KEYSTONE
POLICY CENTER

Colorado Community College System
Strategic Planning
Phase One Report
August 7, 2024

Executive Summary

Discovering a Shared Vision for Colorado's Community Colleges

The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) has undertaken an extraordinary effort to forge a strategic plan that reflects the aspirations and needs of Colorado's diverse communities.

In listening sessions on every campus, we asked for and received candid feedback about community colleges' strengths and challenges. Staff, faculty, students, and community leaders provided ideas for future opportunities in each of the CCCS draft guiding principles: Economic Mobility, Education for All, Partner of Choice, Power of 13, and Empowered Talent. These concepts were tested, refined, and enriched through the invaluable input of those who live and breathe the daily challenges and triumphs of community college education.

What we heard was inspiring. Stakeholders spoke passionately about the role of community colleges in transforming lives and communities, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and innovative education that responds to the evolving demands of the learners, workforce, and society. They highlighted the need for accessible pathways to success, robust partnerships that expand opportunities, and a unified approach that leverages the collective strength of all CCCS institutions.

Our conversations illuminated pressing issues and opportunities and provided a roadmap for addressing challenges and seizing new possibilities. We learned from other states' experiences, drawing lessons that will help the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (SBCCOE or Board) craft a future in which the CCCS colleges are not only places of learning but hubs of empowerment and progress.

This report summarizes thousands of comments and ideas. As a framework to distill the essence of the discussions, we offer what emerged as the most frequently noted pressing concerns and aspirations for the significant stakeholder groups:

Students

- An individualized, affordable pathway to their first or next career, whether through technical training or credit transfers.
- Learning modalities and opportunities that fit the circumstances of their life situation.
- A welcoming environment that respects individuals, cultural backgrounds and supports a thriving learning community.

Staff and Faculty

- Collaboration that includes their knowledge and expertise to develop nimble and innovative educational solutions for the workforce demands of their community and improve student outcomes.
- Increased support for their professional and leadership development and increased competitive compensation.
- Increased resources and staffing and greater efficiency in processes and systems to reduce workload and help restore work-life balance.

Community (business, schools, elected officials, education advocacy groups)

- Employer partnerships and collaboration that provide nimble, flexible, and affordable workforce training options.
- Greater awareness of the value and opportunity community colleges provide to students, employers, and the community.

We invite you to delve deeper into these insights that form the foundation for a transformative strategic plan, shaping a brighter, more inclusive, and opportunity-rich landscape for community college education in Colorado.

Introduction

In the winter of 2024, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) to support the development of its next five-year strategic plan for 2025-2030. This plan represents a significant endeavor with the potential to revolutionize learning and workforce opportunities for many Colorado residents. As the largest provider of higher education and workforce training in Colorado, CCCS serves over 115,000 students annually across its 13 colleges and 35+ locations. Through programs including Concurrent Enrollment, Career & Technical Education, certificate programs, transfer programs, as well as associate and bachelor's degree programs, CCCS offers a diverse range of opportunities for career changers acquiring new skills, working adults earning stackable certificates that lead to degrees, as well as high school and college students seeking an affordable start to their college and career journey.

To achieve its strategic goals, CCCS envisioned a two-phased approach to the planning process. Phase one focused on listening and learning, while phase two will concentrate on creating and launching the strategic plan. This report analyzes key findings from data gathered from an environmental scan that includes research on other state community college systems and higher education organizations, stakeholder campus meetings, and surveys. Based on this analysis, the report outlines opportunities within the major guiding principles and provides key recommendations to guide phase two of the strategic planning process.

Phase One Approach

Phase one of the CCCS Strategic Planning effort involved conducting a series of listening sessions with community college stakeholders across the state, as well as interviews with other state systems of community colleges. Additionally, Colorado Succeeds contributed an industry analysis, located in the appendix, to supplement to our own data collection.

The objectives of Phase one were to:

- **Provide a Dynamic Forum**: Create an open, inclusive platform for students, staff, faculty, and community leaders to share their views on the current state of community colleges and propose ideas for future opportunities.
- **Test the Draft Guiding Principles**: Evaluate and refine the five draft Guiding Principles that CCCS leadership created through feedback from various stakeholders.

- **Gather Leadership Insights**: Collect valuable perspectives from CCCS board members and leadership to inform future strategic directions.
- **Learn from Leading Systems**: Gain insights from leading community college systems in other states and higher education associations to identify best practices and innovative approaches.
- **Compile and Organize Data**: Compile all gathered data into a comprehensive report to assist the CCCS Board and Leadership in developing Phase Two's mission, vision, values, strategic goals, and key performance measures.

The open-systems approach to data collection enabled us to capture a diverse range of perspectives from various groups:

- CCCS Leadership
- Students
- Community Members
- College Staff & Faculty
- School Districts

- CCCS System Staff
- Board
- Government Officials
- Philanthropic Leaders
- Business Leaders

- College Alumni

Through the listening sessions, we asked for and received candid feedback about community colleges' strengths and challenges. Various stakeholders provided ideas for future opportunities in each of the CCCS draft guiding principles:

- **Economic Mobility**. Empower Coloradans to economic opportunity through life-long learning and wealth-building without the burden of excessive debt.
- **Education for All.** Provide accessible, flexible and inclusive education for every learner.
- **Partner of Choice**. Be the preferred partner for industry, government and communities to drive workforce development.
- **Power of 13.** Leverage the strength of 13 colleges through collective efforts while maintaining individual college integrity and shared governance.
- **Empowered Talent.** Build a culture where every individual feels valued, equipped for success, and supported in professional and leadership development to foster an environment of accountability and participatory governance.

These concepts were tested, refined, and enriched through the invaluable input of those who live and breathe the daily challenges and triumphs of community college education.

Every community college hosted listening sessions at most of its campuses as illustrated by the map below. Each location had more than one session, which invited staff and faculty, students, and community members to meet in groups. A virtual option

was also provided at each campus. In total, Keystone Policy Center conducted 36 sessions.

Each session followed a similar format. Keystone asked participants to write what they loved about community colleges on post-it notes, which the group discussed, followed by the same exercise to identify challenges. Participants then broke into small groups and brainstormed their ideas for future opportunities for each guiding principle. The session ended with participants voting on the top two guiding principles they felt were most important to them. The virtual sessions followed a similar format, using Google Jam board for participants to post their comments and ideas. At each session, notetakers captured the essence of the conversation based on both new ideas and those that were elaborated on through post-it notes.

Keystone also collected feedback through an online survey, which was available for session participants to post additional ideas and for anyone who did not attend either a virtual or in-person listening session.

