



The Bell Policy Center

Research • Advocacy • Opportunity

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Letter to Colorado Commission on Higher Education

Re: Access to Postsecondary Education for Low-Income and Minority Students

January 18, 2005

Mr. Rick O'Donnell
Executive Director
Colorado Commission on Higher Education
1380 Lawrence Street, Suite 1200
Denver, Colorado 80204

Dear Rick,

As the new legislative session begins and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education launches its statewide higher education marketing campaign with today's "CollegeInColorado" event, the Bell would like to highlight key issues in improving access to, and success in, higher education for under-served students.

The Bell Policy Center is committed to making Colorado a state of opportunity for all, regardless of race or economic background. Access to and success in college and postsecondary training programs is a crucial gateway to the cycle of opportunity and its importance is ever increasing in today's knowledge-based global economy.

The number one job for Colorado is to expand access to, and success in, higher education for all Colorado students, particularly low-income and minority students. As you know, we are not doing a very good job now, with Colorado ranking well below the national average in a number of important postsecondary access and success indicators.

First, let me praise and recognize your hard work and that of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to inform students and parents about the new pre-collegiate curriculum requirements and how the new College Opportunity Fund (COF) program works, as well as about existing financial aid programs and other resources. This is a good first step. The Bell Policy Center recognizes the need for and supports a coordinated and broad higher education marketing campaign. But while necessary, the CollegeInColorado program is by no stretch of the imagination a sufficient response to the crisis in higher education access in Colorado. Nothing short of an all-out campaign to greatly expand access will do.

The Colorado Opportunity Fund is the first program of its kind in the nation. To ensure a smooth transition from the current system of state funding and that no eligible student is denied his or her stipend, it is essential that students and parents receive accurate, thorough and timely information about how the program works, the application process required, and its impact on out-of-pocket tuition expenses. This is especially important for those students and families with limited information about the college admissions process, financial aid information, and the basic elements of the COF. While we give CCHE high marks, the Bell is concerned that providing this crucial information primarily through the World Wide Web may have an unintended adverse effect on those with limited computer literacy and internet access. Furthermore, the lack of an electronic application in Spanish as of yet may prevent many students and their families from completing the application.



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In addition, the Bell is concerned about the potential delays in processing paper applications, which must also be downloaded from the COF web site. While applications completed on-line are processed immediately and students can access their account as soon as they have completed the application process, paper applications must be mailed for processing and student account information "may not be available for [students] to view for several weeks," according to the College Access Network. In light of the various deadlines of each higher education institution for submitting applications, the delays in processing paper applications may cause problems to students and their families.

Below are three initiatives that we consider crucial for improving postsecondary access and success for underserved students:

1. Increase State Funding for Higher Education

Unless the state addresses its severe fiscal crisis to provide our public higher education system with adequate resources to implement the new initiatives, college preparation and affordability will remain significant barriers for college access and the state will fail to provide postsecondary education opportunity to all Coloradans.

Colorado's economic competitiveness hinges on a well-educated work force. We cannot continue to compete with other states and countries for high-paying jobs when we rank 48th in the nation in per capita state funding for higher education, 48th in state funding per \$1,000 of personal income, 47th in postsecondary enrollment of young minority adults, and 35th in postsecondary access for low-income students. Adjusted for inflation, state funding per resident student has reached the lowest level in over 20 years. Unless we invest in providing all students with the opportunity to access and succeed in postsecondary education, our state's future is at risk.

Colorado's public higher education suffered the biggest budget cuts in state funding in the nation in the past two years. Due to the constitutional fiscal restrictions, this year the state faces another major deficit, estimated at over \$260 million, and higher education will be on the chopping block once again. Similarly, the tuition-setting flexibility provided by the college voucher legislation, which sought to provide much-needed tuition revenue to offset the enormous decrease in state support for higher education, has been nullified by the inadequate tuition increases proposed by CCHE. Unless the state addresses the fiscal crisis and provides additional funding for public higher education, the state's postsecondary access record will continue to be poor and the quality of public higher education will decline.

Mandating college preparation curriculum should help improve students' readiness for college. However, the costs of complying with this state mandate falls on the shoulders of local school districts. The Bell is also concerned that the effectiveness of the mandatory college preparatory curriculum could be limited by a lack of resources to support under-funded school districts.

2. Enhancing Need-Based Financial Aid and Ensuring Affordability

Financial barriers remain the most important roadblock preventing postsecondary access for low-income students. Unless the state substantially increases its need-based financial aid, recent legislative initiatives to increase postsecondary access will have little or no effect.

Research indicates that need-based financial aid is the most effective tool in increasing postsecondary access for college-ready low-income students. The COF does not provide a single extra dollar of support for students and their families. In contrast, out-of-pocket costs are expected to increase. While tuition and enrollment have increased, the state's financial aid funding has decreased significantly in recent years. It is estimated that reductions in state financial aid caused by the state's fiscal crisis during the past two years have significantly reduced or eliminated funding for almost 10,000 students. Unless the state invests a significant amount of resources in providing need-based financial aid, the state will continue to fail to provide postsecondary opportunity to our talented low-income youth. The Bell recommends increasing funding for the state's primary need-based aid programs, the Colorado Student Grant and the Colorado Graduate Grant, and allocating 70% of the state's merit-based aid to students who excel academically but also demonstrate financial need.



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3. Performance Goals for Increasing Enrollment and Retention of Low Income Students

Absent clear and measurable goals for increasing the postsecondary enrollment, retention and graduation rates of low-income and minority students, the performance contracts currently being negotiated between CCHE and postsecondary institutions will not achieve the original goals of the college vouchers legislation.

Advocates of COF claimed that its main purpose was to increase access for underserved low-income and minority students. However, by defining underserved students to include all male students (regardless of economic status, race or ethnicity), it is highly questionable whether the performance contracts will result in increased postsecondary access and success for low-income and minority students. In addition, the draft performance contracts released by CCHE do not include new measures to assess performance in increasing access and success for low-income students.

Of the three measures that CCHE introduced to evaluate performance on access and success, two measures focus on all students, and not specifically on underserved students. These two have been in use for many years by the CCHE Quality Indicator System, the annual performance report on institutions. The Bell is concerned about the new performance and accountability standards since the contract does not require any specific level of resources to be devoted to increasing access and success for underserved students, instead stating that institutions "shall direct available resources to ... programs to increase enrollment, retention and graduation of underserved students."

The only measurable standards listed in the performance contract to address underserved students are the retention and graduation rates of minority students that have already been in use. Without the inclusion in the performance contracts of specific measurable objectives that target low-income and minority students, the stated objectives of the college voucher legislation will not be achieved. The Bell recommends the inclusion of effective measures of access in performance contracts to promote postsecondary access and hold institutions accountable.

I appreciate your attention to these issues and stand ready to work with you and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to improve postsecondary access and success for all Coloradoans.

Sincerely,

Wade Buchanan
President
The Bell Policy Center

CC: Governor Bill Owens

Senator Joan Fitzgerald, President of the Senate

Senator Ken Gordon, Senate Majority Leader

Senator Mark D. Hillman, Senate Minority Leader

Rep. Andrew Romanoff, Speaker of the House

Rep. Alice Madden, House Majority Leader

Rep. Joe Stengel, House Minority Leader