



# Finish What You Started

House Bill 21-1330

Legislative Report

2023

Prepared and submitted by the  
Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE)

Report to the Colorado General Assembly  
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1600 Broadway, Suite 2200, Denver, CO 80202

*For more information contact:*

[CDHE@dhe.state.co.us](mailto:CDHE@dhe.state.co.us)

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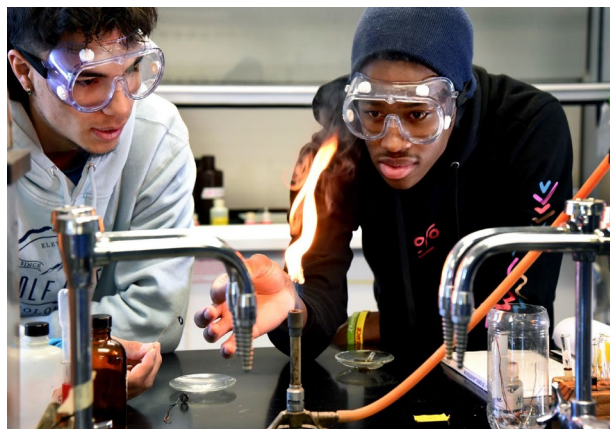
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## Introduction

### COSI Program Overview

The **Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI)**, a division of the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE), was created to increase the attainment of postsecondary credentials and degrees for underserved students in Colorado.

The program addresses the challenge in two ways: **accessibility** and **affordability**. To increase accessibility, COSI funds programs that prepare students for postsecondary education and support them through completion. To increase affordability, COSI provides cost-of-attendance support via matching funds for scholarships so that attendance costs are not a barrier and student loan debt can be mitigated.



By leveraging state funds to generate local giving, the program grows community efforts and engages private donors to increase available scholarships well beyond the investment from the state. Knowing that scholarships must be paired with student support to impact completion rates, the program's Matching Student Scholarship (MSS) component complements the Community Partner Program grants.

COSI reaches students from a range of socio-economic classes (from 0-250% Pell-eligible based on FAFSA and CASFA) and underserved students for whom college seems out of reach. COSI helps students afford a degree and access the support they need to persist and graduate. Since 2014 **COSI has served over 75,000 students across the state, providing scholarships and wraparound student support services utilizing more than \$60 million of state funds and leveraging an additional \$30 million in local and private investment.**

COSI's most recent program evaluation (20/21) demonstrates that the program and its evidence-based supports are positively impacting the state.

- Most students served are students of color, 59-64%, depending on the program.
- Program participants have completed more than 16,000 postsecondary credentials.
- COSI scholars have up to \$4,277 less yearly debt than their peers.
- Students persist at rates of up to 29% (depending on the program) higher than their peers.
- When students receive COSI scholarship funds and participate in a COSI postsecondary wraparound support program, they are even more successful and persist at rates of up to 92%.

## Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This proven model has fostered commitment and confidence in COSI, which is demonstrated by the increase in funding in 2021. **COSI received approximately \$65 million in federal funds to expand and create programming focused on addressing equity gaps, significant enrollment declines, high job loss rates, continuing unemployment, and overall disruption to the workforce caused by the pandemic.**

In spring 2020, COSI responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic to support Coloradans by providing a grant opportunity that prioritized workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and provided participants wraparound and financial support to access and complete their credentials.

The [Colorado Recovery Plan](#) expanded COSI's Displaced Workers Grant to create the **Back to Work** program. Through Senate Bill 21-232 and House Bill 22-1192, \$15 million in the American Rescue Plan Act funds was allocated to support students through June 2024. The Back to Work grant prioritizes individuals whose employment was impacted due to the pandemic. It provides participants wraparound and financial support to access and complete credentials or a degree within the grant term. Participants are incentivized to reskill, upskill, or complete industry-recognized credentials aligned with Colorado Top Jobs, prioritizing health care, education, information technology, and jobs with the most significant projected annual opportunities.

