

# **A Study of Public Higher Education in Colorado**

**League of Women Voters of Colorado**

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## **PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION STUDY 2005 – 2007**

At the Colorado League of Women Voters Convention in May, 2005, the delegates voted to adopt a new study of Public Higher Education for the ensuing two years. Based on the direction given at the convention and on subsequent discussions, the study committee decided to focus on the following three areas: governance, financing, and student access and persistence.

One of the motivating factors for a higher education study was the drop in funding of Colorado's public higher education institutions in general and especially for the past several years, largely as a result of the interplay of an economic decline and the TABOR amendment. Some relief was provided in the fall of 2005 when Referendum C was passed by Colorado voters. Still, in comparison to other states, Colorado has never funded higher education at a high level. Public higher education has never been studied comprehensively by LWVCO.

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### **Study Committee**

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## **Study Outline**

### **Introduction**

### **Part I Governance**

**p.1**

#### **Higher Education Institution Types**

Constitutional and Statutory Institutions

Corporations

Public Corporations, Public Enterprises and Authorities

Charter, Compact or Contract Institutions

#### **Higher Education Organization**

System Boards

Institution or Local Boards

Ways of Organizing

#### **Statewide Higher Education Intermediary Agencies**

#### **Colorado's Higher Education Structure**

### **Part II Financing**

**p.6**

#### **Introduction**

#### **State Appropriations**

#### **Tax Effort**

#### **College Opportunity Fund (COF)**

#### **Tuition**

#### **Enrollment**

#### **Controlled Maintenance Expenses of Higher Education Buildings**

### **Part III Access & Persistence**

**p.11**

#### **Introduction**

#### **Access and Persistence**

The K-12 Years

Admission Requirements

Programs in Higher Education

#### **Financial Aid**

#### **Remediation**

#### **Transferability Within Higher Education**

### **Postscript: Where Do We Go from Here?**

**p.19**

### **Appendices**

**p.20**

**A:** Glossary

**B.** Duties of CCHE

**C.** Controlled Maintenance Expenses of Higher Education Buildings

**D:** Department of Higher Education Chart

**E.** Decentralized System, Pro and Con

**F.** References

## **Introduction**

*The times they are a changin’*

Much is changing in the higher education environment that encourages policy makers to consider adopting new policies. The increased size, complexity, centrality, and competitiveness of higher education have produced profound changes. The demand and need for higher education has greatly increased enrollment in higher education. Higher education has become central to the economy, to the job placement of students, and to civic life. *“Prime-age jobs that require at least some college have increased from 20 percent in 1959 to 56 percent in 1997 (Carnevale and Fry, late 1990s, p.3).* But even in the face of this increased importance, most states have decreased funding for higher education, in many cases because other demands on the state budget have squeezed out funding for higher education.

In the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, federal and state governments placed more emphasis on student loans, thus switching funding of higher education from government to students. According to a recent report by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), all states face potential budget deficits at least through the year 2013 (Jones, 2006). This constricts the amount of money available for higher education, as well as other services. Even when economic conditions improve, other services, such as Medicaid and K-12 education, often take precedence over higher education. This reduction in funding has switched support for higher education from government sources to more reliance on students and their families, as seen in higher tuition and more student loans.

Higher education exists in an ever increasing competitive arena in which the market prevails. Technology has exponentially changed how higher education is delivered and the information that is available. Some even fear that the United States is losing its preeminent place in the world of education. For example, the U.S. ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in the world in high school graduation rates with only 74% of high school students graduating. Further, in 2001, the U.S. ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in college participation, falling from 2<sup>nd</sup> in 1991 (Minnesota Private College Research Foundation, 2006). Many countries have begun major higher education initiatives in the last decade, and many are attracting students from countries other than their own to their higher education institutions.

All of these changes bring about the need for new policies. Many would contend that higher education is not keeping up. What then should be the policies for public higher education governance, funding, access and persistence of students?

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