



# The Colorado Re-Engaged Initiative (CORE)

Report on Program Implementation and Initial Student Outcomes



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2025

Prepared and submitted by the  
Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE)  
Report to the Education Committees of the House and Senate  
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# Introduction

Each year, thousands of students enrolled in bachelor's programs at Colorado's four-year universities discontinue their higher education journey before earning their degree. Common reasons for stopping-out of a bachelor's program include a lack of financial resources, work obligations that do not allow time to complete coursework, the need to provide care for a family member, and personal or family complications resulting from the COVID pandemic. The Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) initiative, created under House Bill 21-1330, allows a four-year institution of higher education (IHE) to award an associate degree to former students who meet eligibility requirements – including having already earned at least 70 credit hours before stopping-out of a bachelor's program. These are earned degrees awarded by the IHE in recognition of the substantial time, money, and effort already invested by the former student. By awarding an associate degree in recognition of academic credits already completed, Colorado's four-year institutions are opening higher-paying career opportunities for individual degree recipients, strengthening the state's workforce and economy by increasing the number of Coloradans with postsecondary credentials and degrees and creating pathways for former students to reengage in higher education and continue working towards a bachelor's degree or higher.

Under HB21-1330, each institution participating in the CORE initiative must report annually to the Colorado Department of Higher Education the number of eligible students to whom the institution awarded an associate degree through the CORE initiative, the types of associate degrees awarded through the CORE initiative, and the number of students who re-enrolled in the institution after receiving an associate degree through the CORE initiative. The Department is required to review and compile these annual reports for the first year of the program and, by January 15, 2025, submit this report concerning implementation of the CORE initiative, including the degree to which students who receive associate degrees through the CORE initiative re-enroll in an institution to complete a bachelor's degree. The Department is also asked to provide recommendations for changes to the CORE initiative, including recommendations for incentives to encourage institutions to participate in the CORE initiative.

# Program Implementation

Implementation of the CORE initiative progressed through three phases: associate degree design, campus-level program implementation, and outreach to eligible students.

## 1. Associate Degree Design - January through July of 2022

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The Colorado Department of Higher Education convened an Associate Degree Design Working Group composed of subject matter experts from four-year institutions, two-year colleges, local district colleges, and system offices to interpret the legislation, define and clarify student eligibility requirements, and determine the type of associate degrees that could be awarded under the CORE Initiative. The working group's findings were published in a [Recommendations and Guidelines Report](#).

### Student Eligibility Criteria

HB21-1330 established four fundamental eligibility requirements. To be eligible for an associate degree under CORE, a former student must:

- 1) Have earned at least 70 academic credits total;
- 2) Have been unenrolled for at least the last two semesters;
- 3) Have stopped-out from a bachelor's program within the last 10 years; and
- 4) Not have transferred to the four-year IHE after earning 15 or more credits at a two-year college (a transfer student who earned 15 or more credits at a two-year college and had 70 or more credits total would be eligible to receive an associate degree from the two-year college they attended through Colorado's existing Reverse Transfer program).

The working group recommended two additional student eligibility requirements:

- 5) The former student must have earned at least 18 credits in residence from the four-year IHE awarding the degree. This requirement was necessary to comply with a Higher Learning Commission (HLC) rule that at least 25% of the credits for any degree granted by an institution must be credits earned in residence at the institution (25% of 70 credits = 17.5).
- 6) Institutions have the option to require a minimum cumulative GPA to award an associate degree. The working group recommended a 2.0 GPA for institutions that did apply a minimum.

### Recommended Associate Degree Types to be Awarded

The Associate Degree Design working group also made recommendations regarding the type of associate degrees that could be awarded under CORE. The group considered Associate of Arts (AA), Associate of Science (AS), Associate of General Studies (AGS), and Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degrees. After considerable

research and deliberation, the working group recommended that all participating IHEs should award the Associate of General Studies degree, but that institutions could also choose to award an AA and/or an AS degree. The AGS degree requires a lower number of general education credits (typically 15) and allows greater flexibility in terms of required elective courses and program-specific courses. Therefore, CORE-eligible former students (who were not working toward an associate degree when they stopped-out of their bachelor's program) are much more likely to fulfill the requirements for an ASG than any other type of associate degree.