This process generated thousands of comments, ideas, and thoughts. Keystone compiled the post-it notes and notetaker comments for each session and grouped these by community college. Keystone then analyzed the notes to identify themes and ideas that emerged across all colleges. Appendix 1 includes a description of the methodology.
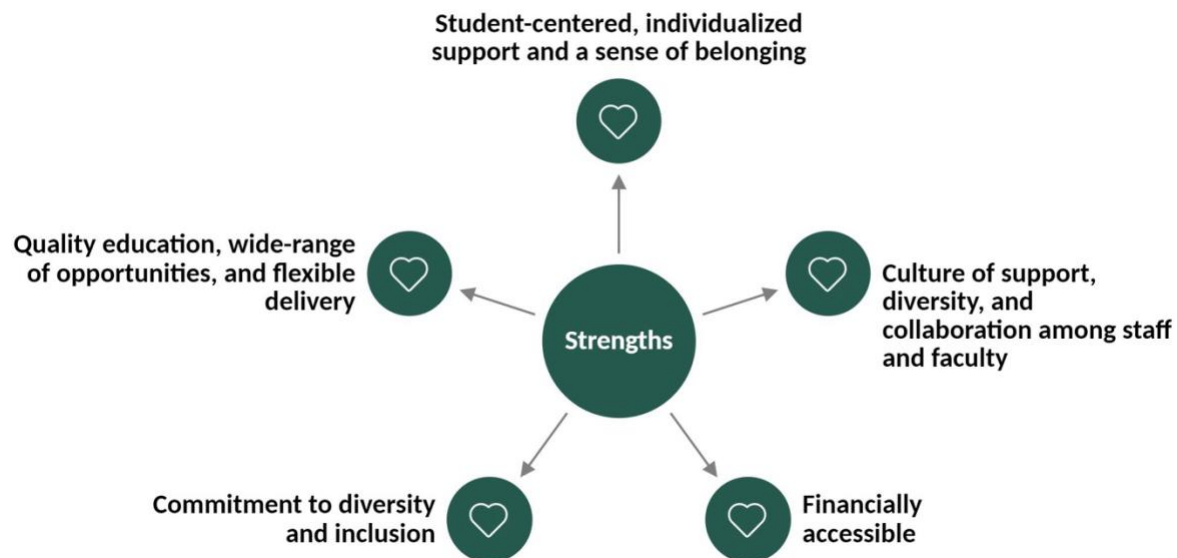
As a part of this process, the team conducted interviews with select members of the Board, select college presidents, and members of the executive leadership team to assess the current state of CCCS in relation to its goals and expectations over the past five years. Additionally, they sought to understand best practices and insights from out-of-state system offices, through interviews with executive leadership teams from community college system offices outside of Colorado. The findings from these interviews were used to inform the strategic planning process and shape the future direction of CCCS.

Key Findings

Keystone synthesized responses from all the listening sessions to identify common themes regarding strengths and challenges. Additionally, we gathered input from stakeholders on CCCS's draft five guiding principles: Economic Mobility, Partner of Choice, Education for All, Power of 13, and Empowered Talent. The goal was to determine whether these principles resonated with the community and to explore the opportunities they might create for the community college system. Given the extensive feedback received, the following pages (13-26) summarize key themes and highlight a selection of comments to support each theme.

Strengths

In each session, we asked participants what they loved most about the community college system. Responses focused on these themes:

Student-centered, individualized support and a sense of belonging

Quality education, wide-range of opportunities, and flexible delivery

Strengths

Culture of support, diversity, and collaboration among staff and faculty

Commitment to diversity and inclusion

Financially accessible

Theme: Student-centered, individualized support and a sense of belonging

- The student-centered community college mission affords students the opportunity and resources to reach their dreams.
- Students feel personally supported by counseling, health services and emergency assistance.
- Hands on learning for pay and credit attracts students.
- Students feel welcomed and describe a sense of connection with the college community.

Theme: Culture of support, diversity, and collaboration among staff and faculty

- Most college staff noted a friendly work culture, with supportive and wonderful colleagues that creates an environment that feels like a community or a family. A strong sense of collaboration includes efforts between departments and institutions to leverage resources and expertise.
- Students express diverse perspectives in class. They also noted the college is a pillar of the community because of its programs, students, staff, faculty and alumni; a perception especially strong in rural communities.

Theme: Financially accessible

- Participants at every college highlighted affordability and accessibility are key strengths of community colleges.
- As one person said, "Accessibility and possibility- start here, go anywhere."

Theme: Commitment to diversity and inclusion

- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is highly valued, and faculty/staff are proud to serve a diverse student population.
- Classroom instruction and campus culture focused on welcoming nontraditional students.
- Promoting a diversity of thought and voices of all student populations is seen as important.
- Appreciation for a focus on creating more Hispanic Serving Institutions, increasing TRIO supports, and recruiting Native American teachers & tutoring Native American students.

Theme: Quality education, wide range of opportunities, and flexible delivery

- Participants highlighted the quality of teachers and the learning environment characterized by small classes and individual attention.
- Community colleges are flexible in offering many CTE programs and degrees to meet a student's educational goals. Colleges implement innovative programs, respond to workforce demands, and meet students' needs.

Challenges

Participants were then asked to consider the other side of the coin. They responded to the prompt "what's not working so well? What are your challenges?" Reponses focused on the following themes:
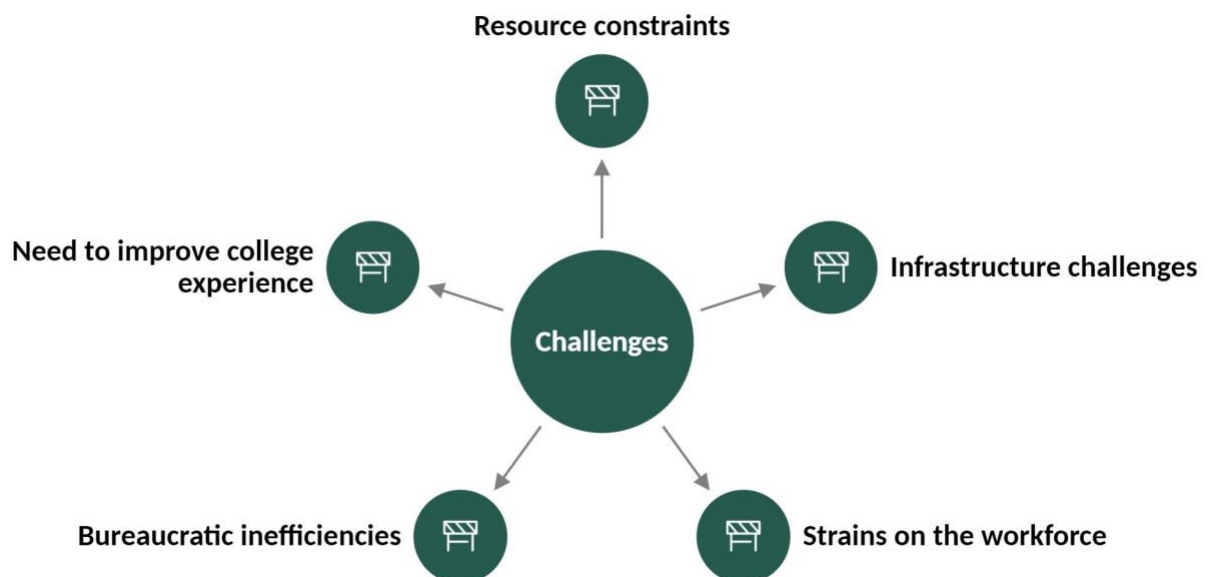
Theme: Resource constraints: funding, salaries, and student needs

- Universal concerns around the lack of financial resources with college's funding from the state is considered inadequate.

- There is a common belief among faculty and staff, that funding constraints are placing limitations on student services (e.g. mental health, transportation, and scholarships to keep students enrolled in school).
- Resource constraints are inhibiting professional development opportunities by limiting travel reimbursements. This is especially challenging for rural employees who desire interaction with other colleges and/or travel to metro areas.
- The perceived impacts from limited funding include:
  - Low wages to pay staff
  - Wages lower than other educational institutions
  - Salaries are not competitive with the market, impacting recruitment & staff turnover
  - Staff shortages
  - Delays in capital projects
  - Competition for scares resource
  - Impedes innovation

> "Education Funding in CO is becoming a joke" - Faculty Staff Member

Theme: Infrastructure Challenges

- Participants identified several technology challenges, including:
  - Website accessibility
  - Wi-Fi connectivity
  - Speed and reliability
  - Upgrades to support remote and hybrid work and data storage
- To enhance efficiency and consistency across the community college system, there is a need to standardize software applications (e.g., Microsoft Office, Blackboard), educational resources (e.g., digital textbooks, online libraries), and virtual meeting storage solutions (e.g., Zoom, Google Drive).
- Some noted that aspects of the online learning environment are challenging.
- Students noted that online classes are more challenging than traditional in-person classes due to their strict guidelines.
- CO Online perceived as taking independence, identity, and consent away from the college.
- CO Online also has responsiveness and navigability issues.

