



EDUCATION WITHOUT EXCEPTIONS

How Federal Threats to In-State Tuition Undermine Colorado's Future

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education expands opportunity and strengthens Colorado's economy. College graduates earn more, spend more in their communities, and generate additional tax revenue to support schools, infrastructure, and public services. However, access to in-state tuition for all Colorado students is at risk, as recent executive orders from President Donald Trump target immigrants and the states that support them. Protecting access to affordable in-state higher education builds on the state's investment in K-12 education and supports long-term economic gains through increased individual earning power both immediately and over time.¹

President Trump's Executive Orders

On April 28, 2025, President Trump issued an Executive Order entitled "Protecting American Communities from Criminal Aliens," which directs federal agencies to withhold certain funds from states and jurisdictions that do not comply with specified federal immigration enforcement priorities. The executive order directs the U.S. Attorney General and Secretary of Homeland Security to publish a list of "Sanctuary Jurisdictions," including states that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students but not to out-of-state residents. It also threatens to withhold federal funding from those jurisdictions.² Many of these executive orders have been challenged in court with preliminary injunctions in place to block their implementation.³

Colorado's Commitment to College Access: In-State Tuition Regardless of Status

As President Donald Trump's Administration tries to restrict states' ability to allow undocumented students access to in-state college tuition, in Colorado, we recognize the benefits of welcoming students, workers, and families in our state, which includes access to affordable higher education.

In 2013, Colorado passed Senate Bill 13-033, also known as the Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow (ASSET) Bill. The original ASSET bill establishes that any student, regardless of immigration status, who has attended a Colorado high school for at least three years preceding graduation, graduated from a Colorado high school or obtained a high school equivalency diploma in Colorado, and is admitted to a Colorado institution of higher education within a year of high school graduation is eligible for in-state tuition rates.

Once classified as an in-state student, each is also eligible for the College Opportunity Fund (COF) stipend, a subsidy given to all undergraduate students who attend public or private colleges or universities in Colorado. The COF pays higher education institutions and supplements that in-state rate on behalf of the student. Every student in Colorado who is eligible for the COF receives \$116 per eligible credit hour which translates to \$3,480 each academic year.

There have been two notable expansions of the ASSET bill since it was passed in 2013. In 2019, the Colorado legislature passed House Bill 19-1196, which expanded access to student financial aid assistance programs to students without documentation who qualify for in-state tuition. These programs include work study, need and merit based grants, and assistance for career and technical education certificate programs. The average state financial aid total award package per student who received aid in fiscal year 2023 is \$3,725.

At the time of passage, Metropolitan State University, one of Colorado's largest metro area institutions of higher education, estimated that about 62% of in-state tuition students without documentation qualify for state financial aid. This is less than 1% of MSU's total student population.⁴

In 2022, [House Bill 22-1155](#) passed, which changed the in-state tuition qualification from attending a Colorado high school for at least three years preceding graduation and being admitted to a Colorado institution of higher education within a year of high school graduation to either:

1. attends a Colorado high school for one year before graduation OR
2. lives in Colorado for one year before earning a high school equivalency diploma.

In both cases, the student must also have lived in Colorado for at least 12 consecutive months before enrolling in college. This one-year residency requirement is standard across Colorado's public institutions of higher education, so HB22-1155 aligned residency requirements for all students, regardless of immigration status. This includes out-of-state students, who are eligible to qualify for residency after living in Colorado for one year.

In Colorado, students who have lived in the state for at least a year qualify for in-state tuition, regardless of immigration status. Out-of-state students become eligible after one year of residency.

Out-of-State Tuition Rates Are Much Higher Than In-State

Out-of-state college tuition is prohibitively high for Colorado students and families. All four-year universities charge at least twice as much—and in many cases, three times as much—for out-of-state tuition compared to in-state rates.

In-State versus Out-of-State Tuition Rates in Colorado Public Higher Education

	In-State	Out-of-State
University of ColoradoBoulder	\$11,520	\$35,482
University of ColoradoDenver	\$10,830	\$32,490
Colorado State University	\$9,903	\$29,861
Fort Lewis College	\$7,200	\$17,712
University of Northern Colorado	\$8,289	\$21,885
Adams State University	\$6,072	\$18,144
Metropolitan State University of Denver	\$8,445	\$26,278

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023). [Tuition and Fees Report Fiscal Year 2022-2023](#).

Benefits of Protecting and Investing in Expanded In-State Tuition

Investing in higher education is beneficial to students, families, and the state’s economy as a whole. College graduates earn more and spend more than high school graduates, and therefore also pay more tax dollars to the state. On average, a high school graduate makes \$42,500, compared to a college graduate who makes \$73,000 a year.⁵ A college graduate pays roughly \$7,235 (or 9.9%) of their income in state and local taxes, compared to \$3,830 (or 9%) paid by a high school graduate, a difference of \$3,400 (\$1,300 to the state and \$2,100 in local taxes).⁶

For a student who obtains a four-year degree, Colorado invests about \$14,000 through the College Opportunity Fund (COF). The additional taxes paid by a bachelor’s degree recipient to the state amounts to \$1,300 every year. It would take about 10 years for the graduate to indirectly repay the state for the COF stipend in the form of higher taxes.

In addition to extra income and taxes paid, college graduates are less likely to live in poverty and less likely to be unemployed. The poverty rate of those with less than a high school diploma is 19% in Colorado. For a high school diploma holder it’s 11.9%. But for a college degree holder the poverty rate drops to 3.7%. In Colorado, women see a substantial economic benefit from earning a college degree, with poverty rates dropping from 13.06% among high school graduates to just 4.01% among college graduates.

Poverty and Unemployment Rates Higher for High School Grads vs College Grads

	Unemployment Rate	Poverty Rate
Less than high school	4.7%	19.0%
High school	4.6%	11.9%
Bachelor's degree or Hhgher	2.1%	3.7%

	Poverty Rate
Male High School Poverty Rate	10.77%
Male College Poverty Rate	3.45%
Female High School Poverty Rate	13.06%
Female College Poverty Rate	4.01%

Source: 2023 American Community Survey for Colorado

The advantage that higher education confers is evident in higher employment rates and increased long-term earnings.⁷ In 2023, the unemployment rate for high school graduates in Colorado was more than double at 4.6% compared to the unemployment rate of college graduates in Colorado of 2.1%. In the first 10 years after graduation, median wages for bachelor's degree recipients grow by 51%, and those with an associate's degree see 31% wage growth.⁸ High school graduates see only a 6.1% increase in median earnings across 10 years.⁹

People with a college degree also weather recessions more effectively. From 2007–2009, during the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for high school graduates increased from 7.7% to 15.3%, but the unemployment rate of workers with a college degree remained under 5%.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Expanding and protecting access to higher education for Colorado high school graduates yields measurable economic returns for the state. Executive actions that limit state flexibility in offering in-state tuition to undocumented students risk undermining these benefits. Colorado already invests in the K-12 education of all students, regardless of immigration status. It simply makes sense to finish what we've started. Ensuring access to in-state tuition allows more students to complete college, secure higher-paying jobs, and contribute more in taxes. College graduates earn more, experience lower rates of poverty and unemployment, and strengthen the overall economy. Supporting college completion is a practical investment in Colorado's long-term economic health.



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