

COLORADO'S STRATEGIC PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

# BUILDING SKILLS

*for an* **Evolving Economy**



**COLORADO**  
Colorado Commission on  
Higher Education

Department of Higher Education

## Strategic Goal

Increase the number of Coloradans benefiting from valuable career skills, obtained while in high school or via postsecondary education, that –at a minimum– enable additional lifetime earnings greater than the cost of attendance.



# COLORADO

Governor Jared Polis

Colorado's economy is exceptionally strong, but this robust job market, where there are two open jobs for every unemployed person in Colorado, has a direct downside for employers as many continue to struggle to find workers with the skills they need. Additionally, the benefits of our strong economy remain out of reach for some Coloradans; 91.4% of Colorado jobs sufficient to support a family of 3 require some form of postsecondary education, and resident undergraduate enrollment in our public institutions of higher education has declined by 19% since 2010-11. To help Coloradans earn a good living and to power the workforce needs of our economy, more learners and workers must have the opportunity to develop new career skills at all stages of life. Colorado also has opportunities to close labor market gaps by seeking talent from pools that have historically been underdeveloped, and attracting workforce populations with quality jobs to bolster in-demand industries.

Colorado's strategic plan, *Building Skills for An Evolving Economy*, from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education builds upon the recommendations outlined in the 2022 [Student Success & Workforce Revitalization](#) Task Force report created by HB21-1330 and the principles of the [Colorado Talent Pipeline Report](#) in calling on our postsecondary ecosystem to focus on the outcomes of education which matter most to learners - access to career opportunity and economic mobility - and to measure our effectiveness in ensuring that Colorado learners get the value they rightfully expect out of the investment they make in their education.

The Commission offers a challenge to our institutions of higher education to guarantee that *all education and training leads to a positive return on investment for every Coloradan*. Such a bold vision is exactly where Colorado needs to be and will lead to a stronger workforce, a vigorous economy, vibrant communities and, ultimately, stronger Colorado families.

Transformation is already happening in the workforce, in business & industry, in technology, and in education. Skills and accumulation of skills transcend legacy barriers, such as age, income, and geography to support a person's educational journey. Now, learning is lifelong, available online and in the classroom, and constantly renewing itself in myriad ways as Coloradans seek to upskill, reskill, and broaden perspectives and understandings to meet the ever-changing needs of these dynamic times.

Drawing from the pioneering spirit that embodies our state, we seek to explore this brave new world with courage and confidence - knowing that together we can build a better, stronger, more inclusive and prosperous Colorado. But we also know such a journey requires sound preparation with a willingness to learn - and relearn - along the way - and remove barriers so that others may join us as we forge ahead.

I thank the Commission for this innovative report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jared Polis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jared Polis  
Governor of Colorado

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<https://cdhe.colorado.gov/about-us/cche/strategic-plan>

*For more information contact:*

CDHE@dhe.state.co.us

Cover photo: Metropolitan State University *Finish What You Started* Program

Letter from the

# Colorado Commission on Higher Education

Colorado's public postsecondary education system has the reputation of being forward-looking, efficient, and providing quality academic experiences. Our institutions deserve recognition for their responsible stewardship of scarce resources and their commitment to successful student outcomes.

As we consider this Strategic Plan that will guide postsecondary education in Colorado for the next five years, we are aware of the need to expand opportunities for many more learners in the state to obtain valuable career skills through education. We must focus on the large number of learners who are not experiencing postsecondary success—including many nontraditional learners and learners from diverse ethnic, racial, economic, and geographic backgrounds.

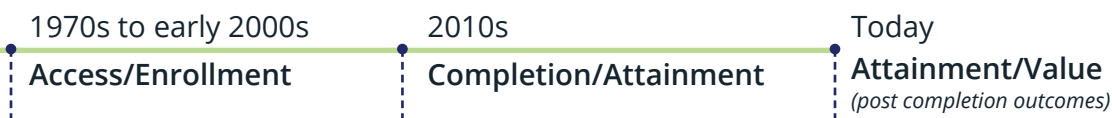
We know that career skills are key to economic mobility. We also know that the majority of Colorado learners completing high school will not earn a degree or other credential from a traditional postsecondary pathway. An even larger percentage of African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native learners—up to 80% of learners of color—will not earn a degree or credential during or after high school.<sup>1</sup>

As we recognize our accomplishments looking back, our goal looking forward is to better serve all Colorado learners. Our vision—and this Strategic Plan—are about equity and opportunity for all learners, especially nontraditional learners and learners from historically marginalized backgrounds.

*We know that career skills are  
key to economic mobility.*

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## The evolution of postsecondary success measures



Over the past decade, as the national policy focus evolved from access and enrollment to completion and attainment, Colorado followed suit. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (“the Commission”) set a statewide credential attainment goal of 66% in 2012 and reaffirmed that goal in 2017. While the state made progress toward this goal, it was largely through in-migration of individuals already in possession of a postsecondary credential, rather than the state making significant progress in addressing equity gaps in credential attainment. Meanwhile, Colorado’s resident undergraduate enrollment declined since that goal was initially set, as did postsecondary enrollment rates for Colorado high school graduates.

Nationally, similar trends have prompted what **Mamie Voight, CEO of the Institute of Higher Education Policy**, calls “a new wave of postsecondary policy development that is focused on value.”<sup>2</sup> It is insufficient to simply increase the volume of credentials achieved without ensuring that meaningful value is created for learners. This “new wave” recognizes that for learners, credential attainment is the start of a journey, not the end. The value they seek in obtaining a postsecondary education or credential while in high school is not the credential itself, but in the doors it opens to career, economic, and social mobility. In response, we must evolve our focus and our measures from credential attainment to ensuring that the education investment Coloradans make delivers value.

