



The Bell Policy Center

Research • Advocacy • Opportunity

1801 Broadway, Suite 280
Denver, Colo. 80202
(303) 297-0456 metro Denver
(866) 283-8051 statewide
(303) 297-0460 fax

www.thebell.org

Don't underestimate community colleges:

**They're an essential part of Colorado's future,
and the state needs to step up its commitment**

By Evan Enarson-Hering, Public Policy Fellow

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It is the 1930s, and in the far edge of southeastern Colorado the Dust Bowl and Great Depression are bearing down hard on the community of Lamar. Agriculture, once a mainstay of this region, is in ruins, and jobs are few and far between. In an effort to bring hope and opportunity to the area, local business and civic leaders come together and Lamar Community College is born.

Many of our rural community colleges got their start in this way, founded on the belief that a local college was the best opportunity for a community facing economic despair. Other state two-year colleges sprung up during the 1960s and '70s in response to the growing need for post-secondary education in our increasingly high-tech world. But state budget cuts, rising tuition and inadequate public investment are now threatening the community college system in Colorado.

From their inception, community colleges have filled the demand for accessible, affordable and flexible higher education for both students and businesses. Colorado's community colleges are the primary pathway and entry point for an increasing number of students seeking the social and economic opportunities a post-secondary education provides. Between 1999 and 2002, in the midst of a recession, enrollment in state two-year colleges jumped over 8%. Currently, over 35% of Colorado's college students are enrolled in community colleges and roughly 5% of older working adults are enrolled in post-secondary training, on par with the national average.

These schools are the most affordable option for many students; in fact 57% of the state's highest need students enroll in community colleges. The community college system is also the state's provider of training for adults moving from welfare to work through the Colorado Works program. The state has designated these schools as the provider of customized job training for new employers and for existing firms experiencing major technological changes who must upgrade their workers' skills in order to survive.

A large number of state and national leaders have recognized this vital link among community colleges, workforce training, and economic development. There is an understanding that we must not just create jobs; we must also create the workers to fill them. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan noted recently that community colleges are preparing students for the workforce as the new high schools of the 21st century. The state labor department predicts that the majority of job openings in the future will require at least an associate's degree. In addition, a community college education may boost income earnings by more than 25% above those of a high school graduate.

But Colorado is far behind the curve when it comes to recognizing the value of community colleges and providing the funding to help them meet demands. This is extremely short-sighted, especially at a



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time when Colorado's economy is struggling, the tech industry is slow to recover, the agriculture industry needs technology infusions to innovate, and the health care industry is facing shortages of qualified nurses and medical staff. The Colorado Dept. of Labor recently completed a study that suggested some of the greatest growth in this decade will be in business, education and health service industries. Almost half of all future job openings are forecast to be in office and administrative support, computer related and sales occupations. Over the last five years, Colorado's community colleges have awarded associate's degrees in program areas that will help meet these needs.

But even as the need for skilled workers is increasing, the only state-funded workforce development initiatives linked to community colleges were scaled back by several million dollars due to budget cuts in 2002. The community college system experienced budget reductions of nearly \$30 million between 2002 and 2004, in effect receiving no additional funding for nearly 8,000 new students. To make matters worse, community college need-based financial aid funding was reduced by \$200,000 this year. According to a report released last week by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, an average Colorado family must pay 20% of its income to attend a two-year college, even after financial aid. Families in the lowest income group must pay 51% of their income for a community college education.

These facts mean that although community colleges are already out of reach for many Colorado families, schools continue to experience falling state support and tuition increases. The introduction of college tuition vouchers last year didn't help to bring any additional money to our schools. And at a time when one of the few discretionary items left in the state budget is higher education, community colleges are really feeling the squeeze of TABOR. There is consideration of permanently closing some of our rural two-year colleges in the near future.

We need to fully fund our education providers in order to meet the needs of Coloradans in the long-run. For community colleges this means expanding state support, adjusting financing formulas to account for differences in the educational costs of intensive degrees in health and computer fields, paying competitive wages to attract qualified professors, increasing need-based financial aid, controlling tuition hikes, and expanding the quantity and quality of state-sponsored workforce training and economic development initiatives.

Public investment in postsecondary education opens doors, encourages people to work to their potential, and vastly expands opportunities for decent jobs that allow individuals and families to become self-sufficient. Colorado needs to step up and open pathways to community colleges, not continue to close them.

Evan Enarson-Hering is a recent graduate of Colorado College and a fellow at The Bell Policy Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting opportunity and self-sufficiency in Colorado. www.thebellorg.