Theme: Employee recruitment, retention, workload, and strains on workforce

- College and system office staff noted high turnover, "leading to burnout, workload distribution issues and challenges in sustaining a sense of community."
- College and system staff are overloaded... "many employees doing the job of 2 plus people."
- At the system office, "workload is too high, employees are working too much, too much stress, too many hours."
- Finding qualified instructors, especially in rural areas, is a challenge due to restrictions on instructor qualifications and labor shortages.

Theme: Bureaucratic inefficiencies (e.g., lack of communication, lack of transparency, process challenges)

- College staff mentioned a lack of communication between executives and both students and staff.
- Students and staff described colleges and departments as silos which, they feel, result in few opportunities to engage with other departments or colleges.
- Bureaucratic challenges include poor procedural processes and unresponsive administrative staff. One staff member noted there are "many steps, processes, and policies for everything [are] not always clear."
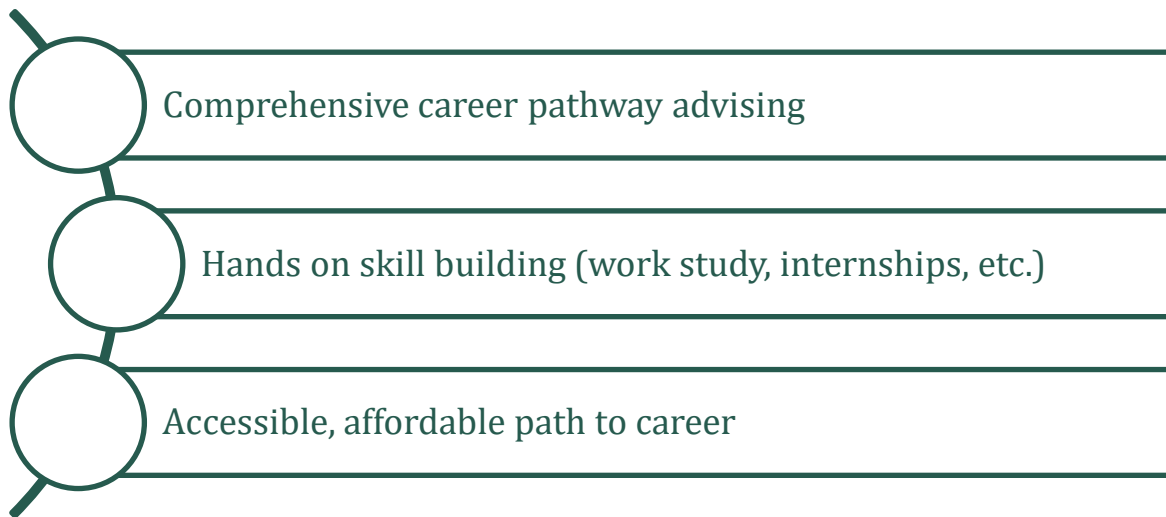
Theme: Need to Improve College Experience

- Students expressed the need for more transparent and accessible advising about career pathways and navigation support for different career options. The lack of faculty diversity impacts their ability to reflect the student population and acknowledge all cultures and intersectionality.
- Many students commented that resolving administrative questions or concerns took a lot of work. When calling the help desk, for example, they noted instances of getting passed around, and not receiving accurate and helpful information.
- Students on rural campuses experience limited class availability, transportation issues, and lack of qualified instructors.
- Campus cafes lack healthy and varied food options, and all do not accept SNAP EBT cards.

Opportunities for Each Guiding Principle

A key objective of Phase One was to test the guiding principles provided by CCCS to determine their resonance with the community and identify potential opportunities for the community college system. The following summary encapsulates the community's feedback on each principle, highlighting key comments and identifying prevalent themes.

Guiding Principle # 1 Economic Mobility

Participants highlighted the critical role of community colleges in providing individualized, affordable educational pathways that empower students to advance their careers and achieve economic mobility.

Comprehensive career pathway advising

Hands on skill building (work study, internships, etc.)

Accessible, affordable path to career

Theme: Comprehensive career pathway advising to meet student needs

- Students expressed a strong need for individualized career advising that helps them navigate diverse career pathways as well as is tailored to their unique goals, skills, and life circumstances to ensure that they receive relevant and actionable guidance throughout their educational journey.
- Integrate career advising with academic programs to provide a seamless connection between education and career outcomes, ensuring that students understand how their courses and training directly relate to potential job opportunities.
- Provide clearer communication and structure around career pathways, including the steps required for various careers, potential salary outcomes, and the

educational credentials needed, to help students make informed decisions about their future.

- Increase advising that specifically addresses the challenges faced by non-traditional students, such as working adults, parents, and veterans, offering tailored support and guidance that considers their unique constraints and needs.

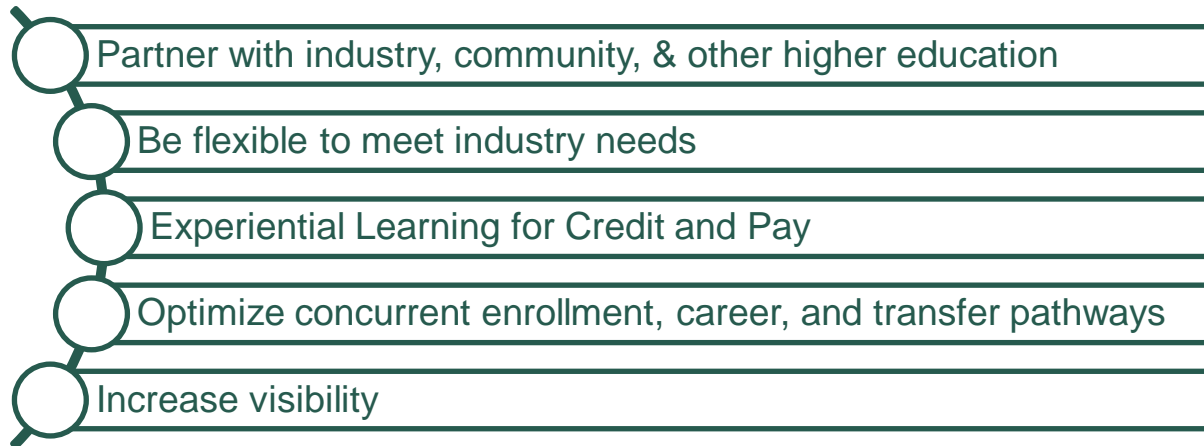## Theme: Hands on skill building (work study, internships, etc.)

- Expanded technical programs that offer hands-on skill development, providing a direct pathway to high-demand careers and enhancing job readiness.
- Increase partnerships with local businesses to facilitate on-the-job training programs, where students can apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, gaining valuable work experience and industry connections.
- Seek funding opportunities for more resources, such as state-of-the-art equipment and dedicated training facilities, to support hands-on learning and ensure that students have access to the tools necessary for developing practical skills.

Theme: Accessible, affordable path to career

- Create affordable education pathways that minimize financial barriers, to ensure individuals- regardless of their economic background- can pursue education that leads to meaningful careers and economic advancement.
- Provide clearly defined and well-communicated career pathways that outline the steps from education to employment including information on job prospects, potential earnings, and required skills.
- Establish robust comprehensive support services, including career counseling, job placement assistance, and internships.