Value is measured by considering the benefits a learner enjoys as a result of their postsecondary education minus the costs the learner incurs (in both time and money) in pursuit of their education. We can improve value for learners by enhancing benefits (especially career opportunities and economic mobility), increasing affordability, or decreasing the amount of time needed to complete postsecondary education.

**The primary benefit learners seek from postsecondary education is improved career opportunities and economic mobility.** Colorado learners should, at a minimum, be able to count on their investment in postsecondary education enabling an increase in their lifetime earnings (over what they would have made had they not pursued postsecondary education) to exceed their cost of attendance.

Positive economic value may be a “nice-to-have” for a small percentage of learners from affluent economic backgrounds. For others—and for most underserved and unserved learners from diverse backgrounds—their economic reality does not afford them the opportunity to invest in an education that leaves them economically worse off and potentially with the burden of persistent debt. Loans and aid that increase affordability and help these learners on the front end are important, but no one—whether from an affluent background or not—should be expected to invest money in a program that doesn’t bring economic gain and therefore may leave the learner with a persistent debt obligation.

In recognizing a minimum economic value threshold, the Commission is not discounting the many non-economic benefits of credentials earned in high school or postsecondary education. We know that in addition to gaining skills that lead to better jobs and careers, postsecondary learners enjoy expanded cultural horizons, acquire durable soft skills, learn how to learn, and gain emotional intelligence, among many other benefits. Individuals with credentials earned in high school or postsecondary education typically enjoy a healthier lifestyle, are less likely to require social services and public safety nets, and are more likely to be productive taxpayers actively engaged in their communities. We acknowledge—and celebrate—these important benefits. At the same time, we hold fast to the simple premise that in order for the individual and the state to enjoy the many benefits of postsecondary education, the pathway must be affordable and economically viable for learners.

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**We hold fast to the simple premise that in order for the individual and the state to enjoy the many benefits of postsecondary education, the pathway must be affordable and economically viable for learners.**

Our vision recognizes that learning—and the needs of learners—has changed. Industries and jobs are continuously evolving, and education providers must similarly evolve to offer greater diversity in learning opportunities and increased flexibility. Colorado learners at any stage of their life should be able to seamlessly navigate fruitful, rewarding career and educational opportunities to continue to support economic and social mobility.

We hope to encourage policymakers and industry leaders to think beyond the historical associate and bachelor’s degree constructs. We urge them to embrace opportunities to blur the lines between learning and earning through an orientation around valuable skill development rather than seat time. As we call for more focus on career skills, we want to be clear that we are not advocating for a tiered system or lesser pathways for some learners – we are calling for skills development to enhance Colorado’s leadership position in the advanced industries and shape Colorado’s future. We recognize that many of our institutions were designed for a student demographic that looked very different from what it does today. We need to evolve our system to meet the needs of today’s learners and of our economy.

We have no intention of issuing this Strategic Plan and considering our work finished. This work builds on the vision outlined in the [“Student Success and Workforce Revitalization Task Force Report”](#) issued in December 2021, and on legislative initiatives stemming from the recommendations in that Task Force report. And the work will continue with the development of a statewide longitudinal data system and outcome-focused success measures to better inform decision-making, advance student success, and ensure that all learners are benefiting from a valuable postsecondary education.

Nor do we issue this Strategic Plan suggesting that our public institutions of higher education alone bear the burden of responding to the challenges we identify. This Strategic Plan is a *call to action* to all stakeholders—our K-12 system, public and private postsecondary providers, and, perhaps most importantly, our workforce partners. We must break down the silos that too often have divided those organizations and systems from each other, recognize our respective roles, and at the same time embrace alignment and partnership.

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**This Strategic Plan is a call to action to all stakeholders—our K-12 system, public and private postsecondary providers, and, perhaps most importantly, our workforce partners.**

Colorado’s postsecondary education system has much to be proud of. For decades, Colorado colleges and universities have remained attractive and nationally competitive, delivering quality education at a reasonable cost despite comparatively low state investment. And as our times have changed, so must we change to meet the needs of our state and its talent.

We have an opportunity to serve more Colorado learners and enhance the economic health of our state. Coloradans deserve a strong, cohesive, and aligned postsecondary ecosystem—and Colorado’s economy requires it. We can and must do even better.

From the Commission,

Sarah Kendall Hughes, *Chair*

Josh Scott, *Vice Chair*

Angie Paccione, Ph.D.,  
*Executive Director, CCHE*  
*Executive Director, CDHE*

Berrick Abramson

Lisandra Gonzales

Aaron Harber

Teresa Kostenbauer

Steve Meyer

Anu Temu Otting

Eric Tucker, Ph.D.

Jennifer Walmer

Jim Wilson



# Strategic Approach and Guiding Principles

*The mission of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education and  
the Colorado Department of Higher Education reads:*

**We support students, advocate, and develop policies  
to maximize higher education opportunities for all.**

Our mission shaped the development of guiding principles  
that are central to our vision and our work.

**We are committed to a learner-focused high school  
credential and postsecondary ecosystem that:**

- Delivers value and access to opportunity;
- Centers equity, inclusion, and belonging at the core of every learner's educational experience;
- Embraces lifelong learning and recognizes all pathways: short-term credentials and degrees; all legitimate providers, whether public or private; and the ability for learners to enter, exit, and re-enter easily;
- Blends and rewards learning achieved in both formal and informal settings, including job-based learning; and
- Recognizes and celebrates the strengths and unique characteristics of our many different high school and postsecondary providers.

**With these guiding principles as our North Star and abiding by the axiom “begin with the end in mind,” the Commission offers the following vision for the strategic plan.**

### Colorado will have:

- A comprehensive postsecondary educational ecosystem that provides more Colorado citizens with improved access to professional opportunities and career mobility.
- A postsecondary ecosystem designed to meet the needs of all learners with an intentional focus on erasing educational equity gaps among African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native people.
- An aligned ecosystem that supports all learners throughout their lifetimes, enabling seamless progression through a diversity of learning pathways and credentials that help them advance their careers and grow.
- A robust data system and a culture of data use throughout the ecosystem, leading to better data-informed policy to best meet the needs of learners.
- A forward-focused ecosystem that drives the economic vitality of the state and a healthy democracy by preparing an educated and engaged citizenry.