Through House Bill 21-1330, COSI received \$49 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to support Higher Education Student Success and created the **Finish What You Started (FWYS)** program. The program prioritizes individuals who experienced economic loss due to the pandemic. It provides participants with wraparound student support services and direct financial assistance to support continued persistence and certificate or degree completion. These funds help address the significant decline in enrollment in public institutions of higher education, the high rate of job loss, continuing unemployment, and the overall disruption to the workforce caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 disruptions have resulted in significant economic harm to individuals and businesses. FWYS responded quickly and effectively by providing support for students to return to public institutions of higher education to complete their postsecondary credentials and help rebuild and revitalize Colorado's workforce— \$46.55 million in funds go directly to higher education institutions with spending authority through June 2026, and \$2.4 million in administrative funds are available through June 2026.

COSI also received \$1.5 million to assist local education providers in implementing strategies to increase the number of students who complete a student aid application FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) or CASFA (Colorado Application for State Financial Aid) before graduating high school. This student aid application completion grant, **Fund My Future (FMF)**, provides funds to local education providers to implement strategies to increase the number of students who complete the FAFSA/CASFA before high school graduation. The local education provider requires students to complete a student aid application (FAFSA/CASFA) before graduation unless the student is eligible to waive the requirement. Local education providers can apply in two categories: supplemental funding and pre-collegiate.

## Finish What You Started

### Program Overview

With the \$3.8 billion of state aid provided by the American Rescue Plan Act, the Governor and Colorado legislature allocated approximately \$200 million towards workforce development and education. COSI received \$49 million to expand the Finish What You Started (FWYS) program, focusing on providing direct and indirect support to students. The program prioritizes individuals who experienced an economic loss due to the pandemic, undergraduates, and in-state students who:

- Earned some postsecondary credits from a public or private higher education institution but did not complete a credential requiring thirty credits or more before deciding not to enroll for two or more consecutive semesters or
- Were admitted to a public institution of higher education as a first-time student for the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic year but did not enroll at any institution for the 2020-2021 academic year.

The statute required the COSI Advisory Board to allocate the funds appropriated following a specific allocation formula.

- 50% based on each institution's headcount enrollment for the 2019-2020 academic year of undergraduate, in-state students whose expected family contribution did not exceed 250% of Pell-eligibility.
- 50% based on each institution's full-time equivalent enrollment for the 2019-2020 academic year of undergraduate, in-state students whose expected family contribution did not exceed 250% of Pell eligibility.
- Allowed the board to adopt rules that identify additional criteria for allocating the money, considering characteristics of the public institutions of higher education, including location in a rural area of the state, total headcount enrollment, and characteristics unique to area technical colleges.

The board utilized \$46.55 million for institutions and \$2.45 million for program administration. In 2022-2023, 30 public institutions of higher education participated in the program. Colorado School of Mines elected not to participate in the program. In addition, the statute laid out specific guidelines on how the institution can use the funds, requiring more funds for direct financial support than indirect student support services. Institutions were required to submit student assistance plans as part of their application and each year through the end of the grant term. The plans must detail the use of funds and programming, and the goal of each plan must be to increase eligible student enrollment, persistence, completion, and reduce student loan debt. All plans must be reviewed and approved annually by the board.

## Program Progress

Federal funding provided COSI with an opportunity to utilize its proven model of financial and student support services to assist Colorado public institutions and expand and create programming focused on addressing equity gaps, significant enrollment declines, high job loss rates, continuing unemployment, and addressing the disruption to the workforce caused by the pandemic.

The second year of program implementation saw a significant increase in participation and spending as the program began the 22-23 academic year. The progress is a testament to the perseverance and dedication of the state, CDHE, and institutions in supporting underserved populations and those most impacted by the pandemic to pursue higher education and receive credentials. Through partnerships between the state, CDHE, and institutions, these funds have been effectively mobilized to revitalize the workforce in a post-pandemic Colorado.

