



The Bell Policy Center

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Take Time to Guard Higher Ed Access

By Andy Hartman

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Colorado prides itself on being a “well-educated” state, but does a woefully inadequate job of helping low-income young people access higher education. Now the legislature is considering a radical change in the way the state funds higher education, but is in danger of falling short on the goal of improving access.

According to Tom Mortenson, a nationally recognized expert on higher education, Colorado ranks 41st among states in providing low-income young people a chance for college. In 2001, Gov. Bill Owens appointed a Blue Ribbon Panel to look at this issue, among others.

The panel proposed that the state fund students through “college opportunity grants,” rather than funding institutions based on the number of students they serve. This proposal is now the basis for the Public Higher Education Financing Act of 2003 (House Bill 1336), currently on a fast track in the legislature.

The stated purpose of the bill is to increase access to higher education among low-income populations. However, financial issues have increasingly taken over the debate, including the desire of some four-year institutions to get out from under 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.

Access, in this legislation, has taken a back seat. The prevailing thinking seems to be, “Things are so bad right now; what could be worse?” So we are moving ahead to implement this concept, possibly within a matter of weeks. No other state has ever tried this approach, and we need to take the time now to at least protect, if not enhance, access.

Following are some of the components of the bill that should be strengthened:

Overall access: The bill includes an initial 25% reduction in community college tuition, bringing it in line with the national average. However, tuition can go back up after the first year. If the goal is to increase access, language should be added that protects this key provision year-in and year-out.

Tuition: The bill does not provide one more dollar in public support for higher education, but works off the very low base set for fiscal year 2003-04. What is likely to happen? Tuition at our four-year institutions will go up significantly compared to community colleges. Are we then consigning well-prepared, low-income students to community colleges and shutting them out of the more prestigious universities? Need-based financial aid is specifically designed to address this problem, but there is no mention of it in the bill. A provision should be added to clearly link growth in tuition to growth in aid for low-income students.

Lifetime cap: The legislation sets lifetime, per student caps of 140 undergraduate credit hours and 60 graduate credit hours subsidized by the state. After hitting these caps, in-state students would pay the full cost of their education. The lower the caps, the more money the state saves. Skills and knowl-



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edge are the raw materials of the Colorado economy and the way individuals achieve self-sufficiency. What happens when those with limited incomes hit the cap? We know from the research that increased out-of-pocket expenses result in reduced access. There is a provision in the bill that allows a student to apply for a waiver on the lifetime credit cap, but it should be broadened to ensure that no one misses an opportunity to improve his financial situation.

Statewide access: The bill clearly moves Colorado 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. What happens to access for those who cannot afford to move to attend college? Some have argued that this might happen regardless of any change in policy. This might be true, but there should be a clear plan that addresses the problem.

If we don't take the time now to examine these issues, even more low-income Coloradans could be sidelined in the future.

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