The Commission’s vision is ambitious, but within reach. Colorado’s institutions of higher education have proven time and again that they welcome hard work, persistence, and innovation. But Colorado also has persistent challenges that require us to evolve our thinking and our approach to our postsecondary ecosystem.

We recognize the Commission’s role as a coordinating body. This plan does not direct any individual postsecondary education provider on specific actions. We provide examples and options for institutions and their governing boards to consider, but we fully recognize their roles and responsibilities in its implementation.

#### **The Role of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (the Commission)**

The Commission is the central policy and coordinating board for Colorado’s system of public higher education, representing all stakeholders in the postsecondary ecosystem, with learners at the center. The Commission is NOT a governing board nor executive or operational leadership for any postsecondary institution in Colorado.

# The Strategic Goal

**Increase** the number of Coloradans benefiting from **valuable** career skills, obtained while in high school or via postsecondary education, that **-at a minimum-** enable additional lifetime earnings greater than the cost of attendance.



The Strategic Goal incorporates three key elements:

Increase

Valuable

At a minimum

*These elements are discussed in more depth below.*

THE STRATEGIC GOAL

# Increase

Our focus is on serving more learners with relevance and value

Valuable career skills are of growing importance in today's economy. Over 90% of in-demand jobs in Colorado that provide a living wage require a postsecondary education, and economic mobility is highly correlated with education attainment. Despite this economic reality, too many Colorado high school graduates are not enrolling in postsecondary education.

Over 90% of in-demand jobs in Colorado that provide a living wage require a postsecondary education.

Figure 1 illustrates the alarming trend today that 53% of Colorado high school graduates will not earn a postsecondary credential. These learners are disproportionately from African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native, and other historically underserved demographics. Three-fourths of Colorado high school graduates from underserved backgrounds will not earn a postsecondary credential. This figure also presents the enormous opportunity to better serve this cohort with valuable postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF COLORADO LEARNERS EARNING A CREDENTIAL

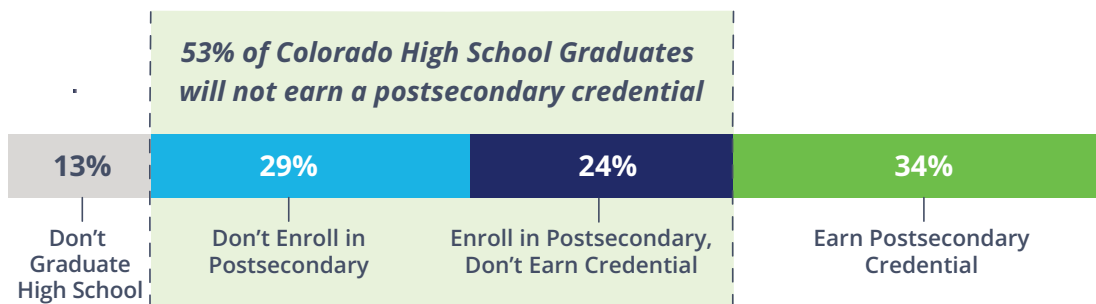
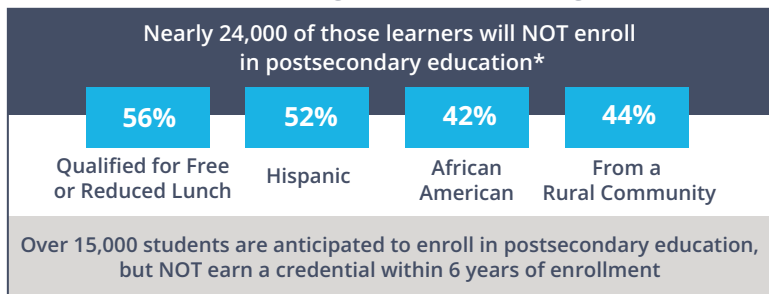


FIGURE 2: HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2020 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT

Almost 61,000 learners graduated from high school 2020



Today 53% of Colorado high school graduates will not earn a postsecondary credential. These learners are disproportionately from historically underserved demographics.

\*Subgroups overlap

THE STRATEGIC GOAL

# Valuable

Our focus is on ensuring Colorado learners gain valuable career skills

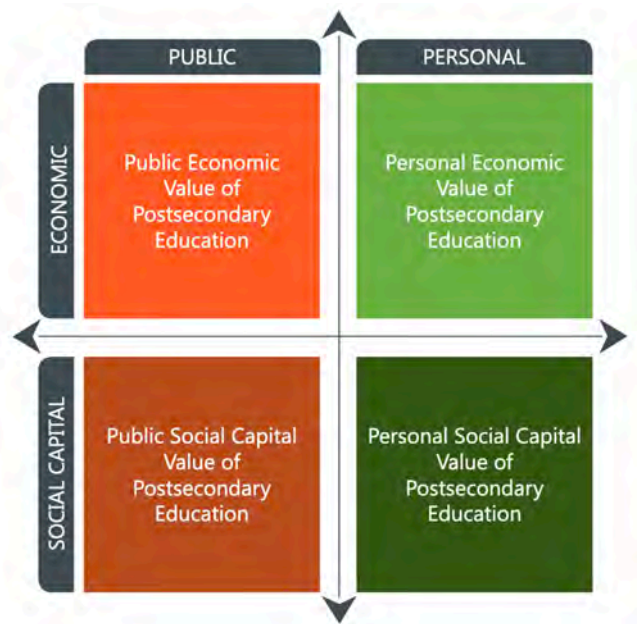
As we strive to increase the number of Coloradans benefiting from a postsecondary education, it is important to recognize that a focus on volume without a corresponding focus on value does little to materially meet the needs of learners or our state. The value that learners seek in obtaining a postsecondary education is clear: Consistently, the number-one reason learners cite for pursuing postsecondary education is to improve their career opportunities and economic mobility.<sup>4</sup> The value is not in the credential itself but in the doors it opens to career, economic, and social mobility.

