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Metropolitan State University of Denver

House Committee on Education and Labor

*Investing in Economic Mobility: The Important Role of Hispanic Serving Institutions
and other Minority Serving Institutions*

Thank you, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, Subcommittee Chairwoman Wilson, Subcommittee Ranking Member Miller-Meeks, and all members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify today. I am Dr. Janine Davidson, President at Metropolitan State University of Denver. MSU Denver is Colorado's largest Hispanic Serving Institution, with over 17,566 undergraduate and graduate students—5,400 who are Latino.

I came to the university in 2017 after more than 30 years of academic, military, and civilian service. I began my career as an Air Force officer and cargo pilot and most recently served as the 32nd undersecretary of the United States Navy prior to assuming the presidency at MSU Denver.

I was thrilled by the opportunity to lead a university like MSU Denver. I saw it as a place where anyone seeking an education could belong and succeed. It reflects the historic promise of America's public higher education system at a time when such opportunity seems to be slipping away; MSU Denver is holding the line on the American Dream. And to be clear, this is not easy!

Today, it is my privilege to highlight what "real" college is like for the vast majority of Americans today, versus the fantasy country club-version available to the one percenters.

MSU Denver is a "modified open-access" institution, meaning that students who are at least 20 years old and hold a high school diploma or GED are automatically admitted. We deliberately define ourselves by who we include, not who we exclude. And because of this, our diverse student body is reflective of the wide-ranging community looking to engage in the transformative power of postsecondary education.

More than 50 percent of our students are people of color, and one-third are Latino. Most of our students transfer to MSU Denver after time at a community college, another 4-year university or after having been out in the workforce. The vast majority—more than 80 percent—of our students work while enrolled in school.

The average age of our students is 25. And thirty percent of our students qualify for a federal Pell grant to help pay for their education.

Our students are agile, practical, and excellent; and their backgrounds are not unique. Today's typical higher education student is no longer an 18-year-old high school graduate, seeking to secure a bachelor's degree in 4 straight years to then launch lifelong careers.

In fact, today's students often start taking college courses in high school - dual and concurrent enrollment are the largest source of enrollment growth at MSU Denver. Others start at community college and earn credits or a credential before transitioning to a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, more students pause their education to enter the workforce before returning to higher education to upskill down the road. They start families, and juggle these responsibilities while taking classes and studying.

We see these experiences as additive to our students' academic journeys and we are committed to providing an educational experience that fits into their complex and "zig-zaggy" lives vs. forcing them to pause their paths and their work lives, to accommodate a rigid linear system. Higher ed should be flexible and accessible to all, regardless of background or stage of life; and should be relevant to where students want to take their careers. Colorado's employers' agree: our graduates are lauded for their real-work skills, their employability - and frankly, their grit. This is an HSI in 2022.

To be clear, this does not mean that higher ed is only all about the so-called "hard skills" that are traditionally associated with STEM pathways, to the exclusion of the liberal arts and disciplines like history, philosophy, and the social sciences. If current events and controversies have made one thing clear, it is that we need more graduates and future leaders who embody the so-called "soft" or "essential" skills, including conflict resolution, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, historical context, and the like - attributes employers across the nation are also

calling for. Higher education is where these combined traits can be acquired and honed.

Myths and Other Headwinds Against 21st Century Higher Education

As an HSI president, one of the biggest obstacles to my mission is the array of negative and, in many cases, outright inaccurate narratives about higher education that deter so many Americans from realizing their dreams. The top of that list is the message that “not everyone can or should go to college.” And my personal favorite: “college is not worth it.” Telling young Americans that college is either irrelevant to their prosperity or simply out of reach will deter the next generation from preparing themselves for a complex socio-economic arena, further fueling our nation’s decline in the 21st century’s knowledge-based, interconnected, globalized economy.

It is just not true that higher ed is out of reach or irrelevant. In fact, it is more relevant and more important than ever.

In Colorado today, more than 75% of jobs require postsecondary education and that number is expected to continue to grow in the years ahead. Additionally, individuals with postsecondary credentials are 3.5 times less likely to live in poverty, 44% more likely to report very good or excellent health, 4.9 times less likely to go to be incarcerated, and 74% less prone to be out of the labor force.

Over their lifetimes, college graduates pay 215% more in taxes and cost the government 39% less in services from the state. The lifetime fiscal effect for earning a degree is \$355,000. Graduates are also more likely to vote, volunteer and save for retirement.

In short, not only is individual economic mobility more reliant upon having a college degree than ever before, the health of our democracy depends upon having more educated Americans. Cultivating equitable economic advancement and a competitive global advantage in our country requires all hands on the deck for an educated workforce. This means making higher education accessible to all Americans, in particular, those who have been historically underrepresented in the sector.

This is the critical role HSIs, and all Minority Serving Institutions, are uniquely positioned to play. HSIs are leading the way to increase educational access and success for America's Hispanic population, and for the nation as a whole.