### **Additional Institution-Specific Requirements**

Lastly, the Associate Degree Design Working Group determined that four-year institutions participating in the CORE Initiative would need to make certain institution-specific decisions before seeking authorization from the Higher Learning Commission to award any new associate degree type under CORE including 1) the number of General Education credits required, 2) General Education credits required by category (e.g., written communication, mathematics, etc.), and 3) any other course or credit requirements beyond General Education minimums.

## **2. Campus Level Implementation - October 2022 through August 2023**

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A second working group, focused on campus-level program implementation, was established in the fall of 2022 to represent the views and interests of provosts, registrars, and academic affairs officers from the four-year universities across the state that were considering joining the CORE Initiative. Prospective institutions then had to request and receive approval from their governing board and their accreditation agency (the Higher Learning Commission) before being authorized to award associate degrees. Primary activities during the implementation phase included:

- Providing information and assistance for institutions deciding whether to participate.
- Submission of an official commitment from each IHE to join the initiative in fall 2022.
- Securement of a CORE Operational Grant (up to \$40K) for each participating campus.
- Creation of systems and policies necessary to award a new level of degree.
- Preparation and submission of a "Substantive Change" application to the Higher Learning Commission for authorization to award associate degrees for each participating institution.

### 3. Outreach and Communications - September 2023 through June 2024

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During this final phase of work, CDHE worked with participating IHEs in their efforts to conduct initial outreach to eligible former students. The primary IHE activities during this phase included:

- Identifying former students who met eligibility requirements for the CORE program,
- Contacting eligible former students and encouraging acceptance of their earned degree,
- Designing, printing, and delivering associate diplomas, and
- Developing messaging and materials to encourage re-enrollment.

## Achievements

Performance metrics and program objectives were established for the project that launched the CORE Initiative. Some of these metrics were required in the HB21-1330 legislation and others were developed later to inform performance dashboards maintained by the CDHE and the Governor's Office.

**Performance Metric 1: At least six of the 11 eligible universities in Colorado will join the CORE initiative and award associate degrees to former students who qualify.**

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**Result:** Exceeded goal. Eight universities have joined the CORE initiative and all eight now have authorization from the Higher Learning Commission to award associate degrees.

Note: Only public four-year colleges and universities were eligible to participate in CORE. Participation was voluntary. Two-year colleges, dual-mission institutions (which can already award both associate and bachelor's degrees), area technical colleges, and local district colleges were excluded under the legislation. These exclusions meant that 11 IHEs were eligible to participate in CORE. Of these 11, the following eight institutions participated in the launch of the CDHE CORE Initiative:

1. Colorado State University Fort Collins
2. Colorado State University Pueblo
3. Fort Lewis College
4. Metropolitan State University of Denver
5. University of Colorado Colorado Springs
6. University of Colorado Denver
7. University of Northern Colorado
8. Western Colorado University

**Performance Metric 2: At least 875 former students will be awarded an earned associate degree by June 30, 2024 (within the first two semesters after the initiative is launched).**

**Result:** Exceeded goal. As of June 30, 2024, 994 individuals have been awarded an associate degree under the CORE initiative. Table 1 shows the number of associate degrees awarded through the CORE initiative in the first year.

Note: The goal of 875 degrees awarded was based on early estimates that over 20,000 former students would potentially be eligible for a CORE associate degree in the first year of the program. However, after additional student eligibility requirements were factored in and three universities opted not to participate, the actual number of eligible former students was fewer than 7,500. The fact that the program was able to exceed the performance metric for associate degrees awarded, despite a significantly smaller pool of eligible students than originally estimated, is evidence of the highly effective outreach and awareness-building efforts by all eight participating IHEs.

