

December 4, 2018

Dear Elaine Berman and Dr. Al Yates,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to have a conversation not only about the achievements of Metropolitan State University of Denver but also the current state of higher education policy in Colorado. I am delighted to see such a commitment to bold thinking and the sharing of ideas from Governor-elect Polis and his team.

As a quick follow up to our conversation, I wanted to share three points I believe are core to the issues facing higher education and that I hope the transition education committee considers as they move forward.

Metrics that Matter

With the change in the administration, it is time to challenge what is considered "traditional" and "non-traditional" for students and their educational pathways. Hard-working middle-class students who take longer to achieve their degrees should not be counted as "failing;" and transfer students (who comprise 56% of MSU Denver's student population) should also be part of the equation. Concepts to consider:

- Most students in Colorado and America do not experience the fabled four-year, straight out of high school college pathway. Their real-life obligations and socio-economic situation mean they often start at one school and finish at another, take breaks of various lengths to save money for classes, or work part or full time while taking classes. All of these realities mean they will take a longer time to get their degrees. Higher education institutions need to adapt to their real-world realities, providing flexible, relevant pathways to success, not the other way around.
- Performance metrics such as the 4- or 6- year graduation rates do not reflect the actual quality of open-access institutes of higher education (IHEs) and are irrelevant to the majority of today's students. In fact, policies that promote these metrics as a measure of a school's quality – and especially if they base funding allocations on them – are misleading and have a perverse set of unintended consequences. Pushing hard-working middle-class students onto a 4-year graduation path simply overwhelms young adults who are trying to balance the obligations of work, family, and school. Moreover, such performance metrics incentivize higher ed administrators to become more "selective" and "exclusive" in order to score more points, which further limits access for so many Coloradans who need either flexible pathways or just another chance.
- In lieu, of four and six-year graduation rates, increased consideration for career placement, debt ratio and average salary – what some call "distance traveled" – would better capture the real journey of social mobility our students are seeking, and our economy and society need to thrive.

- If we want to really track how Colorado IHEs are serving the real-world population, we should reconsider how we track the journey from one Colorado IHE to another and how we measure their non-linear success. Transfer students are not counted in the current, most popularly-reported metrics; and, importantly in the government's IPEDs graduation rate data. All Colorado IHEs "launch" students and "catch" students as they make their way to a bachelor's degree. As a student makes the transfer from one IHE to another, they register as a "fail" by the school that launched them and become "invisible" in the data of the one that catches them. This is how MSU Denver, with over 15,000 full time students, manages to graduate over 3500 students a year; all while registering less than 25% as a "graduation rate" in the publicly-reported data. This math does not make sense, nor does it tell the actual tale of how students are making their way.
- Finally, in addition to more realistically tracking pathways to graduation, "metrics that matter" might also include increased consideration of programs that serve under-represented communities. These programs, which aim to close the attainment gap, should also be recognized for their service to minorities and Pell-eligible students.

Improve the funding allocation model (aka "the Formula")

I appreciate the extensive work that went into creating our current funding model. However, it is clear that the formula's outcomes do not reflect the goals of Colorado's higher education enterprise. Although it was a piece of the original legislation, we have never actually reviewed the past legislation to ensure it still fits the needs of our rapidly growing state and economy.

Concepts to consider:

- Get serious about higher education investment. Unless there is real attention to the top-line allocation to higher education in Colorado, adjusting the formula will still only go so far. We must recognize that Colorado's competitive economic edge is at serious risk if there is not bold action to increase overall investment.
- Keep the humans in the loop through improved collaboration among higher education leaders and by reviewing the funding model every five years. No algorithmic formula can be assumed to be perfect, which is why we have leaders, not computers, running things. Each year, the model should be checked and adjusted through a collaborative dialogue vis-à-vis the governor's goals and objectives; and every five years the formula should be reviewed to ensure alignment with the changing needs of the state.
- Pell-eligible students should receive increased support through the funding model. We miss an opportunity to encourage homegrown talent if we do not support providing more financial support to Pell-eligible students through the funding model.
- Think outside the model: Years of inequitable funding and percentage-based increases to allocations and tuition increases have caused lower-funded IHE's to fall further behind better funded ones. An attempt needs to be made to re-level the allocation and to close these growing gaps. Percentage-based increases should be progressively adjusted going forward.

Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE)

All institutions appreciate the hard work of CCHE in not only supporting students but also their institutions. Enhanced, structured collaboration and dialogue would improve our collective work. Here are a few suggestions:

- Increase interaction between CCHE and the Presidents/Chancellors of IHEs across the state. New steps have been taken to improve how IHEs work with each other in the higher education policy world and it's time to make sure that the same happens with CCHE. Bringing presidents, chancellors and commissioners to the same table over substantive policy issues and the budget process will help improve not only relationships but also the knowledge commissioners need to make hefty decisions in support of higher education.
- In particular, having presidents and chancellors at the table as the CCHE reviews and approves policies and budgets, including in particular the Capital Development request, would enhance transparency and better align outcomes.

Keep Dan Baer

Choosing leaders is the most important task of a governmental transition. The Governor would be well-advised to keep Ambassador Dan Baer on point as CDHE lead. Dan is a strategic thinker with the unique ability to balance the myriad needs of higher education with fiscal and political realities. Since he arrived he has impressed us all with his quick grasp of the array of issues and his collaborative, yet bold, leadership style. He has quickly become an expert and leverages his interagency and diplomatic skills to bring everyone to the table. Keeping Dan Baer in his current seat, either permanently, or at least through this budget cycle into the summer, will maintain continuity and momentum to tackle the issues facing higher education. Importantly, Dan has the broad support of Colorado's IHE CEOs allowing him to hit the ground running with any policy moves the new governor wishes to make.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts. I look forward to working with you and the incoming administration.

Sincerely,



Janine Davidson, Ph.D
President MSU Denver

