

Higher Ed Trendlines

From the desk of Rick O'Donnell

CollegeInColorado.org

Democracy, Workforce & Tackling the Colorado Paradox

January 18, 2005 – If you are one of the 700 people who joined us at the Colorado Convention Center earlier today for the launch of CollegeInColorado.org, there's no need for you to read this *Trendlines*. If you were unable to join us (maybe because you never could quite figure out what our cryptic invite was actually inviting you to), please read on.

When the Governor asked me take over as chief of higher education in Colorado, we discussed the many items that needed to be accomplished: Implementing the new voucher law. Bringing reform and accountability to colleges through performance contracts. Working to solve higher education's funding

problems while keeping tuition affordable. But we agreed that at the top of my agenda would be tackling the Colorado Paradox and expanding opportunities for all Coloradans to access higher education.

Doing What Works...and Paying for It

CollegeInColorado.org is based on national research into the most effective methods for improving college access. We've brought in the experts from California, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and other states who've implemented various parts of our effort.

Colorado is a pilot state for *Pathways to College* – a joint effort of the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, the **Lumina Foundation**, the **Daniels Fund** and the **U.S. Department of Education**. *Pathways to College* is a national toolkit on best practices for improving college access, especially for low-income and minority students. Colorado is the first state to put all of this together in an integrated effort.

Here at the Department of Higher Education, we've spent more than \$1 million over the past several years developing the CollegeInColorado.org website. **Going forward, the overall effort for the air, ground and policy wars is at least \$3 million annually.** This is a true public-private partnership, with at least \$1 million coming from the state and \$2 million from foundations and corporations. Our goal is at least \$15 million over five years.

The Colorado Paradox is that while a highly educated state, Colorado is near the bottom in sending our own children on to college. It is a public scandal that for every 100 ninth graders in this state, thirty percent will drop out of high school. It is unjust that of those who do graduate from high school, more than 70 percent will *never* earn a college degree.

And do you realize that only 9% of Colorado's traditional college-aged Hispanic males are actually in college? Think of that, only nine percent!

For too long Colorado has been able to skate by and ignore this problem by importing a well-educated workforce. But **left unaddressed, the consequences of the Colorado Paradox are dire and affect our whole community.** Students who drop out of high school and receive no postsecondary education are unlikely to have the grounding in history, civics, economics and other knowledge essential to participating fully in our democratic Republic. Beyond the vigor of our

democracy, the long-term health of our economy is also at risk. In the globally competitive economy, employers need a skilled workforce. A well-trained workforce is critical to sustaining long-term prosperity in a modern American economy that is based more on brains than brawn.

Today we launched CollegeInColorado.org, the start of a long-term effort to solve this challenge. This truly is a statewide priority that transcends partisan politics. I am pleased to announce that the co-chairs of

this effort are: **Governor Bill Owens, U.S. Senators Wayne Allard and Ken Salazar, and Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper.**

CollegeInColorado.org is a comprehensive, three-pronged effort to plug the leaks in the K-16 pipeline through “Air”, “Ground” and “Policy” Wars. This strategy was patterned after the successful campaign to reduce drunk driving in America.

The Air War

The first component of the campaign is an Air War to change cultural awareness. In the anti-drunk driving effort, we saw images of wrecked cars, orphaned kids and other television and billboard messages to make clear that drinking and driving led to awful consequences. American culture was transformed to no longer accept drunk drinking. Similarly, CollegeInColorado.org will launch a massive public service announcement campaign on television, billboards, newspapers, Internet and other high-impact venues to transform how all Coloradans think about college. **The Air War will include niche messages directed to minority, low-income and middle class families, particularly middle and high school students and their parents.** The messages will incorporate the importance of going to college and the benefits of getting a degree; what one needs to do in high school to be college-ready; that college can be affordable if one applies for financial aid, loans and other resources; and, that all students should have the opportunity to decide what, if any, postsecondary education is right for them to pursue.