**TABLE 1:** How many associate degrees have been awarded by four-year institutions through the CORE Initiative?

Institution	Associate Degrees Awarded in Fall 2023	Associate Degrees Awarded in Spring 2024	Total Associate Degrees Awarded in Year 1
CSU-Fort Collins	109	84	193
CSU-Pueblo	^	39	43*
Fort Lewis College	0	^	^
MSU-Denver	336	^	337
University of Colorado CO Springs	62	187	249
University of Colorado Denver	69	18	87
University of Northern Colorado	56	25	81**
Western Colorado University ***	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>State Total</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>994</b>

**Note:** Student counts of less than 10 are suppressed to protect student privacy and noted with ^

\* CSU Pueblo is authorized to award both the AGS and Associate of Arts degree. 21 of the 43 degrees in Year 1 were A.A.

\*\* UNC is authorized to award both the AGS and Associate of Arts degree. 61 of the 81 degrees in Year 1 were A.A.

\*\*\* Western Colorado University will award its first associate degrees in 2025

**Source:** Institutional data reporting to the Department of Higher Education.

**Program Tracking Question 1 (Reengagement): How many associate degree recipients have re-enrolled and how many of those re-enrolled students have subsequently earned a bachelor's degree?**

**Answer:** As noted in Table 2, 24 associate degree recipients have re-enrolled, as of November 2024, to continue working towards their bachelor’s degree. An additional 65 individuals who were eligible for an associate degree re-enrolled but declined their degree. A decision to decline the associate degree before re-enrolling was typically to ensure eligibility for Colorado’s Finish What You Started (FWYS) grant program. FWYS provides tuition assistance to students who stopped out and are re-enrolling to work towards a degree. However, returning students who already have a degree or certificate reflecting 30 or more academic credits are not eligible for the FWYS grant, which would make CORE associate degree recipients ineligible. Outreach efforts by IHEs included advising CORE-eligible individuals about their options for re-enrolling—including potential eligibility for FWYS grant funding. Thus, all 89 students re-enrolled to date are considered successful outcomes for the CORE Initiative.

**TABLE 2:** How many associate degree recipients have re-enrolled in a four-year institution, and how many of those re-enrolled students have subsequently earned a bachelor's degree?

Institution	Associate Degrees Awarded in Year 1	Students Re Enrolled After Receiving Associate Degree	Students Re Enrolled After Declining Associate Degree	Students Completed a Bachelor's Degree in Year 1
CSU-Fort Collins	193	^	51	0
CSU-Pueblo	43	^	^	^
Fort Lewis College	^	0	0	0
MSU-Denver	337	^	11	0
University of Colorado CO Springs	249	^	0	0
University of Colorado Denver	87	^	0	0
University of Northern Colorado	81	^	0	^
Western Colorado University	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>State Total</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>^</b>

**Note:** Student counts of less than 10 are suppressed to protect student privacy and noted with ^

**Source:** Institutional data reporting to the Department of Higher Education

**Program Tracking Question 2: From the CORE Operational Grants provided to the participating IHEs, how much was spent on outreach to eligible former students?**

**Answer:** The eight IHEs spent \$51,764 from their CORE operational grants on outreach between January 2023 and June 2024.

Note: This measure turned out to be less relevant to the outcome of the project than anticipated. Most of the IHEs committed internal funds towards their own outreach efforts in addition to these dollars from their CORE Operational Grant.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education and the four-year institutions participating in the CORE Initiative were able to generate a significant amount of [positive media coverage](#) for the program. These news stories helped create awareness about the program, provided program credibility for the communications and outreach materials sent to eligible students, and encouraged participation in the program by both institutions and former students. News stories and press releases from organizations such as 9News, Denver7 News, Chalkbeat, and Colorado Public Radio can be found on CDHE's web page for the CORE Initiative. Stories from recent degree recipients and other stakeholders might be the single best indication of the success of the CORE Initiative:

Lisa Johnson is a 59-year-old grandmother of six. Last Saturday, donning a traditional cap and gown, she was over the moon. She walked across a stage on the Auraria Campus to receive her associate degree in general studies after starting her educational journey decades ago. "It's just hard to explain the happiness that I am feeling at this very moment. Like I just want to pinch myself ... I'm very, very honored ... I never thought it was going to happen." Johnson said getting the degree is the best thing that ever happened to her, alongside giving birth to her children.