The number-one reason learners cite for pursuing postsecondary education is to improve their career opportunities and economic mobility.

In considering value as a core part of our goal, the Commission is leveraging the work of many national postsecondary education leaders who have recently attempted to quantify and codify the personal and public benefits. The Commission finds the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities [Post Collegiate Outcomes Framework<sup>5</sup>](#) and the [Postsecondary Value Commission Framework<sup>6</sup>](#)—highlighted below—particularly valuable in this regard.

While these sources provided valuable policy insights and context for our work, this Strategic Plan takes into account Colorado’s unique policy environment in framing our measures of value.

FIGURE 3: POST COLLEGIATE OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK



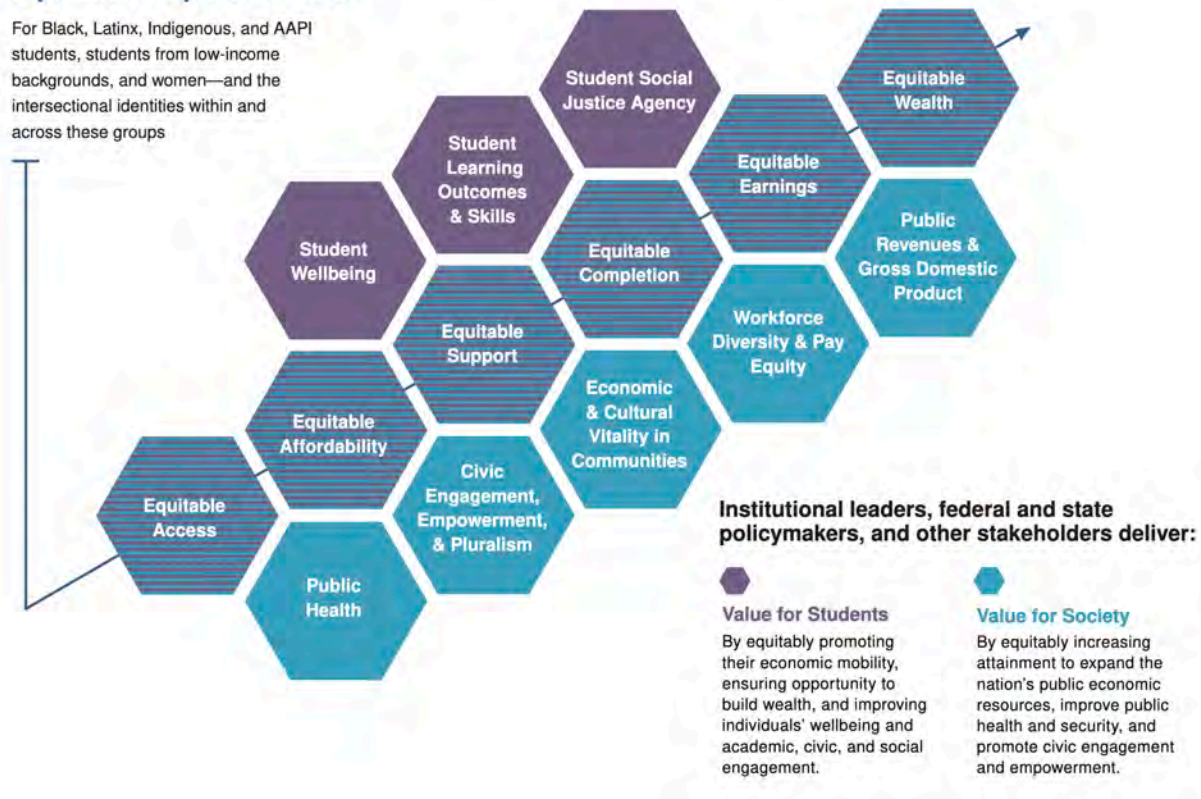


Arapahoe Community College  
 Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI) Scholarship recipient participating in Back to Work Program

**FIGURE 4: POSTSECONDARY VALUE COMMISSION FRAMEWORK**

**Pipeline to Equitable Value**

For Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women—and the intersectional identities within and across these groups



