



**Talmey-Drake**  
research & strategy, inc.



**PUBLIC OPINION**  
**STRATEGIES**

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** DENVER METRO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND HIGHER  
EDUCATION COMMUNITY

**FROM:** BOB DRAKE / LORI WEIGEL

**RE.:** TELLING THE HIGHER EDUCATION STORY

**DATE:** APRIL 15, 2008

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Public Opinion Strategies and Talmey-Drake Research were asked to explore attitudes toward higher education in Colorado with an eye toward developing messages to bolster support for our state's system of higher education in the years ahead. Below we put forth a blueprint that members of the higher education community can follow to help carry out that goal.

### STUDY OBJECTIVES

The state colleges and universities in Colorado are facing a funding crisis unprecedented in modern history. Yet increased funding for higher education in Colorado faces unique challenges, caused in no small part because of three popular voter-mandated provisions in our state Constitution:

The Gallagher Amendment  
The Tabor Amendment  
Amendment 23

With so many powerful interests vying for increasingly more limited resources—transportation, prisons, infrastructure and K-12 education among them—competing for limited tax payer dollars will require that the colleges and universities be able to communicate the need for increased resources with unified and cogent messages that resonate with voters in Colorado.

The primary goal of this research, as developed back in January of 2008, was to determine current perceptions toward higher education in Colorado today, as well as to test different messages that, when used in speaking engagements throughout the state, would leave people feeling more favorably disposed toward increasing the level of funding for higher education in Colorado.

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## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The perceptions of higher education and the message testing lessons derive from both focus group and survey research. The focus groups were conducted among “persuadable” voters in Colorado Springs and the Denver metro area—that is, people who were not strongly in favor or strongly opposed to increasing taxes to provide more funding for higher education in Colorado. One pair of groups was conducted among parents of children age 19 and younger; the other pair among voters over the age of 45 with no children living in their homes. In the Springs groups, messages were tested on participants to see which moved people the most in terms of their inclination to support a generic tax increase for higher education. The messages were then further refined, and re-tested in a second pair of groups held in Denver.

Following the focus groups, we conducted a statewide survey of 802 Colorado residents (margin of error  $\pm 3.5\%$ ) from March 3-11, 2008. Once again, the messages (15 total) were tested to see which ones ended up being the most persuasive.

## COMMUNICATIONS BLUEPRINT

Based on this research, below we have set out a synopsis of how Coloradans view their state’s system of higher education today, and how you should best communicate the fact that higher education faces an unprecedented funding crisis, as well as what needs to be done about it.

### I. What Coloradans Perceive about Higher Education Today

First off, few focus group participants express any sense of crisis about the state of higher education in Colorado, and reflecting that finding, survey results show that less than a majority of Coloradans (44%) feel that too *few* tax dollars are being spent on higher ed. Yet though less than a majority, that 44% far exceeds the 9% who feel too *many* tax dollars go toward higher ed. Forty-seven percent either feel spending on higher ed is about right, or have no opinion.

In terms of the quality of education being provided by our colleges and universities, almost half (49%) feel the quality has remained the same over the past few years, with about equal numbers saying it had *improved* (14%) or *declined* (19%). And when asked to grade the state’s colleges and universities, Coloradans give them C+, pretty much unchanged since 1993.

### II. Willingness to Support Increased Funding Sources for higher Ed.

While not exactly perceiving there to be a financial crisis facing higher education, the survey does show support for increasing taxes to send more money toward our state’s colleges and universities. In the survey, a majority of Coloradans (58%) say they will vote for a \$150 million generic tax increase to support higher education, while 32% were opposed. And in terms of how much of a tax increase is palatable, 52% of Coloradans profess willingness to pay \$50 or more in taxes each year to support higher ed.

### **III. Potential Obstacles to Increasing Taxes to Support Higher Ed**

There are a number of potential hurdles to overcome before a tax increase for higher ed is likely to be successful.

First, it is axiomatic that voters everywhere, including Colorado, don't like voting for tax increases to pay for new spending.

