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ThePostEditorials

A bargain for state taxpayers

A Senate committee will hear a bill today that would boost our vital but underfunded community colleges. It deserves to pass.

Community colleges are one of the most cost-effective elements of Colorado's higher education system, boosting thousands of talented students of limited financial means at a modest cost to taxpayers.

But despite the proven value of Colorado's 13 community colleges spread over 27 campuses, these vital schools — and the 118,000 students they serve — have been repeatedly battered by a bizarre game of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Now, a powerhouse bipartisan team of legislators spearheaded by Senate President Pro Tem Abel Tapia, D-Pueblo, and House Education Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Merrifield, D-Colorado Springs, is fighting to upgrade the community college system so it can educate the workers needed for good jobs in Colorado's nascent "new energy economy."

Tapia's funding plan, Senate Bill 85, is scheduled for a hearing in the Senate Appropriations Committee today. It likely will draw fire from some four-year colleges and universities that covet the \$16.3 million in extra cash it would funnel into the community college system. All of higher education suffered during the recent budget crisis, but community colleges couldn't stem the losses like four-year schools, which raised tuition, solicited gifts from wealthy alumni and corporate sponsors and landed research grants from the federal government.

Alas for community colleges, they rarely get big gifts or grants. And to

their great credit, community colleges refused to make big increases in tuition that would have foreclosed the dream of higher education entirely to poor students.

Tapia, himself a proud community college graduate who went on to become a professional engineer, wants to revive our community colleges by stopping a financial shell game that now forces the Colorado Community College System to transfer \$10.3 million from urban community colleges to subsidize pitifully underfunded rural schools — robbing urban students to provide bare-bones education to students at rural schools like Lamar.

Tapia's bill would give that \$10.3 million from the state directly to those rural community colleges. Such direct funding for rural schools would allow the \$10.3 million now siphoned off from urban schools to stay here to meet the needs of metro area students. Next, Tapia wants to channel an extra \$6 million directly to rural schools to bring them to the same relative funding now enjoyed by their rural four-year counterparts.

Will this modest boost to community colleges hurt prestigious campuses like the University of Colorado? Hardly. Higher education at all levels received \$2.5 billion in the current state budget, including tuition and federal funds. The boost in community college funding is just six-tenths of 1 percent of that sum.

But as modest as that number is, that \$16 million will build a ladder of opportunity for thousands of Colorado students.