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Working together for funding

Local legislators seek better funding for community colleges; Bi-partisan effort could add \$1.2 million to NJC budget

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STERLING — One of the complaints heard by industry leaders is the lack of marketable skills in a community's workforce. Workers just as often complain that they can't return to college or trade school because they can't give up their job.



A student works on an assignment in the Monohan Library on the campus of Northeastern Junior College. (Callie Jones/Journal-Advocate)

The dilemma is often fixed with a community college and the vision of the school's leaders. Community colleges offer a step between high school and a four-year degree, opportunities of learning for the sake of learning or necessary occupational updates.

The problem is that colleges placed in rural communities often have consistently small enrollment and are usually only a handful of students' exit away from having to cut staff or programs.

A bill is now in the state House that could ease that stress.

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, is one of several sponsors on a bill that is designed to restructure the way community colleges are funded.

The bill acknowledges that "smaller institutions of higher education do not have the budgetary flexibility that comes from economies of scale or downsizing when enrollment is slow or stagnant, and this inflexibility creates difficulties with the management of expenses..."

"What we're talking about is funding community colleges that don't have the flexibility," Gardner said Tuesday.

Gardner says community colleges are "ground zero" to keep rural Colorado strong.

"We would like to take funding and put it toward community colleges," Gardner said.



Students work on some assignments in the Monohan Library at Northeastern Junior College. (Callie Jones/Journal-Advocate)

He said the current funding structure penalizes Northeastern Junior Colleges and schools like it. He said colleges in rural communities experience the impact of student enrollment fluctuations quicker than larger colleges.



Pictured above is Hays Student Center on the Northeastern Junior College campus. (Callie Jones/Journal-Advocate)



(Callie Jones/Journal-Advocate)

"Sterling is different than Denver. NJC is different than other colleges," he said.

NJC President Lance Bolton said Tuesday the bill is not a replacement or shuffling of existing funding, but additional funding altogether. Funding for community colleges, such as NJC and Morgan Community College, has been a struggle, as seen with NJC seeking alternative funding sources for building repairs and scholarships.

Bolton said today that the allocation plan indicates NJC could see an increase in base funding of \$1.2 million.

He said the state has set a precedent of funding rural four-year colleges.

"We're looking to match that and catching up with our peers," he said.

As of Tuesday evening, the bill had 26 House sponsors; seven more, and it will pass the House and move on to the Senate. Gardner said he is encouraged that it is a bi-partisan effort.

The one issue that hasn't been fully addressed, according to Gardner, is from where the funding will come.

"We have to make sure we find the funding, but where there's a will, there's a way," he said.

He said there have been other, much bigger funding bills for which the state has found funding, and a program that will benefit rural communities and the state overall should be approved. He said if the bill doesn't pass, rural community colleges will suffer.

The bill admits that the community college system has relied on urban colleges to support rural locations. However, the bill states that this way of funding is limited. After a point, the movement of funding from urban to rural colleges will hurt the urban locations. The bill calls for about \$6.3 million going to Colorado State University-Pueblo, and the remaining \$10 million divided among the remaining rural community colleges.

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On the Web:

Senate Bill 08-085: Higher Education Funding Access

The specific link to see the actual text of this bill:

http://www.leg.state.co.us/CLICS/CLICS2008A/csl.nsf/fsbillcont3/9B4163F8E1DC0DC6872573860056E209?Open&file=085_01