Second, the 58% who say they are willing to support a generic tax increase for education represents a clear majority of voters, yet tax initiatives typically have to start in the low 60% range to have a good likelihood of passing.

Third, as noted above, fewer than half (44%) of Coloradans say too little is being spent on higher ed, yet 50% plus one is needed to pass a tax increase. Given that there is no perception of a crisis, while the bulk of those 44% are likely to support additional taxes for higher education, unless convinced otherwise, most of the remaining 56% are not.

Fourth, while seemingly counterintuitive, we know from previous research that voters are more willing to fund a struggling educational system that is performing well and is improving than one that is underperforming. Few (14%) Coloradans feel that their system of higher ed is improving, and a C+ is not a ringing endorsement of quality.

Fifth, Republicans are fairly entrenched in their opposition to increasing taxes for higher education, and are largely unmoved by messages put forward to persuade them otherwise.

Sixth, when asked to choose between the following two statements,

A: To do a good job, Colorado's colleges and universities need more money.

B: Colorado's colleges and universities have enough money, they just need to operate more efficiently.

More Coloradans (50%) feel that higher ed has enough money but needs added efficiencies, than feel higher education simply need more money (43%).

### **IV. Ways to Overcome the Obstacles**

While there are certainly obstacles to overcome, there are messages at your disposal to help you do so.

First and foremost, you need to establish that colleges and universities throughout Colorado are indeed facing a looming financial crisis. Remember, few Coloradans are aware of just how acute it has become and that it could soon be getting even worse. The message you need to convey is that:

“As a result of cuts necessitated by TABOR and other constitutional constraints, Colorado now ranks 50<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in per student spending on higher education, behind states like Mississippi, Arkansas and Alabama.”

The survey data show that being at the bottom of the pack is the single most compelling message in moving people's attitudes toward acceptance of a tax increase to benefit higher education. It will also underscore the problem to point out the fact that back in 1993, spending on higher ed accounted for 25% of our state's budget, while it now stands at just 11%.

Second, and equally important, you should avoid talking in terms of “increasing” funding or taxes for higher ed. Rather, you should be talking about *restoring* some of the \$150 million in cuts that were made that put us in 50<sup>th</sup> place among the 50 states in per student funding. Coloradans find it more fair and just to “restore” funds that were cut, while balking at having to “increase” state government funding.

Third, and related to the above, you need to explain the consequences of being last among the 50 states. (And it’s not just the stigma that comes with it, as if that isn’t enough.) Depending on your audience, some of the consequences to note are:

1. *Tuition at Colorado’s colleges is climbing dramatically:* To underscore this consequence of funding cuts, research data supports using the following message aimed at ever increasing tuition rates:

“Over the past five years alone, tuition has increased 125% at CU and 120% at Mesa State, pricing many middle and lower income students out of a college education. Restoring funding for higher education will help ensure equal access to college for all Coloradans.”

In conjunction with this message, it is important to reinforce that higher education should not be available to just the children of upper income families. This message of the negative effects of increased tuition works across all audiences

2. *Community Colleges are struggling financially:* Being 50<sup>th</sup> in the nation is taking a toll on our state’s community colleges, and two messages for restoring funding for higher education that tested well referenced the plight these locally-based colleges face:

“Because of funding cuts, community colleges can only afford to pay PhD’s \$30K—same as starting kindergarten teachers.”

and

“Community colleges train 90% of our emergency first responders and 50% of Colorado’s nurses, and the lack of funding is putting those programs in jeopardy.”

3. *Research is threatened:* A message to underscore the important role of research and the need to restore funding to our research universities is that:

“Research taking place at our state’s teaching hospital is some of the most advanced in the nation, and is contributing to the search for cures to diseases like diabetes and cancer. And labs at another of our universities are helping to develop affordable solar panels and renewable fuels. More funding for research will lead to more breakthroughs in the years ahead.”

