



HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS AND FLEXIBILITY

by Lauren Sisneros

The demand for affordable and accessible higher education continues to be a challenge facing the state of Colorado. In the context of difficult economic and budgetary times, legislation passed during the 2010 legislative session establishes new areas of flexibility across the Colorado higher education system. This issue brief discusses the way that changes to the law address flexibility for institutions of higher education, degree programs, and student matriculation and postsecondary access.

Higher Education Flexibility

The legislature passed *Senate Bill 10-003* during the 2010 legislative session, making several changes to state law with regard to flexibility for state institutions of higher education, including tuition-setting and operations. By December 15, 2010, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) must submit to the Governor and the General Assembly a new master plan for the state system of higher education. The CCHE will work with the governing boards and chief executive officers of the state institutions education in preparing the master plan, taking into consideration the recommendations of the Governor's Higher Education Strategic Planning Steering Committee. The master plan must address several issues and goals pertaining to the alignment with elementary and secondary education, accessibility and affordability, funding, and program quality. Prior to submitting the master plan to the Governor and the General Assembly, CCHE must distribute a draft of the plan to the governing boards for comment.

Governing boards of the state institutions of higher education have the authority to set tuition beginning in FY 2011-2012. The schools may not increase tuition by more than 9 percent unless the school obtains approval from the CCHE. Colorado School of Mines may increase its tuition by the greater of 9 percent or twice the inflation rate. To obtain approval, the school must provide a five-year financial and accountability plan. The plan must specify the amount of the tuition increase requested, the governing board's plans for ensuring accessibility and affordability, and the measure the governing board will implement to ensure academic program quality. CCHE may approve the tuition increase for the full five years or may approve the increase for two years, with approval for the remaining years conditional upon performance.

State institutions and certain private institutions will also have greater flexibility in distributing state financial aid moneys, rather than being required to comply with the guidelines established the CCHE. In its biennial review of schools, the Office of the State Auditor must include a review of access to and affordability of higher education.

New Degree Programs

This year the General Assembly authorized specific institutions of higher education — Mesa State College and Colorado Mountain College — to offer additional degree programs. *Senate Bill 10-079* changes the role and mission of Mesa State College to permit the school to offer general programs at the

graduate level. Previously, only a limited number of specialized graduate programs were allowed. The school will continue to offer undergraduate programs in liberal arts and programs for other professional and technical degrees. The school's community college will continue to offer career and technical education.

Senate Bill 10-101 changes the role and mission of the Colorado Mountain College to permit the school to offer baccalaureate degrees. Prior to the bill, the college could offer no more than two years of postsecondary instruction. The bill authorizes the college to offer up to five baccalaureate degree programs and seek approval from the CCHE for new degrees. The school will identify degrees intended to address the needs of communities in its service areas. In addition, the bill established criteria for the CCHE to consider when approving baccalaureate programs for the college.

Legislation during the 2009 legislative session permitted Metropolitan State College of Denver (MSCD) to offer master's degree programs that address the needs of its urban service area. The CCHE approved three new master degree programs for MSCD — in teacher education, accounting, and social work. The accounting and teaching programs will begin in Fall 2010 and the social work program will begin in Fall 2011.

Matriculation and Postsecondary Access

The General Assembly enacted three measures in 2010 concerning higher education transfer agreements. **House Bill 10-1208** requires the creation of statewide college degree transfer agreements between institutions of higher education. Under the agreements, students who complete an associate's degree at a two-year school, and are then accepted into a baccalaureate program at a four-year school, must be enrolled with junior status and are not required to complete any additional general education credit hours. By July 1, 2012, the CCHE and the state institutions of higher education must establish at least four statewide transfer agreements. By July 1, 2016, there must be at least 14 statewide transfer agreements.

Senate Bill 10-088 authorizes community colleges and junior colleges to offer two-year degree programs with academic designation. For community colleges, the degree programs with academic designation must have a valid student transfer agreement. Prior to offering the degree program, a community college must submit the degree program designation for review and approval by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, and a junior college must submit the degree program designation for review and approval by its board of trustees and the CCHE.

Finally, **Senate Bill 10-108** allows nonpublic institutions to request that Colorado CCHE review courses the nonpublic school believes meet general education requirements for inclusion in gtPATHWAYS. Under current law, CCHE and the state-supported institutions of higher education are required to define a process for students to test out of core courses. This program, known as gtPATHWAYS, currently includes more than 1,000 lower-division general education courses in 20 subject areas approved for guaranteed transfer between public institutions. If approved, these institutions may have courses included in the statewide agreements for transferability of credits. CCHE may charge an initial review and an annual review fee to cover costs.

No later than March 1, 2016, CCHE must submit a report to the House and Senate Education committees that includes the names of the nonpublic institutions participating in the general education core course requirements and the number of students who have transferred core course credits to or from nonpublic institutions. In addition, the report must include any issues that have arisen in the course of implementing the general education core course requirements and any recommendations for changes. The bill also authorizes the CCHE to consider complaints that pertain to the general education core course requirements of a private college or university, bible college, or seminary or that pertain to specific core courses if such an institution has chosen to seek transferability of its core courses.