THE STRATEGIC GOAL

# At a minimum

**Our focus is on ensuring that access to valuable career skills is economically viable for Colorado learners**

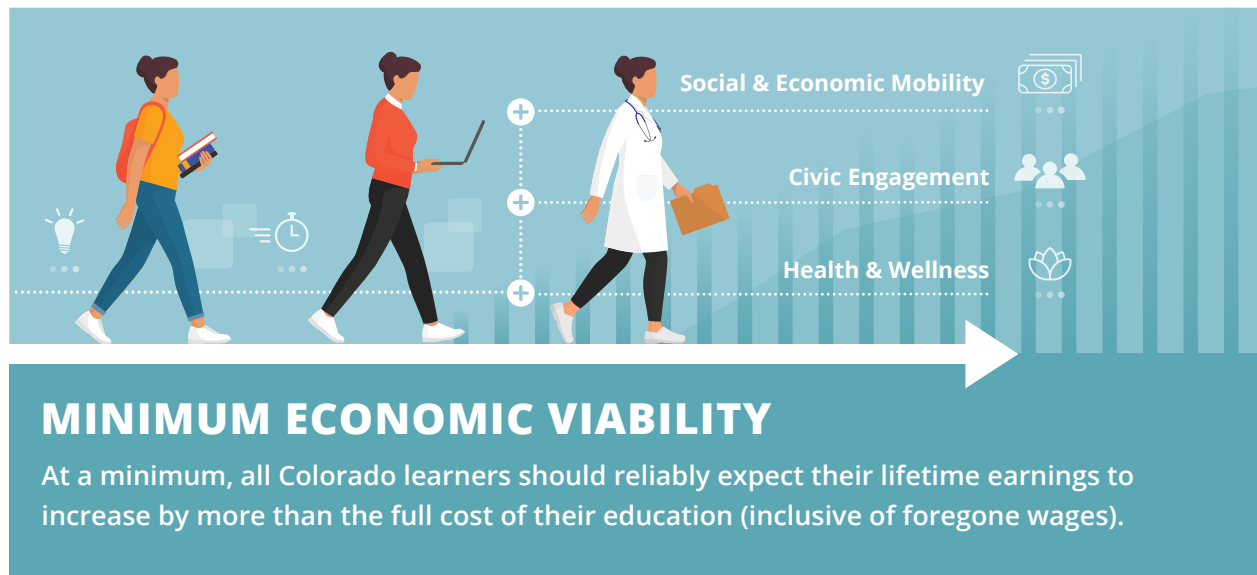
As discussed above, obtaining career skills in high school or via postsecondary education provides many important benefits for learners and our state. However, learners will often choose not to enroll or fail to persist in postsecondary education if minimum economic viability conditions are not satisfied. The investment that learners make in obtaining career skills must at a minimum enable additional lifetime earnings greater than the cost of attendance.

This is especially true for learners with fewer economic resources who cannot afford to suffer financially from their education. As illustrated below, without enrollment and persistence, learners and our state do not enjoy the many non-economic benefits of postsecondary education.

Postsecondary education that does not meet a minimum threshold of economic value is comparable to unpaid internships. While unpaid internships offer beneficial work experience, they are not a viable option for many individuals—especially those with fewer economic resources.

**Learners will often choose not to enroll or fail to persist in postsecondary education if minimum economic viability conditions are not satisfied. The investment that learners make in obtaining career skills must at a minimum enable additional lifetime earnings greater than the cost of attendance inclusive of foregone wages.**

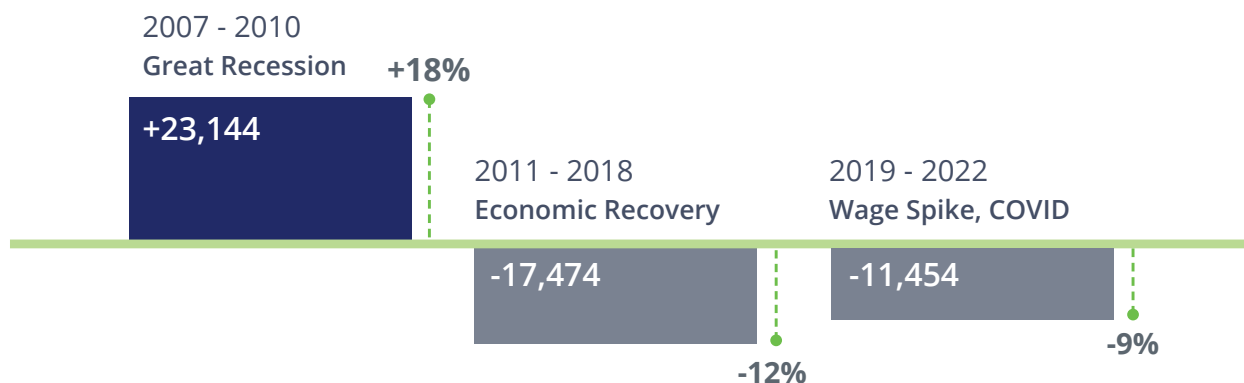
FIGURE 5: MINIMUM ECONOMIC VIABILITY



## Recognizing that economic factors drive postsecondary enrollment decisions for many learners is key to making education more accessible to more Coloradans.

The past 15 years (and, in fact, the past many decades) offer an important lesson in this regard. As our economy has gone through the Great Recession, recovery, COVID-19, and the COVID-induced spike in entry wages, we have seen postsecondary enrollment levels respond: lower wages and job availability drive higher postsecondary enrollment while higher wages lure more potential learners into the workforce. These enrollment trends are illustrated in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6: CHANGES IN TOTAL CO RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT 2007-2022 (FTE BASIS)



The Commission recognizes that a minimum economic value threshold is particularly critical for African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native learners, along with learners from lower-economic means, rural, and other historically disadvantaged backgrounds. We know many students face systemic barriers to college access, lower completion rates, and affordability challenges. We also know that a high school or postsecondary education of value offers the surest way for these students to achieve economic and career mobility without being burdened by unaffordable debt. While we realize that systemic barriers exist in the workforce and elsewhere outside of postsecondary education, if we hope to address equity in a meaningful manner, we must do more to ensure that these students are not worse off for having chosen to invest in postsecondary education.



# Strategic Pillars

How Will We Work Toward the Goal?



Colorado State University

In this section we describe three areas of suggested strategic investment—or pillars—that will enable progress toward our Strategic Goal and the opportunities available to institutions, policymakers, and others to affect change.

## STRATEGIC PILLAR

1

# Identify and improve pathways with a negative return on investment

The first pillar focuses on institutions identifying and improving programs that do not meet the minimum economic value threshold.

Empirical evidence suggests that most learners are better off economically for having attained a postsecondary education. By specifically and deliberately gathering the data necessary to confirm that each program and pathway enables a return on

investment greater than zero, taking into account both the public and private costs and the time value to the learner, institutions will be able to identify those programs and pathways that leave learners economically worse off for having invested in postsecondary education. With this data, institutions will be able to take direct steps to enhance the value proposition of these offerings, including collaborating with policymakers on needed policy changes.