The Air War will create a climate in Colorado so that no matter where a student or their parent turns, whether it is television, radio or print, they will get the message that college is important and accessible, and there is a way to plan, prepare and pay for it.

The Ground War

The next component of this campaign is the Ground War. In the anti-drunk driving campaign, one-on-one personal behavior was changed by bartenders cutting people off after three drinks, designated driver programs, free taxi rides home, and police DUI check points. **In the CollegeInColorado.org initiative, we too will be building capacity at the grassroots to impact individual behavior.** This means ensuring students and parents are informed about post-secondary opportunities as early as 8th grade; that students take a rigorous precollegiate curriculum in high school; that students enroll in college prep programs; and, that students have the necessary resources to understand and apply for financial aid and the college that is right for them. I am pleased that we had hundreds of K-12 principals, counselors, college prep program officers and others at the launch today. We offered special breakout sessions and training and will continue to offer additional tools to help these frontline professionals succeed in the Ground War.

As part of this Ground War, CCHE, in collaboration with the Daniels Fund, has created a new Precollegiate Consortium. The Consortium will network with public and private college prep programs across the state to ensure that all students are well served. Unfortunately, we have some schools with no college prep programs and other schools where they are literally tripping over each other. We need even,

A One-Stop Resource for College Prep Needs

We refer to this whole effort by the name of the website, CollegeInColorado.org, that will anchor the campaign. Here, students and parents can compare colleges, learn about financial aid, do career and interest assessments, apply for college and the stipend, and coordinate all their college-prep work. High school counselors can easily follow their students and ensure that they are doing the right precollegiate activities at the right time. Much of the information is also available in Spanish. Check it out!



quality programming in all high schools. The Consortium will help coordinate service areas across the state, supervise data collection and analysis, and provide tools and training in best practices.

The Policy War

The final component of this effort is the Policy War. In the anti-drunk driving campaign, laws were changed that raised the drinking age to 21, created stiffer penalties for drinking under the influence and lowered blood alcohol thresholds. In the CollegeInColorado.org initiative, we recently announced some of the components of our Policy War. We are running legislation to make a rigorous precollegiate curriculum in high school the default, not the exception. We are creating a new \$50 million scholarship program for low-income students. The Governor's budget includes an increase of General Fund support for need-based financial aid. We have a bill to ensure students learn basic skills before graduating from high school rather than arriving at college only to pay extra tuition to learn fundamental skills their high school diploma says they should already know.

We cannot leave to chance that children will receive the education they need. We must diligently work to solve the Colorado Paradox through integrated Air, Ground and Policy Wars. Although CCHE is spearheading the effort, **CollegeinColorado.org is at the nexus of higher education, K-12, policymakers and the business community.** And without a doubt, the business community is joining the **CollegeInColorado.org effort vigorously.** **Two prominent private sector leaders, Bruce Benson and Steve Farber,** head up a growing list of philanthropic and business leaders who are contributing tremendous amounts of cash and in-kind (such as free air time) support for this effort. This is truly a Colorado initiative.

The Results

CollegeInColorado.org is not a flash-in-the-pan effort (see side article). We are in this for the long-term, and expect big results, including:

- Eliminate barriers to college for low-income, first-generation students
- Increase the number of minority students attending college
- Prepare more Colorado students academically to go to and graduate from college
- Increase parent involvement in student decisions about college
- Reduce remediation in college and graduate more students in a timely manner
- Create a better-skilled workforce

After explaining CollegeInColorado.org, I was asked by a legislator: "So what you are saying is you hope to create a boom in college enrollment. Won't that put huge pressure on the state budget?"

My response was straightforward: "Wouldn't that be a great problem to have? **Isn't a booming college population better than a booming prison population?** If we succeed and need to have more classroom and dorm space, if we need more money to keep the value of the higher education stipend up, that is a budget problem that I am confident we can solve."

Please join us in this effort. Together, we can solve the Colorado Paradox.

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