



Jay Helman, President

April 8, 2013

TO: House Education Committee

FROM: President Jay Helman

RE: Western State Colorado University Opposition to SB165

Public funding support for higher education in Colorado has been a substantial challenge for the past decade. All 4 year and 2 year public institutions have continually struggled to provide accessible and quality educational opportunities in the midst of these prolonged fiscal challenges. Simultaneously, these same institutions have competed with one another for student enrollment to optimize tuition revenues to partially offset diminished general fund support. Over the years periodic attempts to address funding constraints have indicated that support for post-secondary education in Colorado does not poll well with Colorado citizens. With low state funding support, and virtually no indication of changes in the near future, all Colorado publics will continue to compete for student enrollment. This environment hardly seems conducive to adding four-year degree programs in our state.

Additionally, allowing community colleges to offer four year degrees would signify a dramatic shift in statewide higher education policy. Our current system encourages partnerships between our two-year, four-year, and research institutions. These partnerships allows us to serve our citizens and students around the state while maximizing limited resources. We all have critical roles for our students in terms of access, affordability, and education and a change in this system requires a more comprehensive discussion and analysis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jay Helman", written in a cursive style.

Jay Helman
President

Before the legislature approves a bill letting community colleges issue four-year degrees, the demand for them should be proven.

By The Denver Post Editorial Board The Denver Post

Posted:

DenverPost.com

A bill that would allow community colleges to issue four-year degrees is a good example of what could be good policy arriving before good data.

We have no objection with supporters of Senate Bill 165's stated goal of making higher education more accessible, particularly in rural areas, and providing students with degrees that will be valued by employers and result in higher salaries when they enter the workforce. But backers of the bill have not sufficiently demonstrated a demand for the new degrees — or how that demand stacks up against what the state's four-year institutions already offer.

Supporters argue the bill requires community colleges to show there is demand and to demonstrate that programs wouldn't be duplicative of what a college or university in the same geographic areas is already offering. Ultimately the bill lets the state's higher education commission make the determination.

But the community colleges should be required to demonstrate the demand before this bill becomes law. Otherwise, we run the risk of "mission creep" or of directing scarce dollars for higher education to places where it may not be entirely needed.

The original bill allowed for community colleges to add baccalaureate degrees in as many as 10 programs — though the figure has since been amended to seven programs. But in a recent meeting with The Denver Post's editorial board, backers of the bill had a hard time coming up with more than four programs in which bachelor's degrees might be added.

Will community colleges suddenly rush out and look for three more areas? And have they explored partnerships or online collaborations with four-year schools that might be able to meet current demand?

We would like for backers of the bill to conduct a needs study and come back with specifics on the number of students enrolled in two-year programs who would be interested in enrolling in four-year programs, the costs associated with adding the new degrees and information on where else those programs are offered in the state, if at all.

The goal of SB 165 — to increase higher education access and affordability while providing new opportunities to students — is laudable. But first, we'd like to know a bit more about whether it's needed.