

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training

“Keeping College Within Reach: Discussing Ways Institutions Can Streamline Costs and Reduce Tuition”

Colorado Mesa University President Tim Foster

Thank you, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Hinojosa and members of the Committee for the invitation to this important hearing. I'm honored to be with you today. Colorado Mesa University may be thought of as the workhorse of Colorado's higher education system and we greatly appreciate the opportunity to tell our story. Our mascot is the Maverick, so we're used to bucking trends, challenging the status quo and using innovation to lead.

CMU is a regional, public four-year teaching university with offerings ranging from technical and associate's degrees (delivered by our community college branch) to a broad array of baccalaureate liberal arts and professional programs, as well as targeted graduate programs that serve our region and state. We are located in Grand Junction, Colorado, a community of approximately 100,000 people and we're the largest regional hub between Denver and Salt Lake City. With an annual economic impact of over \$317 million, CMU serves all of northwest Colorado; a region roughly the size of South Carolina.

The topic of your hearing today is quite timely. As you'll hear from Ms. Wellman with the Delta Cost Project, Colorado has one of the most productive higher education systems in the United States. Further, our state is home to one of our nation's highest percentages of adults with post-secondary education. That being said, we face numerous challenges with access, affordability and making sure our doors are always open to every student who has worked hard and is interested in pursuing a higher education.

As an access institution, we pay special attention to first generation students and students with documented financial need as this is a significant proportion of our region's population. Recently, CMU has seen high need enrollments jump from 2,481 students in 2009 to 4,643 students enrolled this year. Interestingly enough, last year we found that 59% of students receiving institutional merit based awards also had documented financial need. As a matter of principle, we have found that granting students *institutional* financial assistance based on merit -- rather than arbitrary financial calculations -- results in greater retention and a drive to perform academically to maintain eligibility for the award. On our campus, we have seen first-hand the positive impact of students earning a hand-up, not simply receiving a hand-out.

Along with our efforts to focus resources on merit-based aid is our university's commitment to work study. As we've watched the number of federal and state work study awards shrink in recent years, we developed our own program known as **MavWorks** to match students that want to work with jobs around our campus. These students work no more than 20 hours per week during the semester but they wind up with a direct connection to the institution in the form of contributing to our shared success. Equally important are the human connections student

workers develop in departments ranging from athletics to grounds-keeping. This direct connection results in higher retention which we all care about.

If you look around our state and region, you won't find an institution more focused on low administrative overhead, conservative budgeting and strategically serving students than Colorado Mesa University. To be sure, budget cuts at the state level have keenly focused our attention on running a tighter ship while striving to keep costs low and transparent for students.

When our administration took the helm in 2004, the institution was operating in the red, enrollment was flat and our community was eager to see CMU live up to its full potential. Right away, we began scouring the budget to identify cost savings, efficiencies and opportunities for self-sufficiency. This analysis included a hard look at our price point.

With apologies to Chairwoman Foxx whose great experience in higher education probably included the title of "Dean" along the way, we immediately flattened *our* organization by eliminating Dean positions on our campus, which saved us more than \$500,000 per year.

We convened an Academic Program working group to assess all academic program offerings in the context of our role and mission to make recommendations on which programs the university should continue to fund. The process was tough, it included many difficult conversations around our campus, but it resulted in our Board of Trustees actually eliminating twelve programs and reluctantly letting go a very talented, tenured faculty member.

Much like Colorado's system of higher education in general, CMU has been a leader in university efficiency. Our faculty members carry a 4-4 teaching load (teaching four classes in the spring along with 4 classes in the fall); double that of most R1 institutions. On the operations side, we have created a continuous improvement mentality whereby every year we identify new ways to operate better, smarter, more efficient, and for lower costs. From re-bidding copier services; to developing our region's largest renewable energy ground-source heating and cooling system; to shuttering unused buildings in the summer time; CMU is diligent about keeping operations costs low. We do this because it allows us to reinvest in what matters in our line of business: top notch faculty, facilities, technology and support for students. Because *people* are at the center of our success as a university, I personally interview every single prospective faculty member to ensure their professional value system aligns with what we value at the university. It's that important.

To be sure, this new approach took some getting used to around our campus. But I'm proud to say that our entire campus community has embraced it because it yields results and it puts students first. To us, this is more than a slogan, it defines our operating philosophy and how we conduct business.

For example, on move-in weekend, you'll see our leadership team and our trustees helping students move in to residence halls. Throughout the semester you'll see us eating pizza with students in every dorm across campus soliciting feedback and asking for suggestions on how to improve what we do. What we find is that by listening, really listening, to what our students are

telling us, we can innovate and stay ahead of things that might otherwise serve as barriers to student success.

You see, Madam Chair, CMU understands who our customers are. Students. In Colorado alone, over 500 accredited institutions are competing with us. On our campus, we believe competition is a good thing, whether it's athletics, entrepreneurship or academics. Irrespective of how regulators in Denver – or even right here in Washington, D.C. tell us how to run our institution, if we're not doing a good job, I'll hear about it. I have an open office hour every Monday afternoon and if we're not doing something right, students are **not** afraid to come and tell me. Perhaps even more importantly, if we do not prioritize student success and the conditions necessary for students to thrive, our customers (our students) vote with their feet. And right now, our focus is to keep costs in check, provide students a great value, and deliver to them an outstanding undergraduate education. Watching our enrollment grow by double digits over the past few years leads me to believe we're on the right track.

In visiting with students and parents, I can assure you that families are very aware of cost and finding the best value for their education dollar. This year in Colorado, the average tuition and fee increase at other public colleges and universities was over 13% -- ours was less than 5%. I've heard many times that families chose Colorado Mesa University not only for the quality of our programs but also because each education dollar can be stretched further on our campus. All of the aforementioned cost savings measures coupled with our constant focus on interaction with students allows CMU to keep costs in check for students while investing in those things that matter.

It is worth noting that none of our success would have been possible without a strong, engaged Board of Trustees. Our Board constantly challenges me to define success and help identify ways to measure it. To me, success is defined by providing a high quality educational experience with a sharp eye towards the costs associated with delivering it. If first generation and middle income students cannot afford our tuition, the level of quality is rendered significantly less meaningful.

Because higher education is such a competitive arena, I implore you to let the market work. Keep an eye on regulations that unnecessarily burden institutions that are trying to do the right thing for students. Seek out innovation and flexibility measures that enable institutions like CMU to do the most good for students. Ultimately, keep your eye on the prize – and trust students and prospective students to keep us accountable. As public financial support continues to shrink for institutions like CMU, we will have no choice but to continue innovating and enhancing our self-sufficiency. We think we're up to the challenge and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Madam Chair.