Guiding Principle # 2 Partner of Choice

Participants widely viewed collaboration and partnerships as significant opportunities, mentioning community, employers, K-12 schools, universities, and workforce development centers as present and future partners. Engaging with the community was seen as vital in understanding and meeting the diverse needs of the local community.

| Partner with industry, community, & other higher education |
| Be flexible to meet industry needs |
| Experiential Learning for Credit and Pay |
| Optimize concurrent enrollment, career, and transfer pathways |
| Increase visibility |

Theme: Partner with industry, community, & other higher education

- Establish mutually beneficial partnerships with industry that pair education with workforce needs, including employer support for community colleges. For example, businesses and industry could sponsor scholarships and financial support to help reduce student debt.

- Participants identified existing or suggested future partner opportunities with many sectors, including:
  - Agriculture
  - Automotive
  - Childcare
  - Construction
  - Culinary
  - Cyber
  - Electrical
  - Heavy equipment
  - HVAC
  - Outdoor equipment
  - Nursing
  - Rural hospitals
  - Welding
- Mutually beneficial relationships might also include employer financial support for community colleges.
- Develop clear and accessible pathways for high school students through partnerships with secondary schools.

> "When a business thinks about training staff, they should think about a local community college" - *Community Member*

Theme: Be flexible to meet industry need

- Rise to always evolving industry need by identifying and implementing innovative programming
- Develop curriculum, including non-credit and for-credit professional development, with speed and flexibility. This may require re-examining the credentialling process.
- Explore delivering courses in a nontraditional manner in order to meet learner needs (e.g. delivered outside of the 15-week model, offering availability on Fridays and evenings, and taking training to the employer's site).

Theme: Experiential learning for credit and pay (e.g., earn while you learn, internships, work/study)

- Integrate educational programs with job placement initiatives to ensure alignment and meaningful employment opportunities. Paid workplace-based learning enables students to earn money while gaining valuable experience and credit.
- Connect students with employers through career fairs and job shadowing.

Theme: Optimize concurrent enrollment, career, and transfer pathways

- Enrich partnerships with four-year institutions to ensure the transferability of credits and cross-state transfer programs.
- Provide students with more guidance on how to move to a four-year institution.
- Streamline the enrollment process to reduce administrative burdens and make it easier for students to enroll in concurrent courses.
- Increase quality of concurrent enrollment courses at high schools to ensure consistency and high academic standards.
- Improve access and flexibility by creating flexible scheduling options to accommodate high school students attending classes on the college campus.

Theme: Increase visibility

- Increase prospective students' and employers' visibility and understanding of the community college system by emphasizing its low-cost and swift entry into the workforce.
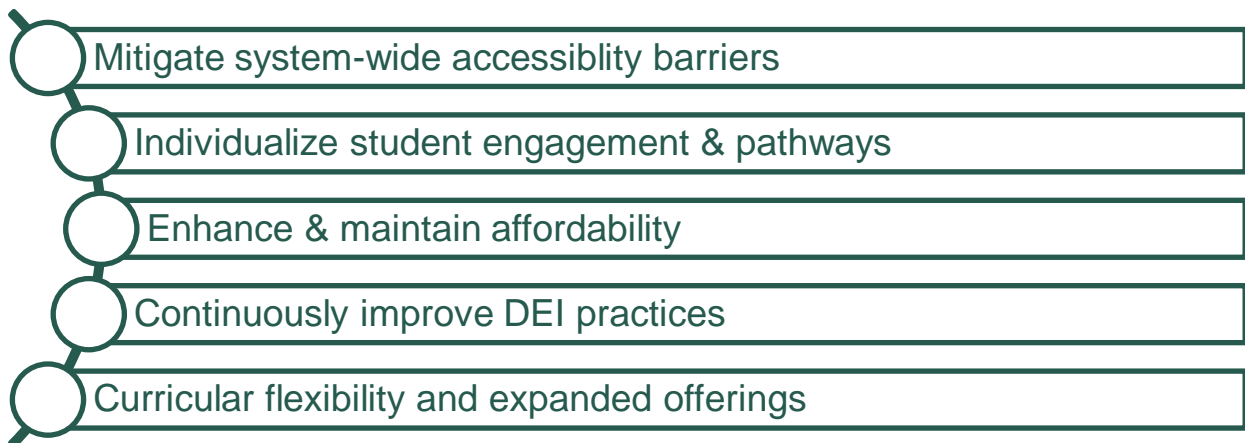- Communications should emphasize success stories with examples.

Increase awareness through media coverage, participation in community-led events, statewide student recruitment fairs, and a concerted campaign targeted at high school counselors.

- Staff, faculty, and students strongly conveyed the need for CCCS to enhance its visibility regarding its efforts to meet students of all ages and backgrounds where they are and help achieve their career aspirations.

> "Make it a Plan A choice, not Plan B." - *Staff Member*

Guiding Principle # 3 Education for All

Participants emphasized the need for inclusive education that accommodates diverse cultural backgrounds and life circumstances, ensuring all students have access to personalized and affordable learning opportunities. They highlighted the importance of creating a welcoming environment that supports a thriving learning community and respects individual differences.

- Mitigate system-wide accessiblity barriers
- Individualize student engagement & pathways
- Enhance & maintain affordability
- Continuously improve DEI practices
- Curricular flexibility and expanded offerings

Theme: Mitigate system-wide accessibility barriers (e.g. class schedule, childcare, transportation, language, etc.)

- Increase flexibility and innovation in course offerings and program structures to accommodate various schedules, lifestyles, and learning styles.
- Students and staff identified many barriers that prevent or inhibit learning:
    - To help students get to campus, partner with transportation agencies, or otherwise provide logistical assistance to students.
    - Onsite childcare or financial resources that help to pay for offsite care.

15

- o Reduce tech barriers by improving connectivity (especially in rural colleges), providing personal computers for learning, and teaching digital literacy skills.
- o Ensure classes, services, and locations are ADA accessible and provide accommodations.
- o Remove language barriers by providing translation services, bilingual instruction, and teaching in learners' native language.

> "True student-centered education for all would let students choose the modality and schedule for their classes." - *Student*

Theme: Individualize student engagement & pathways

- Instill a holistic approach to education that considers personal growth and development in the context of professional pathways for each student's journey, including:
  - o better career services,
  - o greater internship opportunities,
  - o more robust prior learning assessment.
- Create a consistent and extensive advising process to guide the students' academic journey including wrap-around services would provide touch points for first-generation students.
- Increase or improve resources by creating physical learning environments that are adaptable, responsive, and oriented towards people's needs.

Theme: Enhance & maintain affordability

- Increase the affordability of community college education by,
  - o free tuition for Colorado residents,
  - o more support of Open Educational Resources (textbooks),
  - o equal tuition costs across all modalities,
  - o increased financial aid, scholarships and grants,
  - o funding for students who do not qualify for federal Pell grant funding depending on individual circumstances,
  - o more flexibility on dropped classes and refunds.