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Ayiela, a student receiving an associate degree from the University of Colorado Denver on December 5 said, "It was mentioned at the ceremony that other colleges may follow our lead with this initiative. I 1000% agree that they should, and believe that sharing my voice will help make that happen. This ceremony wasn't just about getting a degree, it was about healing, self-love, and triumph over hardship. Receiving my associates in general studies has healed something within me that I cannot begin to put into words. My mother has been ill, and I feared that she would never get to see her youngest daughter graduate. This celebration has been just as healing for her as it has been for me."

**Joint news release by Governor Polis and CDHE**

"Sometimes life gets in the way of education plans, but students who have earned their academic credits should be recognized with a degree that will advance their careers. I congratulate the first round of graduates to receive their degree through the CORE initiative. They are now one step closer to a stronger future for themselves and their families. Through legislation we passed, we're



making it possible for Coloradans to earn their higher education degrees and get a jumpstart on the career of their dreams."

**Speaker of the House Julie McCluskie, D-Dillon, a primary sponsor of the legislation**

## Barriers to Implementation

The innovative nature of the CORE Initiative and the fact that Colorado was the first state in the nation to implement this type of program on a statewide basis, made estimating accurate time and cost requirements challenging. This made regular updates to the project plan, budget, and timeline necessary.

HB21-1330 specified that implementation of the CORE Initiative would be funded with Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF). The U.S. Department of Treasury maintained strict compliance requirements for eligible uses of these funds, including timeframe, recipient eligibility criteria, reporting, and demonstration of addressing the direct economic impact from the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the U.S. Department of Treasury made significant changes to the initial SLFRF guidelines when publishing the interim final rule in April of 2022. During the implementation of CORE, there were several instances of misalignment between the intent of the state legislation and guidance set forth by the U.S. Department of Treasury. Resolving these issues required multiple time-consuming but important conversations between CDHE staff and the State Recovery Office, the Office of the State Controller, and the Governor's Office. Strong and ongoing relationships between staff at all four of these agencies were instrumental in resolving these issues and ensuring the CORE Initiative complied with requirements from both the legislation and the U.S. Treasury guidance documents.

Determining CORE eligibility for some students has proven difficult due to reporting timelines for the statewide database of postsecondary students that includes data such as courses and credits completed at each institution, student contact information, and enrollment start and end dates. In cases where a student attended multiple IHEs before stopping out, it was sometimes a difficult and time-consuming process for any single IHE to determine whether the former student met all eligibility criteria for a CORE associate degree.

A secondary but equally important barrier to implementation stemmed from the fact that four-year universities were precluded under the statute from counting the associate degrees awarded as "completions." HB21-1330 states, "Associate degrees issued by institutions through the CORE initiative shall not be

considered in determining an institution's funding pursuant to part 3 of Article 18 of this Title 23" [i.e., the state higher education funding allocation formula]. This was a concern for several eligible universities when considering whether to participate in the initiative. Some faculty, administrators, and leaders questioned the legislation's stipulation that four-year institutions could not receive "completion credit" under the funding formula for students awarded an associate degree—particularly because two-year institutions receive completion credit for students to whom they award an associate degree through a similar program known as Reverse Transfer.

## Key Takeaways

Statewide implementation of the CORE Initiative was successful. The program exceeded performance goals for the number of IHEs opting to participate and for the number of degrees awarded in the first two semesters. Additionally, the number of students who have re-enrolled to pursue a bachelor's degree to date is promising. With nearly 1,000 individuals receiving an earned associate degree in the first year of the program, the CORE initiative has the potential to measurably increase Colorado's postsecondary educational attainment rate. Representatives from higher education agencies in Michigan and Montana have requested information and guidance from CDHE with the intent of replicating this innovative Colorado program.

Best practices employed that led to successful implementation and outcomes of the program included allowing adequate time for detailed project planning to occur during the initial stages of the initiative, cultivation and leveraging of professional relationships between CDHE staff, the Higher Learning Commission, and four-year institutions to ensure all program stakeholders had opportunities to be included in the work and regularly informed of project progress.