4. *Finally, higher ed is just plain good for the state.* Coloradans recognize that an educated workforce is a plus for our economy, and the message below reinforces those feelings:

“Restoring cuts to higher ed’s budget will hold down tuition and make a college degree more affordable. This benefits us all by creating a new generation of educated workers who contribute to our economy, pay taxes, and are active in our communities.”

## **V. How Coloradans Feel the Restored Funds Should Be Spent**

When making the case for an increase in funding for our colleges and universities, it is important to understand in which areas Coloradans feel additional funds for higher education should be spent. Knowing where helps ensure that you can deliver the messages to which Coloradans will be most responsive. In order of priority, Coloradans feel the following areas are most deserving of increased funding:

- First and foremost, keeping tuition affordable (28% said #1).
- Increasing opportunities for middle and lower income students, young and old (lifelong learners) to go to college by funding need-based scholarships (19% #1). It should be noted that survey results show that 49% of Coloradans with at least a high school degree are contemplating going back to school for more education sometime before they retire.
- Training more K-12 math and science teachers to improve the education of our children and better prepare them for college (19% #1).

## **VI. What You Can Do to be Seen as Good Stewards of Tax Dollars—Reforms/Initiatives**

When asking taxpayers for more money to restore higher ed funding that has been cut, it is important to acknowledge that with the restored funds will come new responsibilities to prove the higher education community is using tax payer dollars wisely.

At a minimum, the reforms and initiatives identified as most important to undertake, are:

1. Establish policies that provide incentives for our best students to become teachers in K-12 schools, particularly to fill critical positions for math and science teachers. *(68% Very Important)*
2. Support programs for emergency first responders and nurses at the community college level. *(2nd highest rated message to get Coloradans to vote in favor of a tax increase for higher ed)*
3. Continue efforts to save on administrative expenses and operate more efficiently, so more money ends up in the classrooms and labs. *(60% Very Important)*
4. Make sure the courses you teach provide the skills our graduates need to meet Colorado's future workforce needs. *(55% Very Important)*

## **VII. Target Audiences**

There are a couple of target audiences that are more likely to be open to new information and to shift their position on funding of higher education as a result. The two different groups most open to this new information are: seniors (age 65 and over) and men under age 45/non-college men. Both sub-groups are more likely than nearly any other sub-group to support increasing taxes *after hearing more*. This is significant since these tend to be two groups that are more sensitive to taxes, either due to living on more limited budgets or due to philosophical anti-tax stances, and are therefore initially less likely than other groups to support increasing taxes for higher education.

## VIII. How Best to Communicate: Do's and Don'ts Suggestions

Based on the research, we set out below a synopsis of what works well and should be used in talking on behalf of higher education, as well as terms and messages that should be avoided.

- DO use the term “Colorado’s colleges and universities” or “our colleges and universities” to describe the collective institutions in question. Focus group research shows the phrase “higher education” is also understood and can be used, although “Colorado’s colleges and universities” is perceived to be the most effective.
- A significant proportion of focus group participants do not understand what is meant by “public” colleges and universities--they view “public” simply as open to the public and therefore easier to get into and probably of lower quality. Nor do they understand the phrase “state colleges and universities” as implying state funding. Instead creating a shared sense of responsibility and ownership, by using terms like “Colorado’s” or “Our” colleges and universities is important.
- DO NOT assume that the public knows anything about state government’s financial condition, or the financial crisis faced by higher education. The focus groups demonstrated they do not. Nor are most people familiar with the financial condition of higher education. The survey shows that less than half (44%) view the level of state funding as “too little” today.
- DO establish the financial problem faced by higher ed today by emphasizing that “Colorado now ranks a dismal 49th in state support per student for higher education and dead last among the 50 states in total funding per student.” This is the single most persuasive message tested in focus groups and the survey. Focus groups show that providing a comparison to other states helps provide context that’s otherwise lacking when a litany of financial woes is presented to people. Among the various comparisons which could be made, the “49<sup>th</sup>” figure stands out. Residents clearly do not want to be behind states which they perceive as inferior to Colorado in anything, much less in education. This message clearly appeals to Coloradans’ sense of pride.