**As the program entered its second year, COSI saw a consistent increase in the number of students served and credentials completed.** With the increase in participants, COSI saw an increase in the pace of spending, with an average report of \$3 million spent each quarter between 30 active organizations. Based on annual reporting information shared with CDHE in August 2023, participating institutions spent \$11,501,792.25 between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023. As of the last quarterly report submitted in June 2023, 3,559 students were served, and 732 credentials were completed. Program highlights and challenges are outlined below.

### Program Highlights

- CDHE launched a statewide social media campaign to market this initiative. The campaign ran for six weeks through late spring and into early summer 2023 in direct relation to recruitment and onboarding for the 2023-2024 academic year.
- The program has more than tripled the served population from 1,000 students in 2021-2022 to more than 3,000 through 2022-2023.
- Completion rates have increased by more than 600% from 100 in 2021-2022 to more than 700 completions through 2022-2023.
- Front Range Community College serves the most participants, reporting 392 students through 2022-2023.
- Colorado Mesa University and Pickens Technical College have reported the highest number of credentials completions at 73 through 2022-2023.
- Colorado State University-Global terminated their agreement in January 2023, but under new institutional leadership, the program was reinstated in May 2023 and launched in fall 2023.
- Western Colorado University serves adult learners online across the state and in more than 30 school districts, with cohorts of paraprofessional teachers from Jefferson County, Canyon City, Moffatt, Morgan County, and others, to complete their teaching credentials remotely.
- Northeastern Junior College coordinated efforts from across the college and, in partnership with their faculty, to offer in-person, accelerated coursework at their Yuma campus to ensure their students could participate in Finish What You Started and earn a credential before the end of the grant term.

### **Program Challenges**

- A significant amount of funding and resources was allocated by the legislature for institutions of higher education collectively over the past two years in support of high-need fields and workforce efforts tied to pandemic recovery. However, an unintended consequence is that it has created a competing candidate pool of eligible recipients through multiple programs. In addition, it has created an undue burden on institutions of higher education (particularly their financial aid staff), who are responsible for strategically braiding the funding streams without duplicating benefits or services.
- Institutions continued to encounter challenges in securing and maintaining staff. Fourteen of the 30 Finish What You Started programs were impacted by staffing changes or challenges throughout the 22-23 academic year. This is a national trend of hiring at institutions of higher education post-pandemic and directly impacts the program's success.
- The final federal rules continued to have impacts into 2022-2023, and the economically impacted definition required that institutions reverify the eligibility of all participants.
- Changes in reporting requirements in 2022-2023 created an additional workload for institutions already experiencing programming challenges.

### **What's Next**

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As the program moves into the third year (2023-2024), many colleges and university programs will reach the peak and capacity of recruitment this year, with student-served figures plateauing in coming years. This is based on various factors, particularly surrounding the time it takes to re-engage a student, the number of credits, the length of time needed to complete a credential, and alignment with the eligibility of being able to document economic impact.

As of December 2023, COSI expects that four of the 30 active programs (Emily Griffith Technical College, Otero College, Northeastern Junior College, and University of Northern Colorado) will be closing out grants by June 30, 2024. Additionally, 13 institutions are entering year three of a four-year grant term, expecting to close their grant as of June 2025. Furthermore, 13 institutions plan to continue this work through June 2026, six of which proactively decided to extend the program based on progress.

COSI will continue diligently monitoring spending and progress toward program goals throughout the 2023-2024 academic year. A variety of metrics are utilized to track and monitor grant management, including but not limited to annual grantee health assessment based on a rubric of expectations, monthly and quarterly reporting submission per grant (on spent, student served, and cumulative completions), as well as conducting in-person site visits. The level of technical assistance the COSI team provides depends on the institution's annual health status. It can range from monthly meetings to semester check-ins and performance plans (as needed). Comprehensive monitoring and triage allow COSI to quickly determine areas of concern and provide the necessary support to ensure compliance and student success.