Theme: Continuously improve DEI practices

- Create an inclusive environment that welcomes, reflects, and understands diversity and individual differences to enhance DEI.
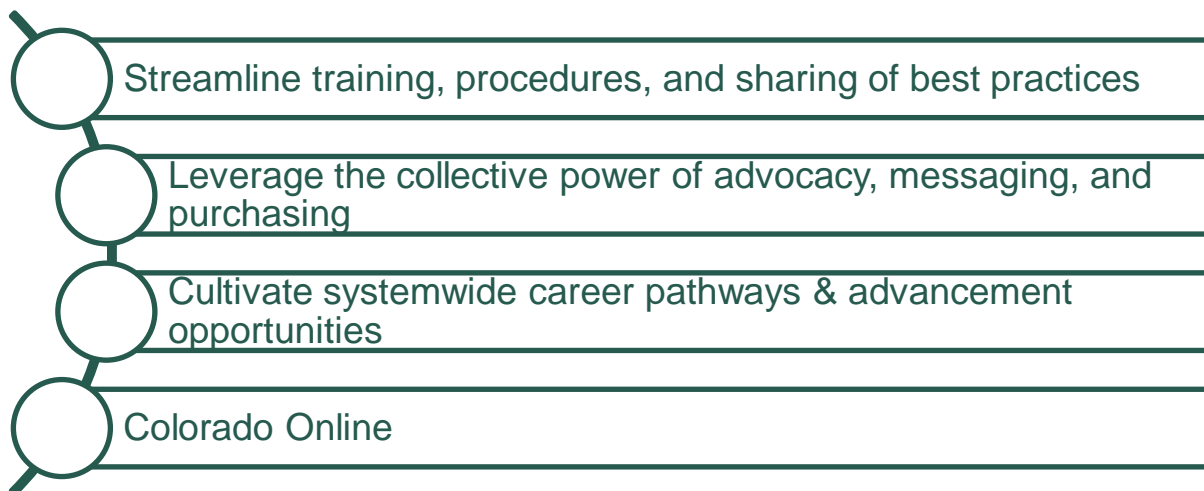
- Additional training for all employees to provide a consistent and inclusive DEI approach to student support.
- Hiring more faculty and staff of color to create a more diverse environment and be more representative of the student population.
- Embracing multicultural learning and competency.

Theme: Curricular flexibility and expanded offerings

- Provide a wide range of learning opportunities that cater to various types of learners, spanning different fields of study and geographical locations.
- Create a nimble process for colleges to develop new programs and make decisions for their communities.
- Provide programs options that would attract more students including:
    - hands-on experiential learning,
    - specialty programs like high school diploma, CDL, and ESL,
    - community education and non-degree programs targeting seniors, second careers, and those seeking lifelong learning and skill development.

Guiding Principle # 4 Power of 13

Participants across CCCS emphasized the need to streamline procedures, improve communication, and establish consistent metrics for program approval to enhance efficiency and clarity. They advocated for cohesive system-wide strategies that align education with workforce needs and facilitate career pathways and advancement opportunities.

- Streamline training, procedures, and sharing of best practices
- Leverage the collective power of advocacy, messaging, and purchasing
- Cultivate systemwide career pathways & advancement opportunities
- Colorado Online

Theme: Streamline training, procedures, and sharing of best practices

- Improve procedures and streamline processes across CCCS, including consistent training related to program approval.
- Create better communication and responsiveness between the colleges and the System Office.
- Establish uniform procedures for Prior Learning Assessments (PLA).
- Establish program inventory that is easily accessible.
- Improve data sharing with external partners, such as the Department of Labor.

Theme: Leverage the collective power of advocacy, messaging, and purchasing

- Use the Power of 13 to influence policy and legislative changes.
- Use collective bargaining power to form more effective corporate partnerships, secure better purchasing deals, and streamline operational processes.
- Establish more consistent program approval metrics across the system.
- Unified system-wide marketing to increase visibility.

Theme: Cultivate systemwide career pathways & advancement opportunities

- Enhance a cohesive strategy that aligns education with workforce needs and is facilitated through strategic partnerships with industry and economic stakeholders.
- Staff and students advocated for a more structured support to guide students from their educational journey into employment.
- Improve transfer pathways and advising on transfer options to Colorado universities.

> "We are working with economic partners, other providers, industry, and sector partnerships to ensure we are working with a common goal for the future workforce pipeline." - *Faculty Member*
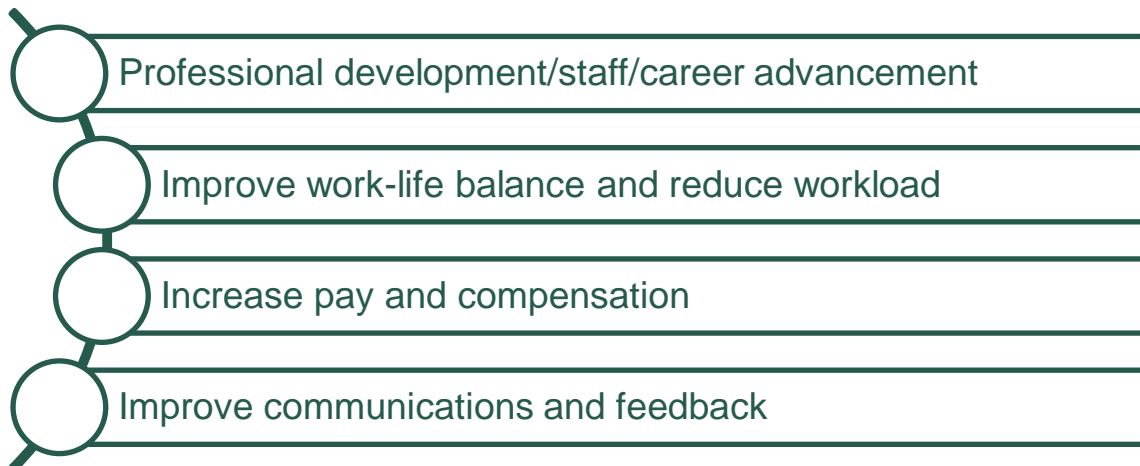
Theme: Colorado Online

- Address challenges and enhance the overall effectiveness of the CO online program through proactive problem-solving and continuous improvement efforts. Ensure that all technological components of the CO online program are robust and interconnected.
- Include faculty in developing and continuously enhancing CO Online, ensuring that those who deliver the education are involved in its design and functionality. Staff emphasized the importance of developing a seamless registration process and integrating student information systems to create more efficiency and a streamlined experience.
- Create a centralized, accessible, and reliable information source to minimize confusion and inconsistencies across the online system.

> "Give faculty a say in CO Online." - *Faculty Member*

Guiding Principle # 5 Empowered Talent

Participants in all listening sessions highlighted the critical need for enhanced professional development, comprehensive support systems with financial incentives, fair compensation aligned with market standards, and improved communication and transparency to foster a collaborative and efficient environment.

- Professional development/staff/career advancement
- Improve work-life balance and reduce workload
- Increase pay and compensation
- Improve communications and feedback

Theme: Professional development/ staff training/career advancement (e.g., tuition reimbursement)

- Staff and faculty highlighted the critical need for enhanced professional development and training initiatives through comprehensive support systems including:
  - tuition reimbursement for classes at four-year higher education institutions,
  - identify incentives for participation, such as offering compensation for participation and allocating dedicated time for learning.
  - ongoing training across various departments to ensure that staff skills remain current and relevant,
  - funding curriculum redesign and pedagogy training to improve teaching practices and targeted programs to address literacy support needs throughout the organization.

Theme: Improve work-life balance and reduce workload.

- Pay for participation and release from other duties to facilitate engagement.
- Increase staff capacity by adding paid internships.
- Institute staff succession planning to ensure adequate staffing capacity which would improve distribution of responsibilities and maintain work life balance for current employees.
- Streamline processes to reduce inefficiencies that add to unsustainable workloads.

Theme: Increase pay and compensation

- Attract and retain skilled staff and faculty by increasing pay and compensation with market standards
- Seek creative opportunities to addresses inflationary pressures
- Provide baseline support so staff can afford the opportunity to live in their communities.