HSIs enroll approximately two-thirds of all Hispanic college students, more African American students than all of the HBCUs combined, 40% of all Asian American students and more American Indian students than all Tribal Colleges and Universities. HSIs are the fastest growing higher education sector in the U.S. and nine of the top 10 colleges and universities ranked by the Social Mobility Index are HSIs. MSU Denver enrolls the highest numbers of hispanic and African American students in Colorado.

Value and Innovation:

At MSU Denver, our vision statement is to be a leader for social mobility where students of all ages and backgrounds build a better, more equitable society through innovative and transformative education. We work toward realizing this vision by making intentional investments in data-validated, transformative programs and practices that encourage our students' success. From the faculty to the staff to the administration, trustees and donors who support our mission, we acknowledge our sector and our institution are in the midst of a radical period of transformation. And it is about time. Higher education must bend to fit the lives Latino students - and all Americans seeking to improve their lives, their families and their communities with learning beyond high school.

A college value crisis? I see this moment as a needed wake up call to HSIs and all colleges and universities: Students need colleges to better connect their education to the real world, and not make them contort themselves into a centuries-old model of higher learning.

Colleges must take this concern about value seriously. At MSU Denver, we believe everybody should have access to a quality education and a fair price. Frankly, our future depends on this. Over 80% of our students stay in our state – they deliver value right back into our economy.

College value begins with completion of a credential. MSU Denver graduates more students of color than any other institution in Colorado. Each year, we graduate more than 3,000 and this past December, 1,631 Roadrunners earned a college degree. Fifty-five percent of them were first generation, 92 were single parents,

718 were students of color, and 109 were military veterans. Each of these graduates - and their families' lives - will be living examples that college is worth it.

But MSU Denver can - and will - do better. Our 6-year graduation rates lag the national average by as much as 15 points; our Pell students also graduate at lower rates than the national average. Our battle plan? We are targeting the student services and programming with the greatest impact on student outcomes , re-aligning our resources, and bending ourselves to do more of what works.

Programs that we know work include, our Urban Leadership Program (ULP), College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), Brother 2 Brother, and Reisher Scholars Program, all of which provide students with the winning combination of advising + financial assistance + leadership and community-building structures that create a true sense of belonging on our campus. These programs serve a majority of students of color— and a greater proportion of Hispanic/Latino students— and have significantly higher retention and graduation rates compared to our averages.

The Urban Leadership Program (ULP), for instance, sees 69% of its students graduate in 6 years vs. 22% of non-ULP. And the retention rate for these students is 88% (20 points higher than the rate for non-ULP students). A similar story of the radical improvements of value we are committed to is told in the data from the other programs. CAMP students, who are migrant or seasonal farmworkers and their children, graduate at rates 20-points higher than non-CAMP students.

Brother 2 Brother is a program specifically focused on empowering male students of color to meet future workforce needs through leadership development, social integration, academic support and career preparation. This program more than doubles participants' rate of success— $\frac{2}{3}$ of all students graduate in 6 years vs. 22% of non-B2B students.

Last, 87% of MSU Denver students participating in the Reisher Scholars Program—which focuses on Colorado students who have completed some, but not all, of their postsecondary education— graduate in 6 years; 95% are retained.

Frankly, those numbers for our American Dream chasers best 1/3 of the members of the elite research public - and private - institutions of the Association of American Universities. And 40% of our students attend college - with grants - tuition is free. That is college value, and that is where we invested your Covid-relief dollars and where we target the new money Colorado's legislature has given us to redress historically inequitable funding for our institution.

Aligning budgets to strategies that work and using data to assess and re-align when needed is something I am passionate about- something I learned from my years working with Congress on military strategy. The promise of public education is too important and the investment by the American people too significant to not find ways to measure what matters and hold higher education accountable to prioritizing what works. MSU Denver is committed to doing better year over year by building on our foundation of cost-management and innovation.

One way we squeeze efficiency is through the economies of scale and excellence realized through our unique tri-institutional campus, the Auraria Higher Education Center (AHEC). MSU Denver shares the downtown Denver Auraria campus with the Community College of Denver (CCD) and the University of Colorado, Denver. This allows us to align educational pathways across the institutions and to collaborate on student life and on improving transfer processes. Financially, we share costs for things like facilities maintenance and security services, and also share joint access to a health clinic and research library. We are currently working on a joint strategic plan to thicken our academic and operational collaboration across all three institutions, while also finding innovative ways to partner with Denver developers to improve the physical infrastructure and overall connectivity to the downtown neighborhoods.

This tri-institutional focus aligns with MSU Denver's focus on innovative partnerships. We partner directly with industry to develop career-relevant curricula and provide our students with work-based learning opportunities that allow them to put their classroom learning into real-world practice. These efforts are particularly meaningful for our first-gen and lower income students who often don't yet have the professional connections and built-in networks that are the difference makers in today's competitive job market.