## Legislative Reporting Requirements

Per 23-3.3-1006 (7)(a), CDHE is required to submit a legislative report to the joint budget committee and the education committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives or any successor committees by December 1. The report must summarize the reports received from the public institutions of higher education and must include:

- The amounts allocated and distributed to each public institution of higher education.
- The amount each institution spent in providing direct student financial assistance to eligible students and in providing services and support to eligible students and the types of direct student financial assistance and services and support provided.
- The number of eligible students who re-enrolled in the academic years in which each institution's student assistance plan was implemented.
- The postsecondary credentials awarded to eligible students who received assistance through each institution's student assistance plan.
- Any additional information the board deems useful in determining the degree to which the money appropriated to the fund pursuant to section 23-3.3-1005 (6) was successfully spent to increase eligible student enrollment, persistence, and completion and decrease student debt.

This section is self-reported by institutions either through annual or quarterly reporting. The data disruption CDHE experienced over the summer slightly impacted the submission of COSI annual reports and did not impact quarterly reporting. Through the annual and quarterly reports, COSI collected much of the data needed for the legislative report. Unfortunately, no additional data points, as detailed in the last bullet above, are available currently.

### The amount allocated and distributed to each public institution of higher education.

The total allocation provided through HB21-1330 is \$46.55 million divided between 31 public institutions of higher education, 30 of which are participating. In 2022-2023, \$11,189,338.42 was disbursed to 29 institutions to provide financial and student services support. Distributions are based on 2022-2023 CORE records of payments issued to subrecipients.

Institution	Total Grant Term Allocation	Year #2 Disbursed Amounts	Percentage of Total Allocation Disbursed in Year Two
Adams State University	\$ 678,546.00	\$ 282,485.00	42%
Aims Community College	\$ 1,250,756.00	\$ 312,689.00	25%
Arapahoe Community College	\$ 1,111,149.00	\$ 50,072.92	5%
Colorado Mesa University	\$ 2,118,620.00	\$ 706,206.00	33%
Colorado Mountain College	\$ 983,646.00	\$ 327,882.00	33%
Colorado Northwestern Community College	\$ 246,845.00	\$ 45,500.00	18%
Colorado School of Mines	\$ 521,426.00	Terminated Agreement in 2022	
Colorado State University	\$ 3,655,937.00	\$ 838,601.00	23%