And there is a reason we are now 49<sup>th</sup>, which leads to the sister message that is also important to convey: that is that:

*Since 2001, Colorado has cut its budget for higher education more than any other state.*

This provides a helpful context and is complementary to the 49<sup>th</sup> figure.

- DO NOT get mired in the negative. In the focus groups, participants perceive messages which focused solely on the negative financial state as whiny and overly negative. The messages included in this memo purposely point out what can be done if funding is restored, rather than staying negative.

- DO talk about “*restoring funds* that were cut from higher education” and DO NOT talk about “*increasing funding* for higher education.” Focus group participants clearly find it more fair and just to “restore” funds that were cut, while being prone to balk at having to “increase” state government funding.
- DO NOT say that budget cuts have negatively affected the quality of education. Beyond being a bad idea for marketing our schools to prospective students, survey research shows that Coloradans do not perceive such a decline in quality. Sixty-three percent of Coloradans feel that the quality of education has either “Improved” (14%) or “Stayed the same” (49%), while only 19% feel it has “Declined.” Therefore, trying to communicate that budget cuts have negatively affected the quality of higher education is neither credible nor prudent.

Instead, better phrasing is:

*While Colorado’s colleges and universities have learned to do more with less, some of the funding cuts should be restored before restricted budgets begin to affect the quality of the education students receive.*

- DO stress that funding needs to be restored primarily to keep tuition affordable and to ensure equal access to college for all Coloradans. Survey data shows that keeping tuition affordable and providing scholarships to lower and middle income students top the list of areas to which additional funding could be directed. In addition, one of the most compelling rationales for restoring funding is this message of opportunity:

*The opportunities that result from a college education should not be available to just the children of upper income families. Restoring funding for higher education will help ensure equal access to college for all Coloradans.*

- DO ensure that messages about opportunity through access to higher education includes the middle class and does not focus solely on lower income or disadvantaged populations. The vast majority of Coloradans perceive themselves as middle class. In our focus groups they worry about their own ability to afford college for their children, and resist the idea of taxpayer money going solely to help “someone else.” For example, one of the top messages tested as a rationale to restore funding is:

*In the past 5 years alone, tuition for a college degree has gone up 125% at University of Colorado and 120% at Mesa State in Grand Junction, pricing many middle and lower income students out of a college education. More state support will keep future tuition increases lower.*

- DO NOT cite the number of students who do not graduate in four years as proof of the financial problems plaguing higher education. Focus groups show that kids failing to graduate in four years is seen as more a fault of the higher education institutions, rather than a good example of the financial pressures which prevent students from obtaining a degree in an ideal time frame.
- DO NOT talk about the student debt burden brought on by a college education. Our focus groups demonstrate that many Coloradans believe that if students are paying their way they will be more serious, dedicated students. They feel those who invest in their college education are the ones who will be more serious students and study harder. Additionally, the real life \$17,000 figure we tested in the following statement does not seem terribly significant to many focus group participants:

*As a result, the average student on financial aid graduating from a public four year college in Colorado today starts out their working life more than \$17,000 in debt from just federal student loans.*

- DO NOT emphasize bricks and mortar needs or specific capital programs. Capital needs, technology, etc. are not nearly as compelling as money going to “students,” and test at the bottom of the list of priorities in focus group exercises.
- DO NOT talk about how financial woes affect professors and instructors. Fifty-seven percent of Coloradans agree that college professors are well compensated and have good benefits, with only 17% disagreeing--a view that is relatively unchanged over the last fifteen years. We also tested the following related “brain drain” message:

*Colorado’s colleges and universities are losing some of their brightest minds and most talented researchers. Last year, the University of Colorado lost a Nobel Prize winning researcher and professor to a Canadian university, mainly because CU could not offer comparable financial support for his continued research. Restoring cut funds will let us pay our top researchers and professors what they are worth*

It proved to be less than compelling: only 50% say it makes them more likely to support a tax increase for higher education, versus 67% for the “49<sup>th</sup>” in the country message discussed earlier.

