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Consortium of regional colleges to improve education through \$750,000 FIPSE grant

PUEBLO – Fueled by a \$750,000 Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, a group of southern Colorado colleges and universities will work cooperatively to increase the number of southern Colorado residents who attend and graduate from college.

The 10 members of the Southern Colorado Education Consortium agreed Oct. 25 to expand efforts to encourage current middle and high school students to continue their education past high school. Consortium members agree that part of the effort must be to eliminate barriers perceived by many students and parents.

The Southern Colorado Higher Education Consortium was formed in June 2009 for the purposes of enhancing educational opportunities for southern Colorado residents, supporting efforts to improve the quality of life in the region, and supporting regional economic development. The consortium members are Adams State College, Colorado State University-Pueblo, Fort Lewis College, Lamar Community College, Otero Community College, Pikes Peak Community College, Pueblo Community College, Trinidad State Junior College, the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and Western State College. The FIPSE grant is the first federal funds supporting the consortium and is recognition of the importance of its efforts.

“This FIPSE Grant affords financial support for the institutions of higher education in Southern Colorado to collectively develop resources to attract, retain, and graduate students,” said Patty Erjavec, Pueblo Community College President. “We are committed to removing barriers for student success.”

“This is a broad partnership that links all of the southern Colorado colleges and universities to work not for the benefit of our individual institutions but rather for that of all of the people of our

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region,” said CSU-Pueblo Provost Russ Meyer. “Too often, people think of the colleges and universities as competitors, but this cooperative grant clearly shows that our primary interest is in achieving the greatest success for the largest number of people in southern Colorado.”

With the grant dollars, the two- and four-year colleges and universities will develop multiple outreach efforts to more than 300 southern Colorado middle and high schools. The schools will develop models to boost enrollment of adult students as well as an estimated 15,000 current middle and high school students who have the potential to be the first in their family to attend college, are members of an ethnic minority group, or are low-income.

“The key to long-term economic success at both the personal and broader community level is education,” Pam Shockley-Zalabak, chancellor, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs said. “Companies are interested in hiring people who are well-educated and coming to communities with a well-educated population. By improving the education of our citizens, our communities are ensuring their future.”

In November, teams from each college will meet to determine the details of the outreach efforts. A partnership with Cisco Technologies Inc. will be utilized to connect schools and individuals. Cisco’s widely advertised Telepresence system is being used to connect students from around the globe in high-definition, real-time television. The consortium will explore using the company’s technology to connect rural middle and high schools with a regional college to deliver advanced science and math courses as well as presentations about obtaining financial assistance for college or the value of a college education.

In the 23-county southeastern Colorado region, approximately 19 percent of adults have college degrees compared to almost 36 percent in metropolitan Denver. Colorado also has a large education achievement gap between its Caucasian and ethnic minority residents. Correspondingly, income levels in southern Colorado are lower than those of northern Colorado.

In what often is called the Colorado paradox, fewer native-born Coloradans earn college degrees than adults statewide. Concern about Colorado’s reliance on importing people who often take the state’s highest paying jobs was a driving factor in the consortium’s decision to pursue grant funds to increase college enrollment.

Colorado State University - Pueblo is a regional, comprehensive university emphasizing professional, career-oriented, and applied programs. Displaying excellence in teaching, celebrating diversity, and engaging in service and outreach, CSU-Pueblo is distinguished by access, opportunity, and the overall quality of services provided to its students.

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Founded in 1933, Pueblo Community College is a premier teaching institution focused on providing academic and service excellence to help its students acquire the 21st Century skills needed to better their lives. An educational and technological leader, PCC fosters economic development and utilizes strong partnerships in the communities it serves through its Pueblo, Fremont and Southwest campuses.