**Institutions and policymakers have two primary levers to increase the economic viability of their programs: 1) enhance lifetime earnings through tighter alignment and collaboration with employers; and 2) increase affordability.**

### Lever One:

#### Increase collaboration between workforce and educational institutions

Affecting change in market-driven compensation structures is not within the control of our postsecondary ecosystem. However, increasing collaboration between educational programs and the workforce can provide learners with earning opportunities while still pursuing their educational

pathway, thereby lowering net costs and providing valuable experience that leads to increased earning opportunities upon completion. Increased collaboration between educational programs and the workforce has the added benefit of expanding professional networks for learners, discussed more in Pillar 3.

## Lever Two:

### Reduce cost of attendance

Institutional business models and cost structures are complex and have been years in the making, suggesting that significant decreases in tuition and fees in the near term are unlikely. Open Education Resources and other approaches to reducing learner costs are gaining ground and should be expanded; however, they alone are not enough. The Commission recognizes that housing and other associated costs of attending postsecondary education can deter learners from enrolling and succeeding, and the Commission will continue to advocate for solutions to these broader challenges.

A key driver of the cost of attendance for learners is the opportunity cost of foregone wages. Even for learners who pay little, if any, tuition due to federal- and state-provided financial assistance, the full cost of attendance can be a challenge, and the time they spend in the classroom is time they otherwise could be spending in the workforce earning wages to provide for themselves and their families.

The Commission's vision includes "enabling seamless progression through a diversity of learning pathways that help learners advance their career."

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#### **A key driver of the cost of attendance for learners is the opportunity cost of foregone wages.**

This notion, which incorporates support for more skills-based education and intentionally blurring the lines between secondary education, postsecondary education, and the workforce, suggests replacing the two- or four-year mindset with new innovative approaches to fulfilling curriculum requirements in a shorter amount of time, thereby reducing the opportunity cost burden. Credit for prior learning, college credit earned in high school, credit for industry credentials, and stackable credentials are all concepts that have not always been embraced historically by colleges and universities. Today, these and other approaches that recognize not all learning has to take place in the classroom are offering learners opportunities to complete postsecondary education in less time.

Thus, this plan and this pillar advocate for an intentional focus on expanding these and related opportunities that reduce the time needed to learn needed career skills and thereby reduce the opportunity cost of foregone wages.

## STRATEGIC PILLAR 1

# Identify and improve pathways with a negative return on investment

### How does Colorado Work Toward this Goal?

#### Embrace opportunities for learners to earn credentials in a shorter time:

- Continue to grow Concurrent Enrollment and dual enrollment.
- Ensure that learners are not required to spend time and money on skills/credentials obtained in another state or Colorado institution of higher education.
- Invest in academic and career advising to better guide learners to the outcome they expect.
- Expand the state's credit for prior learning toolbox, with a particular focus on industry credential-to-course credit.
- Build stackable credentials of quality in critical occupations to include non-degree (certificate) and associate degree completion points such that each step leads to employment at higher wages.

#### Promote opportunities for learners to reduce opportunity cost and increase wages:

- Promote flexible academic programming that allows learners to simultaneously work.
- Support and incorporate earn and learn into educational pathways.
- Support apprenticeships to ensure continuous wage increases throughout the credential pathway.



Arapahoe Community College  
Open Educational Resources (OER)

#### Colorado's Promising Practices

- In 2020, Pikes Peak Community College awarded over 10,500 credits for prior learning for individuals who had served in the military in programs such as management and computer information systems.
- Since the fall of 2019, Arapahoe Community College's Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative has saved over 15,000 students nearly \$2 million in textbook expenses by replacing high-cost print textbooks with OER.
- Through scholarships and support services, the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI) has increased affordability and accessibility for learners across the state, with over half those served to date being learners of color. Learners supported by COSI have completed over 16,000 postsecondary credentials.

VISIT <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/about-us/cche/strategic-plan> to see the entire list of Colorado's Promising Practices

## STRATEGIC PILLAR

# 2

## Enable more learners to succeed in programs and pathways that offer a positive return on investment

As institutions and policymakers work to ensure that all pathways meet the minimum economic value threshold, we must simultaneously work to understand barriers and invest in proven practices that expand these education opportunities for all Colorado learners.

Most educational programs meet the threshold (they offer a positive return on investment), and learners can expect to be better off financially for having invested in the postsecondary experience. Unfortunately, not all learners have equitable access to those programs, and not all who have access complete their pathway. We must simultaneously work to identify and address equity, belonging, and other barriers that keep potential learners from accessing these programs and keep learners who do enroll from completing them.

The Commission recognizes that barriers and inequities in postsecondary education—and beyond in the workforce and elsewhere outside the postsecondary education ecosystem—are numerous. Undermatching—when learners are not encouraged and/or do not enroll in institutions matching their academic qualifications—limits opportunities for learners, in particular learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Many learners from historically underserved backgrounds too often feel as if they are not welcomed into or do not belong in postsecondary environments.

Much more work is needed on this front, including but not limited to investment to increase faculty diversity and increased inclusion of cultural and ethnic studies in the core curriculum.

**We are calling on institutions and policymakers to invest in: 1) better data; and 2) proven approaches that enable more learners to achieve better life outcomes.**

### **Lever One:**

#### **Access better data**

The Commission, Department of Higher Education, and institutions will take a first step to accessing better data through implementation of House Bill 22-1349. More timely disaggregated data connected to workforce outcomes will enable more effective interventions. Better data will also enable transparency for learners about what they can expect from an educational pathway—from the skills and competencies they will acquire to the career outcomes those competencies lead to.

### **Lever Two:**

#### **Invest in proven approaches**

A myriad of programs exist in the K-12 and postsecondary ecosystems to guide learners to and through their postsecondary pathway. Many of Colorado's institutions have implemented programs to support first-generation learners and learners from diverse backgrounds. From first-year coaching to peer advising to community-focused engagement, these programs and others are seeing success. Better data will provide insights into programs and approaches that are driving desired outcomes.