Ironically, LinkedIn reports that close to 65% of “entry level” jobs for holders of bachelor’s degrees require three years of experience. This makes such experiential learning models more critical than ever, especially for first generation, low income and other under-represented populations who fall into what LinkedIn calls the “network gap.” MSU Denver is committed to bridging that gap through innovative industry partnerships where employers engage students - and curriculum developers - well before graduation day, to ensure students are work-ready and career-aligned as soon as they walk across that stage with a diploma.

This Classroom-to-Career work, and the industry partnerships at its core, lay a critical foundation for our students’ long-term success. At MSU Denver, we are striving toward a goal of having 100% of our students engaged in work-based learning by 2025 and believe we are setting a model, and a standard, for postsecondary education in our nation.

MSU Denver is committed to aligning our academic programs with the critical needs of Colorado and the nation. The following four areas exemplify this alignment.

Cybersecurity: MSU Denver is designated as a National Security Agency (NSA) National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense. We were the first in Colorado to offer bachelors and masters degree programs and are partnering with employers to develop work-study programs, certificates and stackable credentials to help feed this critical need in our nation’s talent pipeline.

Aerospace: We have model partnerships with Colorado’s robust Aerospace Industry, where companies like Lockheed Martin have been intimately engaged in helping us align our curriculum to real world challenges and who hire our students before and after graduation.

Advanced Manufacturing. Our Advanced Manufacturing program is partnered tightly with Colorado’s Advanced Manufacturing Association, whose headquarters is housed on our campus. Companies like Hartwig, ensure we have the latest state of the art equipment so our students graduate with up to date skills. Together we are working to address the emerging supply chain challenges exacerbated by the

joint shocks of the global pandemic and increasing geo-strategic tensions with China.

Health: Our College of Health and Applied Sciences is focused on scaling throughput for the massively in-demand graduates of our various integrated health professions programs. From nursing and nutrition, to social work and human services, the pandemic has highlighted the imperative for higher ed to respond and scale to fill the massive gaps in our talent pipeline.

Public Service: Meanwhile, my experience on the National Commission for Military, National, and Public Service, raised my awareness of the immense need for talented civil servants across our entire government workforce. Public service is an important vehicle for social mobility and for MSIs, focusing on career opportunities for our diverse students is an important way to fuel a more participatory democracy. We started a paid internship program for students who wish to serve in Washington DC, and the enthusiasm for the program was reflective of how engaged this generation of students is. Indeed, MSU Denver had the highest voter turnout of college students in 2016, leading the way for the immense national turnout we saw across the country on college campuses in 2020.

As you can see, higher education is more important than ever to the future prosperity of our nation. And the federal government has a critical role to play in ensuring that we capture this moment to chart the course. The COVID-relief funds Congress allocated were a downpayment on this future. At MSU Denver, we targeted our funds to weather the COVID storm, in ways that would also build the platforms we need for transformation - like IT system modernization to better deliver online programming - and in the transformative strategies I shared above.

What does the next generation of federal support to MSU Denver and our peer HSI institutions look like? I offer five specific suggestions.

1. Help change the narrative: College is not a country club. And excellent HSIs don't just enroll Latinos at higher rates, they connect these students to networks, work-based learning, and jobs that propel individuals into the middle class and active civic engagement. Change the metrics to capture

the true value HSIs bring to students over their lifetimes and to the nation as a whole.

2. Account for Today's Students in Metrics that Matter: Develop metrics and formulas that recognize the reality of college students that I have shared today. Most MSU Denver students work over 20 hours and enroll in 11 credits. This means they are not technically "full-time." But these first generation students, career changers, and student parents often need the same supports as full-time students.
3. FAFSA Simplification: We commend Congress for passing FAFSA simplification in the last session. Implementation can't come soon enough. At MSU Denver, we are literally wasting scarce dollars and stafftime on the wrong thing - helping students fill out a form to confirm they are poor. This process inefficiency and wasteful use of valuable staff time at the university level can be eliminated with FAFSA simplification at the federal level.
4. Pell: Double down on what the federal government does best - fund students directly, and their affordability, specifically. I call on you to increase the Pell grant to keep pace with economic realities and ensure educational opportunity for all. No other federal investment will yield the same ROI for Latino students - and all American Dream chasers - as this bold step.
5. Enhance Federal Work-Study: Work-study plays an important role in helping students graduate and enter the workforce. Paid work-based learning opportunities not only provide financial support for budget-strapped and low income students; but also deliver critical resume-building work experience prior to graduation.

I firmly believe that the work we're doing at MSU Denver, and the work taking place across all HSIs, represent the future of higher education. I thank you for the meaningful investments you have made in HSIs so far and invite you to continue to work in partnership with us to support our students and institutions in the time ahead.