One message on teacher pay does rise to the top tier of messages, most likely because it provides more context for the real situation facing many higher ed institutions. After being read the following statement, 63% of Coloradans say they are more likely to support a tax increase for higher education:

*Quality teachers are the core of any college. Yet today, community colleges in Colorado can afford to pay PhD professors only \$30,000 a year, about the same salary as starting kindergarten teachers. Restoring cut funds will allow us to pay our best teachers what they are worth.*

- DO talk about community colleges and the significant impact they have on training many of the most highly-respected professions in our state. Messages which mention community colleges are most compelling to those Coloradans who are least inclined initially to support restoring funding for higher education, and are therefore most helpful in moving opinions. For example, the following message we tested garnered support from Republicans, 55 to 64 year olds, and women over the age of 45, three demographic segments that provide below average levels of support for higher education early on in the survey:

*Colorado's community colleges train more than 90 percent of the first responder emergency workers and more than half of the nurses in our state, but those programs are now threatened by continuing budget cuts.*

- DO link higher education to K-12 education by emphasizing the role colleges and universities play in training K-12 teachers. In addition to testing messages, we also tested in the survey a number of reforms and accountability measures which, if included in the debate surrounding a potential ballot initiative for higher education, could increase voters support. Overwhelmingly, the most popular reform measure we tested is:

*Educating more qualified teachers – especially in math and science – to help Colorado's kindergarten through twelfth grade schools fill these critical positions.*

A near unanimous 93% of Coloradans say this reform measure is either “very” (68%) or “somewhat” (25%) important to them.

- DO NOT attempt to make the case that college is for “everyone.” Specifically, saying that “a college degree is the functional equivalent of a high school degree generations ago” has little credibility. Even when using examples of blue collar occupations which now often require a college degree and computer savvy, the concept is flat out rejected by focus group participants. They can cite numerous examples of people who have gotten good paying jobs without having a college degree.
- DO NOT frame your arguments in a way that suggests that the public should give higher education a higher priority than several other public needs, including health care, K-12 education, transportation or energy efficiency and renewables. While higher education receives strong support on its own, when forced to choose, Coloradans place higher education as a lower priority for state funds. In addition, there was a strong negative reaction from many focus group participants to contrasting spending on corrections with spending on higher education.

- DO point out that a strong system of higher education has a direct beneficial impact on healthcare costs, K-12 education and energy efficiency and renewables. While Coloradans may rank higher education below some of these other priorities in terms importance for new funding, you should point out the role higher education can play in helping to shape solutions to these other pressing problems. Studies show that a highly educated workforce creates less demand on state tax dollars for healthcare spending. And higher education can also play a key role in preparing the math and science teachers that are needed in our state's K-12 system. Finally, it is our state's university research labs that are working to make solar and other sources of renewable energy more affordable for Colorado businesses and consumers.
- DO talk about how more people with college degrees create positive economic impacts for the State of Colorado. Many focus group participants already "get this." Of the various economic rationales we tested, the one which moves voters the most is one that connects the economic impact to the daily lives of the average citizen and includes other phrases already established to be favorable ones:

*Restoring some of the \$150 million dollars that has been cut from Colorado's higher education annual budget will make a college degree more affordable and benefit us all, by creating a new generation of educated workers who contribute to our economy, pay taxes, and are active in our communities.*

- DO NOT spend much time reciting a litany of statistics on the impact Colorado's colleges and universities have on our state's economy. For the most part, Coloradans do not respond as well to a list of statistics, such as: colleges and universities add \$4.25 billion to our economy, generating 97 thousand jobs and \$387 million in taxes. In our survey, only 28% of Coloradans say these statistics make them "a lot" more likely to support a tax increase for higher ed, compared to 35% for the statement "*Restoring some of the \$150 million . . .*" quoted above.