Theme: Improve communications and feedback

- Improve communication between executives, students, staff, and faculty.
- Value employees' voices through participatory governance and shared decision-making.

- Improve communication channels from the System Office which are perceived as slow, lacking, or absent.

Listening Session Prioritization

At the end of each session, the facilitators asked participants to vote on the top two guiding principles that were most important to them. Results were as follows:

- Empower Talent – 333 votes
- Education for All – 312 votes
- Economic Mobility – 256 votes
- Power of 13 – 137 votes
- Partner of Choice – 110 votes

Not every attendee chose to participate in the ranked-choice voting.

Interviews

CCCS Leadership

Keystone interviewed the CCCS Chancellor, Board Chair and one board member, two community college presidents and CCCS Foundation board chair and one Foundation Board member seeking their views on the strengths and opportunities. These leaders were enthusiastic about the progress of the community college system, mindful of challenges and excited about future possibilities.

Key Themes

- Community colleges provide an accessible, affordable path for all learners to gain knowledge and technical skills to enter jobs and careers immediately.
- Despite this excellent value and opportunity, employers, prospective students, and families do not appreciate the opportunity of community college.
- Community colleges must do a better job of telling this compelling story and changing the stigma surrounding their identity.
- Because community colleges serve all learners, programs, and services should be co-designed holistically from a student-centered perspective. This should include individualized coaching, schedules and modalities that fit students' needs and services that support the person.
- The spirit of collaboration between the System and the colleges has improved dramatically under Chancellor Garcia. We now have an excellent opportunity to maximize what the system can offer while allowing colleges to meet local community needs.
- Some opportunities for system support include improving CO Online, providing back-office operations, and providing common services like human resources and payroll.
- Adequate funding, especially for rural colleges, is a key challenge. Rural colleges are vital to their communities.
- When asked to state a headline on the release of the strategic plan, leaders described a bold future in which community colleges are 100% focused on improving the community!

Other State Community College Systems

CCCS leadership identified the Indiana and Virginia community college systems as exemplary workforce development programs with emphasis on accessibility to all

learners. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education is a source of information about community college systems in the Western United States. These interviews provided key models for potential innovative changes to Colorado's system.

Sue Ellspermann is president of Ivy Tech, Indiana's community college system. The system is governed by one board and has 19 campuses, each headed by a chancellor.

1. **Single accreditation.** Ivy Tech has one accreditation for all programs and all colleges. This enhanced the state's economic development because a company can have several locations and know their employees will receive the same training. Ivy Tech has one credit agreement with four-year institutions partners.
2. **VP of Workforce Development.** To further career pathways, the legislature established the position of VP of Workforce Development, which is in the system office. The Ivy Tech system is an integral member of the state's economic development team. The VP is essential to establishing partnerships with corporations that can be leveraged statewide for all colleges.
3. **Process review.** The System office reviewed processes and procedures by establishing collaborative teams that made recommendations for improvement.
4. **Collaborative governance.** To further collaboration, the Ivy Tech president encourages the college chancellors to submit proposals for improvement, which go to the System's cabinet. The process is somewhat like a legislative process, with everyone involved in making revisions to achieve consensus. The System President can initiate or veto proposals.

Sharon Morrissey, retired Chancellor of Virginia's Community College System.

1. **Economic mobility** is baked into the strategic plan. To track and determine the connection between training and education programs and jobs, Virginia invested in databases that more finely tune wage data based on job and region.

2. **Workforce development**
   a. Virginia developed a robust CTE program called Fast Forward, a short-term training program for high-demand industries like healthcare, information technology and skilled trades and infrastructure
   b. The G3 program (Get a skill, get a job, get ahead) is a credit program for in-demand industries such as early childhood, healthcare, information technology, and public safety.

3. **Access for learners**
   a. To support learners new to college, Virginia redesigned its onboarding process and established coaches to help students navigate enrollment, registration, and payment processes. It used the AdAstra software to develop class schedules that are convenient for students.
4. **Leveraging the community college system**
   a. Virginia established a faculty ranking and pay scale that is more equitable to the technical faculty. Virginia brings together all faculty annually for a two-day conference to encourage shared learning among peer groups and promote professional development throughout the year.

Demaree Michelau, President, Western Interstate Compact on Higher Education

1. Declining enrollment due to reduced birth rates and numbers of high school graduates is a significant challenge for higher education institutions, including community colleges.
2. Declining enrollment and financial strain are leading to the closure of small colleges in some regions of the country.
3. While the cost of community college tuition has remained somewhat flat for many years, the increased cost of housing and other consumer items has increased the financial strain on households, impacting students' ability to afford tuition. Noncompetitive compensation affects staff and faculty recruitment and retention.
4. Legislatures in some states are placing priority on state-funding career technical education programs. Western states like Montana and Idaho have developed innovative workforce development programs.
5. WICHE maintains databases that compare Western higher education institutions across many variables, such as state funding, tuition, and enrollment.

Colorado Succeeds Analysis

Colorado Succeeds represents Colorado businesses, industry associations, and local chambers committed to enhancing the state's education and workforce systems. Collaborating with businesses, they align education and training with workforce needs, envisioning an education system where all Coloradans achieve a credential leading to a family-living wage within six years of high school graduation. Through labor market analysis, employer engagement, pathway research, and policy implementation, Colorado Succeeds addresses issues in education and training. They engage with high-needs industries such as healthcare, IT, construction trades, hospitality, and business services.

Colorado Succeeds has provided recommendations for CCCS's new strategic plan, detailed in Appendix 3: Colorado Succeeds Input for CCCS Strategic Plan.

Economic Mobility	• Ensure program offerings prioritize economic mobility for learners by aligning programs with industry trends.
Partner of Choice	• Become the partner of choice by creating authentic industry engagement and greated agility to ensure curriculum aligns with industry needs.
Empower Talent	• Empower talent by recognizing sills gained outside of educational institutions and creating more flexible curricular pathways aligned with industry needs.
Power of 13	• Harness the power of 13 by elevating and coordinating employer engagement and coordinating industry advisory activities
Education For All	• Realize education for all by continuously reviewing and responding to data.

Keystone Takeaways

Analyzing the tremendous amount of data gathered in the listening sessions, Keystone formulated key takeaways that CCCS and the Board may use to drive a strategic plan to create lasting positive impacts on our community colleges and the communities they serve.

The Guiding Principles of Economic Mobility, Partner of Choice, and Education for All are overlapping and similar

- When considering ideas for the future, staff, faculty, and students did not significantly differentiate between Economic Mobility and Partner of Choice. Comprehensive career pathways, experiential learning through work study or internships, as well as accessible and affordable education were common themes for both guiding principles.
- Similarly, ideas for Education for All included accessible, affordable education, career pathways and experiential learning. In addition, people emphasized the importance of deepening and enhancing commitment to DEI principles and offering a wide range of flexible programs.
- Based on this similarity, the Board could consider combining or reformulating these three guiding principles when designing strategic goals.

Substantial shared value to student success and the community college mission

- Staff and faculty at every college and at the System office are committed to the mission of accessible education for all and to student success.
- Staff and faculty are highly motivated for improvement that will increase student success and would likely be receptive to change linked to that goal.

Universal feelings of community and support on campus

- Staff and faculty frequently described the supportive feeling of community and family at their college. This sense of community forms a good foundation for collaborative change efforts.
- Students frequently expressed feelings of belonging. They described the personal connections and individualized support they receive as a primary value and attraction of the community college.
- While staff and faculty are committed to the mission and the college community, addressing compensation issues and growing professional development opportunities will enhance teamwork and improve student outcomes.

