

Denver Post

URL: http://www.denverpost.com/opinion/ci_3053804

College support put to test

Editorial

September 25, 2005

Nearly 85 percent of Coloradans say improving the quality of education in the state is vital to our economic health, according to a new survey. Yet over the past three years, state lawmakers have carved more than \$400 million from the higher education budget.

What's wrong with this picture?

While it's true that more money doesn't always equal a quality education, systematically starving higher education - as lawmakers have been forced to do over the years and could be forced to do again next spring - is a huge leap backward for a state that already suffers from a pathetic record of sending its children on to college and preparing them to enter the ever-changing 21st century workforce.

The huge cuts have resulted not only in job losses at schools and the shuttering of valuable programs but threatens to create a "brain drain" culture where the most talented professors leave for friendly climes. Last year, the cuts also translated into skyrocketing tuition hikes.

While some of that extra money will be used to fund financial aid for low-income students, middle-income families are gouged. Not only are they left with a bigger bill, they're forced to question the quality of their education and the value of a Colorado degree.

If voters don't approve Referendum C in November, which would allow the state to keep more of the revenue it already collects, public higher education as we know it will cease to exist. Within a handful of years, Colorado could become the first state to stop funding its colleges and universities.

Still, the public hasn't really caught up with the impact of the recent cuts. The survey, released at the recent "Education to Elevate Colorado's Economy" conference, found that 42 percent of Coloradans think the state is spending the right amount of money on education. In 1993, when a much larger portion of the state budget was dedicated to higher education, 41 percent said the same thing.

In 1990, 20 percent of the state budget was earmarked for higher education. The percentage now has been more than halved - despite inflation, population and student growth. In about a decade, it will be zero.

An accessible and affordable higher education is not only essential for today's students but also for the economy and for Colorado's future. If we can't produce an educated workforce to fill the jobs of tomorrow, we can't expect today's employers to stick around, much less expect out-of-state businesses to relocate here.

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