As already noted under Pillar One, opportunities for learners to participate in internships and apprenticeships, and to have access to career services and other professional connections embedded into the postsecondary experience, improves their chances of success.

**Expanded state funding, targeted to support initiatives like the ones outlined above, will enhance the success of this strategic pillar and create meaningful value for Coloradans and our state.**

## STRATEGIC PILLAR 2

# Focus on Equity and Enable More Learners to Succeed

### How does Colorado Work Toward this Goal?

- Disaggregate learner data to better understand equity and other barriers and target interventions.
- Invest in evidence-based approaches to academic and career advising to better guide learners and target interventions when needed.
- Invest in evidence-based support systems for learners.
- While adding cost, improving completion rates benefits the individual learner and program ROI.
- Increase transparency for learners about expected outcomes from educational pathways.
- Ensure equitable access to earn-and-learn opportunities, career services and professional connections.



Colorado State University



University of Northern Colorado  
*First Generation Celebration*

### Colorado's Promising Practices

- Red Rocks Community College's STEM Education Leadership Initiative for Students of Colorado is expanding opportunities for diverse learners to access careers in high-tech skill and STEM careers.
- Colorado State University has increased four-year graduation rates among racially minoritized students by using a learner-centered, strength-based approach to supporting learners with their academic, personal and career goals.
- Western Colorado University did a 3-month campaign to destigmatize mental health by guiding Mountaineers in self-reflection, coalition building, and community action.
- UNC provides tutoring, coaching and other forms of intentional support to first generation students, resulting in its highest retention rates in 2022 for first-generation students in over a decade.

VISIT <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/about-us/cche/strategic-plan> to see the entire list of Colorado's Promising Practices

## STRATEGIC PILLAR

### 3

# Catalyze increased postsecondary-workforce collaboration, alignment, and co-creation of new pathways that offer a positive return on investment

## Lever

### Increase alignment and collaboration with employers

This third pillar focuses on tightening collaboration between employers and educational institutions to co-create new pathways directly focused on in-demand skills. If learners are to experience better career mobility and seamless progression through a diversity of learning pathways, as our vision states, our education ecosystem must better align with employers. If learners are to have access to increased professional connections and opportunities, the education ecosystem and the workforce system must be more than aligned—they must actively collaborate and co-create educational pathways.

Our goal of an increasing number of learners benefiting from a valuable postsecondary education will both lead to and be dependent on such collaboration and co-creation. By considering future earnings, we seek to encourage an increased focus on supporting learners through expansion of professional networks and career services; we also seek to prompt increased attention to program and curriculum design that meets industry needs.

The Commission recognizes that investment by institutions in increased collaboration with workforce partners may not immediately provide a positive ROI for the institution, and this may deter institutions from making these investments. As such, we encourage policymakers to provide targeted financial incentives for institutions to invest in these collaborations.

In the near term, the work of increasing education and employer collaboration and co-creation was significantly boosted financially with the passage in 2022 of House Bill 22-1350, the Regional Talent Development Initiative Grant Program – now known as “Opportunity Now.” The Commission offers its full support to the administration and implementation of this program—and the initiatives developed under it—toward the goal of bringing about transformative change throughout the state in how our education and workforce systems collaborate.



## STRATEGIC PILLAR 3

# Catalyzing increased postsecondary-workforce collaboration

## How does Colorado Work Toward this Goal?

- Reimagine how academic pathways connect with workforce, industry, and other community partners to add value.
- Co-create pathways with workforce and industry partners to align curriculum with industry needs.
- Include internships, apprenticeships, and other experiential learning in every pathway.
- Ensure that learners/earners have full access to, and ownership of, their data and credentials to demonstrate learning and skills over the course of the individual's learning and career.
- Continue the work begun under HB22-1215 to better integrate secondary, postsecondary, and work-based learning.
- Expand the work begun under SB22-192 to create stackable credential pathways that recognize industry credentials and work-based learning.
- Ensure enhanced career services for all learners.



Front Range Community College  
*Healthcare apprenticeship*



Metropolitan State University  
*SpringHill Suites partnership for hospitality learners*

### Colorado's Promising Practices

- MSU Denver's partnership with SpringHill Suites by Marriott offers learners the opportunity to learn hospitality skills and expand their professional network.
- Front Range Community College partners with local employers to offer apprenticeships in high-demand fields including health care, manufacturing, and tree care, combining learning with real work.
- Colorado State University Global aligns its degree programs with industry certifications and standards to ensure students learn the most up-to-date skills employers are looking for.
- At Regis University's Center for Counseling and Family Therapy, learners complete training in health fields by providing low- to no-cost services to a low-income community and virtually across the state. Students get hands-on training, and the community gets low- to no-cost state-of-the-art mental health services.

VISIT <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/about-us/cche/strategic-plan> to see the entire list of Colorado's Promising Practices

# Reaching Our Goals

## The Commission's Work Plan

This Strategic Plan has a vision and goal, but it intentionally does not include a formula for determining economic value or specific numeric metrics. The Commission readily acknowledges that the important introduction of measures of value and a Colorado-specific minimum economic viability threshold will require significant engagement from a diversity of stakeholders. To this end, the Commission will lead the development and future iterations of Colorado-specific measures of value through engagement of a technical working group, which we will convene shortly after issuing this Strategic Plan (see Appendix A for more details).

The Commission and Department of Higher Education also will continue to develop a more robust statewide data system

as supported by House Bill 22-1349, the Postsecondary Student Success Data System Act. The data system will facilitate more disaggregation of learner outcomes by African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native, and other racial/ethnic groups; Pell-eligible learners and other income groups; first-generation postsecondary learners; learners in rural and remote regions; and other groups.