Frustrations with lack of resources, compensation, outmoded technology and platforms, system complexity, lack of transparency and bureaucracy

- Staff, faculty, and students experience many barriers rooted in the community college system. Despite these frustrations, staff are committed to students and the community college mission.
- Students frequently highlighted the need for improved infrastructure, such as upgrading facilities and amenities (especially at the rural colleges) and technology networks, hardware, and software.
- Funding to mitigate these frustrations will likely improve student success and satisfaction.

Staff and student excitement around the Power of 13

- Staff and faculty believe that the System and colleges working together are a strong collective voice that can effectively raise awareness and advocate for more investment from the legislature and other partners.
- Staff and faculty expressed a strong desire to connect with colleagues to share best practices and solutions to common problems. Students also expressed interest in connecting with others across the system.
- Staff and faculty looked to the System to enhance efficiencies of procedures and shared system alignment ideas, such as connections among similar disciplines or responsibilities, professional development and compensation opportunities, and common online systems.

Strong belief that prospective students and communities have low awareness of the benefits and return on investment of community college education

- Staff and faculty look to the System Office to develop & disseminate overarching consistent messaging.
- Increasing awareness of the excellent value and immediate workforce entry opportunities of a community college education will likely require a multi-channel communication strategy that reaches potential students, employers and community leaders in various ways.
- Communications should highlight the unique value of the various career pathways within the community college system and of each college.

Keystone Vision Elements

To assist the Board and leadership and college presidents to form a compelling vision statement for the future, Keystone suggests these elements that emerged from the many thoughts and ideas expressed during the listening sessions at every campus.

#1	#2	#3
Community colleges are Coloradoans' premiere choice for obtaining the education and skills for their first or next pathway to a financially prosperous career.	Community colleges will meet students where they are and welcome all learners in a personal and enriching community environment.	Community college educators and staff thrive in an environment that values collaborative, innovative solutions as well as encourages professional growth.

Keystone Recommendations

The following recommendations align with the aspirations and feedback from students, staff, faculty, and community members. The recommendations are intended to ensure that the CCCS strategic plan is responsive to the needs of its diverse stakeholders and positioned to support the growth and success of Colorado's community colleges.

Establish Personalized and Affordable Career Pathways

Recommendation: Create comprehensive, individualized career pathway programs that cater to both technical training and credit transfers. These pathways should be affordable and provide clear, actionable steps towards achieving career goals to ensure accessibility for all students, regardless of their background or financial situation.

Rationale: Students are seeking affordable and personalized pathways that align with their career aspirations. Providing these tailored educational routes will help meet diverse needs and support lifelong learning and career advancement.

Expand Flexible Learning Modalities and Support Services

Recommendation: Develop and implement diverse learning modalities, including online, hybrid, and in-person options, to accommodate students' varying life circumstances. Complement these with robust support services such as academic advising, career counseling, and technical support to ensure students have the resources they need to succeed in their chosen educational paths.

Rationale: Students require flexible learning opportunities that fit their unique life situations. By offering a variety of learning formats and comprehensive support services, CCCS can enhance accessibility and retention, fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

Foster an Inclusive and Respectful Learning Environment

Recommendation: Cultivate a welcoming campus culture that respects and celebrates individual and cultural diversity. This includes implementing initiatives to increase faculty and staff diversity, promoting cultural competency training, and creating programs that support the inclusion of all students in a thriving learning community.

Rationale: A diverse and inclusive environment is critical for creating a supportive and thriving community. By fostering a culture of respect and inclusion, CCCS can enhance the educational experience and outcomes for all students.

Strengthen Professional Development and Collaboration for Staff and Faculty

Recommendation: Enhance professional development opportunities for staff and faculty, focusing on leadership skills, innovative educational practices, and workforce demands. Additionally, foster a collaborative culture where staff and faculty can share their expertise and contribute to the development of flexible, community-responsive educational solutions.

Rationale: Investing in the professional growth of staff and faculty will lead to more innovative and effective educational practices, better student outcomes, and a more motivated and capable workforce. Collaboration among educators will ensure that CCCS can quickly adapt to changing workforce needs and community demands.

Build Stronger Community Partnerships and Increase Awareness of Community College Value

Recommendation: Develop and strengthen partnerships with local employers and community organizations to offer flexible, affordable workforce training and educational programs that meet local labor market needs. Additionally, launch awareness campaigns to highlight the value and opportunities provided by community colleges to students, employers, and the community at large.

Rationale: By building robust community partnerships and increasing awareness of the role and value of community colleges, CCCS can enhance its reputation, attract more students, and better serve the needs of the local economy and community.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Community feedback was gathered through the following sessions:

- Red Rocks Community College - March 4
- Community College of Aurora - March 13
- Arapahoe Community College - March 18
- Pikes Peak State College - March 19
- Morgan Community College - March 20
- Northeastern Junior College - March 21
- Pueblo (Mancos) - March 26
- Otero College - March 27
- Lamar Community College - March 28
- Pueblo (Pueblo) - April 1
- Pueblo (Fremont) - April 2
- Trinidad State College (Alamosa) - April 4
- Trinidad State College (Trinidad) - April 5
- Community College of Denver - April 10
- Colorado Northwestern Community College (Rangely and Craig) - April 11 to April 12
- State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) Meeting – April 12
- Front Range Community College (Westminster) - April 23
- Front Range Community College (Fort Collins) - April 30
- System Office – May 14

Appendix 2

Methodology

The Keystone facilitation utilized a flexible approach to gather data from listening sessions. College presidents and staff customized each session's agenda to meet the unique needs of their communities. For example, we incorporated virtual meetings and specific breakout groups based on the presidents' guidance. Consequently, many sessions varied in format, but the objective remained: to create a space for stakeholders to share feedback and generate qualitative data. We are confident that this goal was consistently met across all sessions.

Through skilled facilitation, participants provided candid and conversational feedback, producing substantial qualitative data that informed our findings. While a consistent methodology might have yielded more quantitative data, we believe the qualitative insights we gathered are crucial for the strategic plan.

The Keystone team leveraged extensive facilitation experience to inform our approach, which proved effective for this project. A uniform approach would generate future research of interest by enabling reliable quantitative analysis and comparative statistics; for this strategic plan, we chose flexibility to best serve each college's distinct community.

Also, most participants were college staff. A targeted approach focusing on different stakeholder groups, such as students or industry partners, would also be valuable for future research. However, we opted for an open-systems approach to ensure inclusivity and hear from everyone interested in sharing feedback.

Moreover, in most listening sessions, the team also gathered quantitative data by facilitating activities where participants voted on the most important guiding principles.

Colorado Community College System: Strategic Plan

Creating true industry partnerships to help more Coloradans achieve economic mobility through connections to regional and state workforce needs

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Colorado Succeeds represents businesses and leaders from across Colorado who are committed to ensuring that our education and workforce system helps more of Colorado's homegrown talent reach their full potential. For over 15 years, we've been working with Colorado's businesses to understand and address challenges and opportunities in Colorado's education and training system and align education and workforce needs. We envision an education system that allows all Coloradans to achieve a credential of value – one that gives them a family-living wage within six years of graduating from high school through traditional and non-traditional pathways.

To achieve this goal, Colorado Succeeds partners directly with Colorado businesses, industry associations, local chambers, and others. Through labor market analysis, direct employer engagement, learner pathway research, direct experience with the education-to-employment ecosystem, and policy implementation, we work to identify and address challenges in our education and training systems. In recent years, we've engaged in conversations in high-needs industries including health care, IT, Construction Trades, Hospitality, and Business Services, among others.