The project was completed on schedule, although initial time estimates for several process steps proved to be insufficient in practice. In particular, the amount of time required for various levels of internal approval at many of the IHEs was longer than anticipated: cultivating a high-level champion (typically the university provost), presenting an overview of CORE for a formal vote by the institution's faculty senate, and securing final approval by the governing board for each participating institution. However, the extra time required in

these cases was offset by a faster-than-anticipated process for applying for and receiving authorization from the Higher Learning Commission to award a new degree type. The eight participating IHEs were some of the first universities in the country to utilize HLC's new accelerated process for initial accreditation. This accelerated process reduced the time required to apply for and receive authorization to award associate degrees from two years or more under the traditional process to just five months. HLC's willingness to work with the CDHE as a partner—and to be flexible and innovative when necessary—was hugely instrumental to making the CORE Initiative a reality for Colorado's institutions of higher education.

## Lessons Learned

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Neither the bill authors nor the project managers for CORE and the Finish What You Started (FWYS) grant program were able to foresee the misalignment that would develop between the two programs. FWYS provides tuition assistance to students who previously stopped-out but wish to re-enroll and work towards a degree. This scholarship program could have been a natural fit for many of the former students who received their associate degree through CORE and wanted to re-enroll to continue working towards a bachelor's degree. However, returning students who already have a degree or certificate reflecting 30 or more academic credits are not eligible for the FWYS grant. This meant that students had to choose between participating in the CORE initiative to earn an associate degree or receiving financial support to continue working towards their bachelor's degree. Academic advisors and enrollment advisors from the participating IHEs played a critical role in informing CORE-eligible former students about the possible implications of accepting or declining their associate degree. The FWYS program is scheduled to phase out over time and end completely by June 2026. At that time, the conflicting student eligibility requirements between these two programs will no longer be an issue.

## Project Continuation

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From the beginning of the project, CORE was intended to continue beyond the one-time federal SLFRF funding that helped launch and operationalize the initiative. The eight participating universities now have the systems, policies, and processes in place to identify eligible students and award associate degrees as additional students become eligible each semester. The institutions will have nominal costs each year for printing diplomas, conducting outreach and marketing, and providing advising services to associate degree recipients

who wish to re-enroll and earn their bachelor's degree. While this is the final statutorily required report from CDHE on this initiative, the project will continue through the participating universities and their ongoing efforts to re-engage students. The Department will continue to collect and publish annual program data including the number and type of associate degrees awarded by each institution, the number of former students who re-enroll after receiving an associate degree, and the number of re-enrolled students who earn a bachelor's degree.

## **Operational Excellence**

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The CORE project demonstrated operational excellence in the level of customer service provided to leaders and staff from participating IHEs. CDHE staff centrally coordinated the project work whenever possible. By performing tasks like crafting standard responses for the HLC application for initial accreditation, educating HLC review teams about the unique nature of the CORE Initiative in advance of application reviews, coordinating a "batch submission" of applications from all eight institutions, and sharing of best practices for identifying eligible students, the Department was able to save considerable time and effort on the part of all eight IHEs participating in the Initiative.

Operational excellence was also displayed in terms of contract administration. The program manager created an Excel-based application form for IHEs to use when applying for CORE Operational Grants. Feedback from the institutions indicated that this application was simpler and faster than traditional forms and that the resulting application, once accepted, was easy to convert to a quality Statement of Work. Several other units within CDHE have adopted this form for use with other program applications.

## **Reasons for Underutilization of Funds**

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The CORE project reverted approximately 45% of the \$1 million allocated to the initiative through the HB21-1330 legislation. There were two primary reasons for this reversion:

1. The cost of implementing the CORE program on each campus was less than originally anticipated. It was determined that a grant award of \$40,000 to each participating institution would be sufficient to cover all costs associated with launching the program, including updating the university catalog, identifying and contacting eligible former students, designing and printing new associate degree diplomas, and marketing

and outreach to encourage degree recipients to re-enroll and continue earning credits toward a bachelor's degree.

2. The Department of Higher Education did not incur any substantial costs for publicizing CORE or identifying and notifying eligible former students, beyond staff time necessary to plan and execute implementation of the program. Rather than utilizing state dollars, participating institutions wanted to complete publicity and outreach efforts with internal staff and resources with the intent of developing an institution-specific message crafted to the interests of their own former students.