



The Bell Policy Center

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How can Colorado improve access to college? State needs more than one bill to expand educational opportunity

By Andy Hartman

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It is not often you find politicians and policy-makers from different political parties and parts of the state in agreement on much of anything. But almost everyone agrees that Colorado does a woefully inadequate job of helping its low-income young people access higher education. In fact, according to research conducted by Tom Mortenson, a nationally recognized expert on higher education, Colorado ranks 41st among all states in providing low-income young people a chance for college.

Earlier this month, the Bell Policy Center hosted a forum on how to improve access to college. The forum brought together leaders from the education, policy and foundation communities. Two clear lessons emerged.

First, access to higher education is a complex issue, and there's probably no silver bullet solution. One of the most articulate speakers at the forum was Rudionna Garza. Rudionna grew up in a poor family. Her father spent much of his time in jail, and her mother, a drug-dealer, eventually died from AIDS-related complications. But today, Rudionna is a senior at Colorado College. Most kids don't have this many obstacles to overcome, but many, many come from poor, undereducated families and work full-time to help support them, leaving little time for academics. How did Rudionna defy the odds? In her words, it was having others set high expectations for her (which she then adopted for herself), going to a diverse public school with peers from middle and upper class families, and receiving the counseling and mentoring necessary to negotiate the college admission process. These—along with a lot of hard work and talent—all helped her to succeed in high school. This success led to a college scholarship.

Rudionna's story makes clear that a comprehensive approach to improving access to higher education must not only address the financial barriers, but also the "pipeline" issues, including low expectations, poor instructional quality in elementary and secondary school, and the lack of knowledge on the part of some students and families of what it takes to prepare for and attend college. This is a bigger agenda than can be addressed by one piece of legislation. We need a statewide dialogue about how to reduce the drop-out rate and make other changes to ensure more of our kids are prepared for college when they leave high school.

Second, the Public Higher Education Financing Act, currently working its way through the Legislature, may help improve access to higher education for low-income Coloradans _ but then again, it may not.

The Public Higher Education Financing Act proposes that the state fund students through stipends drawn down from their "college opportunity savings accounts," rather than funding institutions based on the number of students they serve. In other words, vouchers for higher education. This radical change was initially proposed to improve access. But as the bill is currently written, access has taken a back seat to other issues, including the desire of some four-year institutions to get out from under



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the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR).

This is understandable, given the continuing collapse in state revenues and the vulnerability of higher education to further budget cuts—at least \$100 million is on the chopping block for fiscal year 2003-04. The bill would help Colorado's major institutions of higher learning—including CU—increase tuition at a faster rate and take pressure off the state's General Fund.

But to help improve access for low-income students, the Public Higher Education Financing Act should be strengthened considerably:

OVERALL ACCESS: The bill would result in a one-year, 25 percent decrease in community college tuition. It should be amended to ensure that tuition couldn't go right back up after that first year.

TUITION: While providing no more money for higher education, the bill would virtually ensure that tuition at four-year institutions would go up _perhaps dramatically. Yet there is no provision that clearly links growth in financial aid for low-income students to growth in tuition. The result may be that talented low-income students (like Rudionna Garza) will be priced out of our more prestigious institutions. We must not let that happen.

LIFETIME CAP: The legislation includes a lifetime cap of 140 undergraduate and 60 graduate credit hours per student subsidized by the state. What will happen when those with limited incomes hit the cap? We know from the research that increased out-of-pocket expenses seriously limit access. There is a provision in the bill that allows a student to apply to the Colorado Commission on Higher Education for a waiver on the lifetime credit limit if paying the full cost would "cause a substantial economic hardship on the student and the student's family." This provision should be strengthened to ensure that no one is prevented from pursuing a degree or retraining based solely on his or her economic status.

STATEWIDE ACCESS: The draft bill clearly moves toward a "market-driven" system of higher education. If not enough students choose a particular institution, it will close—and this is most likely to happen in rural areas. Institutions such as Lamar Community College and Mesa State College are at risk. Some say that this is a likely scenario whether this bill passes or not. So regardless of the fate of this legislation, we need to ask, "What happens to access for people who live in these parts of the state but cannot afford to move to a new community to attend college?" There should be a clear plan to address this problem. If the bill can be strengthened along these lines and passed, it will be a good start on improving access to higher education in our state.

But the larger lesson of our forum was that the process of preparing a child for college starts much earlier. If we want our kids to have the best opportunity to succeed, we must do more to strengthen our entire educational system before even more Coloradans get sidelined in the future.

Andy Hartman is director of policy and research at The Bell Policy Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting opportunity and self-sufficiency in Colorado. Articles from the Bell Policy Center (www.thebell.org) appear once each month in the Insight section.