The Commission's work will benefit from implementation of recent legislation, including House Bill 22-1215, the Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-Based Learning Integration Act; and House Bill 22-1350, which created the Regional Talent Development Grant Program, which will support the better integration of the postsecondary and workforce ecosystems.



Adams State University  
Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI)  
Scholarship recipient participating in Back to Work Program



Metropolitan State University  
SpringHill Suites business partner



Metropolitan State University  
Finish What You Started Program participant

# Conclusion

Over the next five years, more than 300,000 Coloradans will graduate from our public high schools.<sup>7</sup> If we act now, thousands can enroll in some sort of postsecondary education—and get a return on the degree or credential they worked so hard for.

Our priority is the increasing proportion of learners not being served by our postsecondary ecosystem who are from our African American or Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native communities, as well as from economic, geographic, and other demographic backgrounds that have experienced inequitable access and success. The challenge for Colorado is urgent and immense.

In this Strategic Plan, we offer a vision—and more importantly, we establish an approach to move us toward that vision—that focuses on the primary reason most learners pursue postsecondary education; namely, career mobility and economic success. We do not discount the many other non-economic benefits to the individual, our communities, and our state; on the contrary, our plan starts with the recognition that the benefits of postsecondary education are many, but that those benefits are available only if postsecondary education is economically accessible.

Designed in a different era, our high school and postsecondary ecosystem must adapt to meet the needs of today's Coloradans. We must let go of long-held assumptions that limit our learners rather than support and empower them. We must be open to new approaches that are based on data and results. And we must do so in full partnership with our K-12 and workforce partners.



Metropolitan State University, Hospitality student gaining valuable skills alongside community business partner SpringHill Suites

With this Strategic Plan, we offer a path forward. The ideas contained in this Plan ensure that educational pathways are economically viable—lowering costs, investing in proven learner support programs, and increasing collaboration with employers — are a beginning. We acknowledge that our institutions are in a better position to be innovative and pioneering and understand what works, and we defer to their expertise.

**Colorado's postsecondary education system has much to be proud of, but we can and must do better in meeting the needs of today's learners.**

# Appendix A

## How Will Colorado Define the Minimum Economic Viability Threshold?

The Commission will lead the development of and future updates to Colorado-specific measures of value through engagement of a technical working group, which the Commission will convene shortly after issuing this Strategic Plan. The Commission has developed the following basic design principles to guide their work:

### The minimum economic threshold analysis:

- Shall not yield specific return on investment figures. Rather, this analysis will return a binary result: “green” if  $ROI > 0$ , “yellow” if  $ROI < 0$  ;
- Shall not be used to compare ROI among programs or institutions;
- Is intended for use by institutions of higher education, policymakers, the Department of Higher Education, and the Commission. It shall not be published or distributed to a broader audience;
- Is not about professional education versus liberal arts education. Economic mobility is of the utmost importance to all learners, including liberal arts and humanities majors.

**At its most basic, a learner-centric postsecondary threshold measure will consider the value created for the learner by postsecondary education minus the cost of attendance.**

### For calculating the minimum economic value threshold:

- Value Created for the Learner will focus on tangible economic value in the form of the present value of expected median incremental lifetime wages of those who have pursued postsecondary education in a specific field of study from a specific institution as compared to expected median lifetime wages of a high school graduate without postsecondary experience.
- The focus on tangible economic value rather than a broader measure of value is intended to align with the underlying intent that by ensuring that learners are not made financially worse off by investing in postsecondary education.
- Cost of Attendance will include both the a) Median Net Tuition and Fees paid by learners in pursuit of a specific credential in a specific field of study from a specific institution, and b) Foregone Wages during the time spent in school based on the median wages of a high school graduate without postsecondary experience.

# Appendix B

## Frequently Asked Questions

Please visit <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/about-us/cche/strategic-plan> to see answers to frequently asked questions.

# Acknowledgements and Appreciation

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Aurora Community College

Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI)

Colorado State University

Colorado State University Global

Front Range Community College

Metropolitan State University, Photo credit: Clifford Grassmick *Daily Camera*

University of Northern Colorado

# Endnotes

- 1 “Pathways to Posterity: Postsecondary Access and Success for Colorado’s High School Graduates,” Colorado Department of Higher Education, p. 45, [https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2022\\_Postsecondary\\_Progress\\_rel20220503.pdf](https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2022_Postsecondary_Progress_rel20220503.pdf).
- 2 Mamie Voight conversation with the CCHE at its annual retreat held July 28, 2022, in Greeley, CO.
- 3 Percentages are estimates and are derived from the Colorado Department of Education graduation statistics using the 6-year graduation rate for 2019 (<https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/gradrate-current#special>); and from the Colorado Department of Higher Education’s data on enrollment rates for 2018 high school graduates (enrolling within 2 years of high school graduates) and 6-year completion rates for the 2015 freshman class ([https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2022\\_Postsecondary\\_Progress\\_rel20220503.pdf](https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2022_Postsecondary_Progress_rel20220503.pdf)).
- 4 These and other surveys: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/collegedecisions/>; <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/heri-freshman-survey-242619>; <https://www.guilddeducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/What-U.S.-Workers-Want-From-Education.pdf>.
- 5 <https://www.aplu.org/library/advancing-a-comprehensive-study-of-post-collegiate-outcomes-framework-and-toolkit/file>, p. 7.
- 6 <https://postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>, p. 11.
- 7 WICHE Knocking at the College Door: Between the Class of 2018 and the Class of 2037, high school graduates are projected to average 62,260 per year.



**COLORADO**

**Colorado Commission on  
Higher Education**

Department of Higher Education

**This report was prepared by the  
Colorado Commission on Higher Education**

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*For more information contact:*

[CDHE@dhe.state.co.us](mailto:CDHE@dhe.state.co.us)