Through this work, Colorado Succeeds has identified the following needs from Colorado's postsecondary education providers:

Ensure program offerings prioritize economic mobility for learners by aligning programs with industry trends.

Become the partner of choice by creating authentic industry engagement and greater agility to ensure curriculum aligns with industry needs.

Empower talent by recognizing skills gained outside of educational institutions and creating more flexible curricular pathways aligned with industry needs.

Harness the power of 13 by elevating and coordinating employer engagement and coordinating industry advisory activities.

Realize education for all by continuously reviewing and responding to data.

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Ensure program offerings prioritize <u>economic mobility</u> for learners by aligning programs with industry trends

Neither [colleges nor employers] collect, analyze, or exchange relevant data to assess the system's performance—the bedrock of a continuous quality improvement routine. For example, according to data in the <u>Partnership Imperative</u>, when asked what percentage of their student body are incumbent workers, 64% of community college leaders said, "I don't know."

In Colorado, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) has done <u>important research</u> into 'skill builders,' students returning to college without completing a traditional degree or transferring to another institution. The findings of this research, as well <u>as wage outcomes</u> reported by the State's annual investment report, show that many Community College Students are leaving with credentials or experiences that are leaving to significantly positive outcomes. This is especially true for students pursuing two-year certificates and Associates of Applied Science pathways. Consequently, many of these pathways align with in-demand fields, including healthcare, IT, and Business. Unfortunately, this information is not readily available to students, making it more difficult for them to make informed decisions about their education pathways. This is particularly important information for some of Colorado's fastest-growing student populations, who have also historically been underserved and minoritized, including first-generation, low-income students, and Latine students.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Elevating and prioritizing pathways that lead to economic development and creating stronger partnerships with employers in pathways that lead to economic mobility and living wages.
- Using available labor market information to identify nuanced talent pipeline pain points based on employers' geographic needs (e.g., sourcing new hires, upskilling current employees, achieving DEI goals, etc.).
- Provide custom data reporting based on employers' shared pain points and regional talent pipeline dynamics.
- Working with industry to solidify, clarify, and communicate growth and professional development career ladders and incentives for employees completing Apprentice programs and earning academic credentials.

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Become the _partner of choice_ by creating authentic industry engagement and greater agility to ensure curriculum aligns with industry needs

According to data shared in The Partnership Imperative, business leaders believe community colleges are resistant to curriculum change. As high as 43% of all employers surveyed agreed with the statement, "My community college lacks the mandate or culture to develop programs that align with what employers are looking for."

Business and industry depend on the postsecondary system to train much of the modern-day workforce. Often, industry does not feel like the talent they hire is getting the right skills through their postsecondary education. Industry leaders want to be part of the solution, but too often, there is no mechanism for them to engage in existing curriculum development processes – or when they are engaged, it leads to boutique programs rather than systemic change. Colorado businesses know that they need to be part of the solution, but when they come to the table, their concerns may be overlooked or explained away because they don't align with academically-driven processes.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Creating a more integrated process where employers and faculty come together to define learning outcomes and ensure faculty has an understanding of the modern needs of industry and are embedding those needs into course outcomes. Identify and address the root causes of misalignment and address them.
- Having industry weigh in on the skills and competencies needed from students at different credential levels (certification, certificate, associates, bachelors) and verify that they will hire (or promote) graduates from those programs if curriculum is aligned with industry needs.
- Implementing these steps at the systems level where possible and appropriate so that industries do not have to weigh in multiple times.
- Looking ahead to where the labor market is going and co-create career and credential pathway maps alongside employers (construction example, below).

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Empower talent by recognizing skills gained outside of educational institutions and creating more flexible curricular pathways aligned with industry needs

More Colorado learners are graduating high school with career-connected experiences, postsecondary credit, and industry-recognized credentials than ever before. Students are also taking different pathways. Today, fewer than 50 percent of high school students are enrolling directly in college than ever before. Additionally, those who delay enrollment are most likely to enroll in a Community College.[1]

Many of the skills that students gain outside of the education system are valued by employers. Therefore, learners who enter the education system with meaningful skills that they've attained through credentials or work experiences should have those skills recognized as part of their education. Additionally, even when credit is accumulated within the system, it is not always recognized across the system. Colorado has created a complex system for transferring institutions that requires students to navigate hundreds of articulation agreements. Students must navigate these pathways both within the two-year system and across the two-and four-year system.

> "No student should have to retake a course that they've already taken or take a course that they don't need just because of some bureaucratic process."
>
> **– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER**

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Expanding access to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), connected to work-based learning experiences through the "College Credit for Work Experience" bill, to streamline education to employment pathways.
- Providing greater clarity and flexibility around "General Education Requirements" for all degree types: AAS, AA, AS, BA, BS, BAS. Create space for employers and college faculty to work together to reimagine general education requirements align with employer needs and truly produce the durable skills employers are looking for.
- Simplifying and streamlining the statewide transfer of credits between all degree types and all colleges. Currently, there are hundreds of articulation agreements for students to navigate. Since the Community Colleges are at the center of these agreements, we encourage you to recommend solutions for ways they can be streamlined for employers and students.

[1] *Colorado Department of Higher Education, Pathways to Prosperity Dashboard/Data*

Harness the <u>power of 13</u> by elevating and coordinating employer engagement and coordinating industry advisory activities

Currently, employer engagement activities seem cursory and separate from senior leadership-level strategic decision making. Additionally, employers are approached by K12, community colleges, state agencies, chambers, and a multitude of other organizations to participate in workforce development activities, initiatives, and advisory groups. They are burned out and confused about where/how to engage in ways that produce a demonstrable ROI for their time. Simpler connections for employers with less duplication are essential.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Having college senior leaders serve on the boards of regional industry intermediaries, business associations and other employer facing economic development groups to identify consistent opportunities for partnership and engagement.
- Elevating workforce development to a cabinet-level position at all institutions (and at the system-level) responsible for coordinating and centralizing all employer engagement activities across the college. Deans could have a dotted line reporting into this role for activities related to industry alignment and coordination. This position could also oversee non-credit coursework designed to meet industry needs.
- Supporting a robust, diverse network of business leaders and employers to engage through thought partnership, feedback on solutions and barriers, piloting and participation in policy and practice implementation efforts, and leveraging for strategic partnership opportunities.

"The system is too complex for employers; we are committed to this work and even we don't know how or where to engage. We need to be clear about what we need from employers so that we can come to the table."

– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER

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Realize <u>education for all</u> by continuously reviewing and responding to data

Colorado has some of the nation's largest equity gaps; the system simply isn't serving all students well. Additionally, traditionally underserved populations, including Latine students and students from lower-income backgrounds, are far more likely to be served by the Community College System. Because of this, the system has a unique opportunity to ensure that these students achieve economic mobility. However, without data, we won't know how to direct resources and help ensure that we are addressing the needs of these students. Additionally, students need more access to easy-to-understand data so that they can use it to inform their own decisions.

> "Never before have we had more analytical tools to help us identify programs that work so that we can prioritize our investments; data needs to be driving the decisions we make."
>
> **– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER**

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Supporting ongoing efforts for a statewide longitudinal data system and data sharing agreements across stakeholders to create greater access to data.
- Helping make data on enrollment, completion, retention, wage outcomes, costs, and other factors more available for students and using it to inform decisions.
- Utilizing more primary data directly from employers about specific jobs drives the most critical work for companies, identifying the credentials/training required for these jobs, and communicating demand for different career pathways.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH & RESOURCES
- The Partnership Imperative
- America's Hidden Economic Engines
- Building Equitable Pathways Through Employer Talent Collaboratives

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