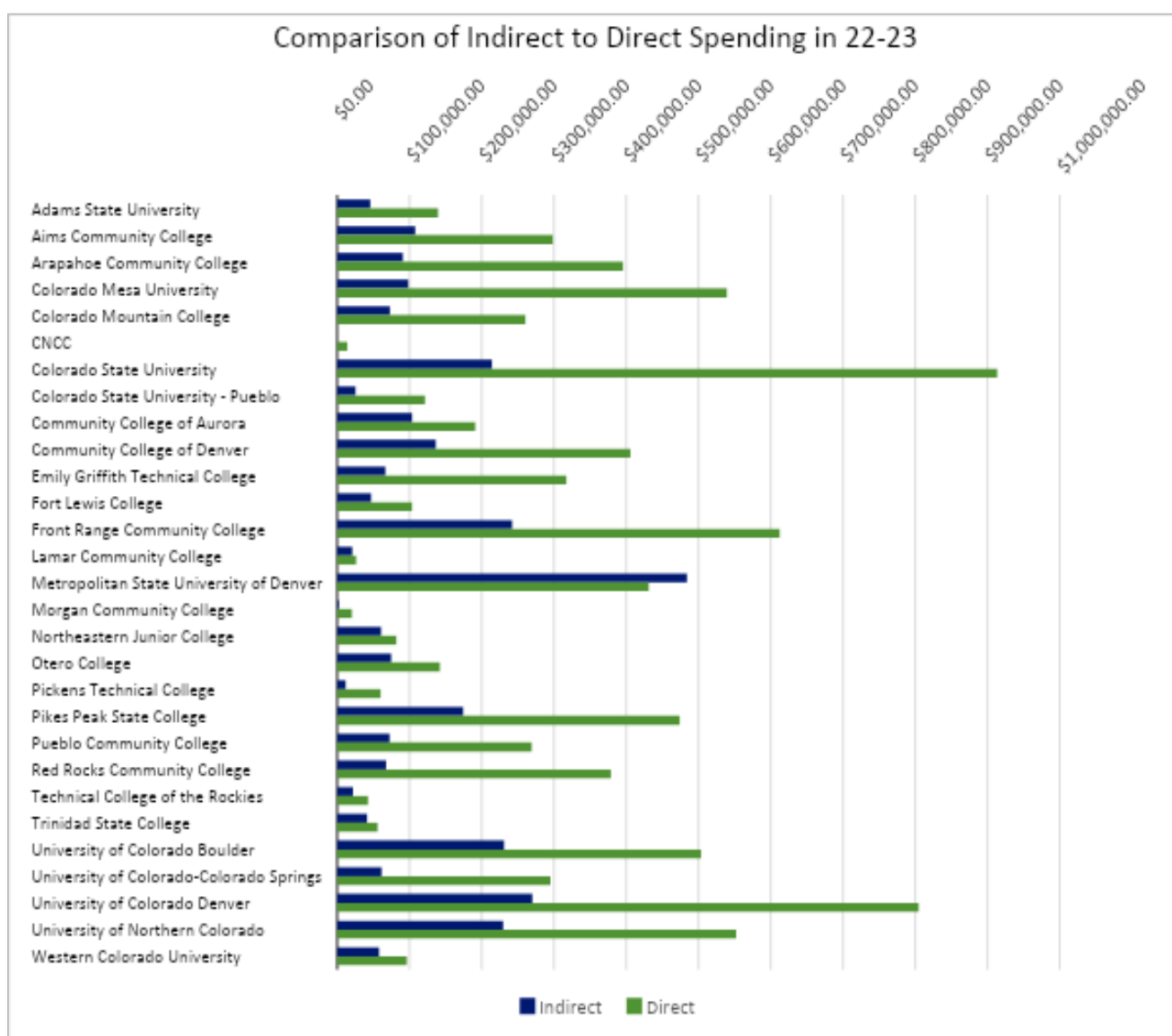
**Finish What You Started**

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Colorado State University Global	\$ 785,340.00	Reinstated program launched in the fall of 2023	
Colorado State University-Pueblo	\$ 1,015,124.00	\$ 134,157.00	13%
Community College of Aurora	\$ 1,318,414.00	\$ 380,944.00	29%
Community College of Denver	\$ 2,002,754.00	\$ 612,383.00	31%
Emily Griffith Technical College	\$ 863,084.00	\$ 437,911.00	51%
Fort Lewis College	\$ 552,344.00	\$ 153,657.00	28%
Front Range Community College	\$ 3,206,928.00	\$ 1,037,706.00	32%
Lamar Community College	\$ 251,898.00	\$ 39,040.50	15%
Metropolitan State University of Denver	\$ 5,712,650.00	\$ 851,845.00	15%
Morgan Community College	\$ 344,391.00	\$ 57,398.50	17%
Northeastern Junior College	\$ 353,211.00	\$ 117,737.00	33%
Otero College	\$ 422,134.00	\$ 150,000.00	36%
Pickens Technical College	\$ 626,982.00	\$ 63,903.00	10%
Pikes Peak State College	\$ 3,728,872.00	\$ 974,265.00	26%
Pueblo Community College	\$ 1,430,926.00	\$ 337,715.00	24%
Red Rocks Community College	\$ 1,328,254.00	\$ 330,282.00	25%
Technical College of the Rockies	\$ 191,590.00	\$ 50,500.00	26%
Trinidad College	\$ 567,165.00	\$ 94,527.50	17%
University of Colorado Boulder	\$ 3,122,075.00	\$ 1,019,694.00	33%
University of Colorado Colorado Springs	\$ 2,398,588.00	\$ 215,000.00	9%
University of Colorado Denver	\$ 3,205,271.00	\$ 731,297.00	23%
University of Northern Colorado	\$ 2,024,812.00	\$ 674,938.00	33%
Western Colorado University	\$ 530,269.00	\$ 161,002.00	30%
	\$ 46,550,001.00	\$ 11,189,338.42	

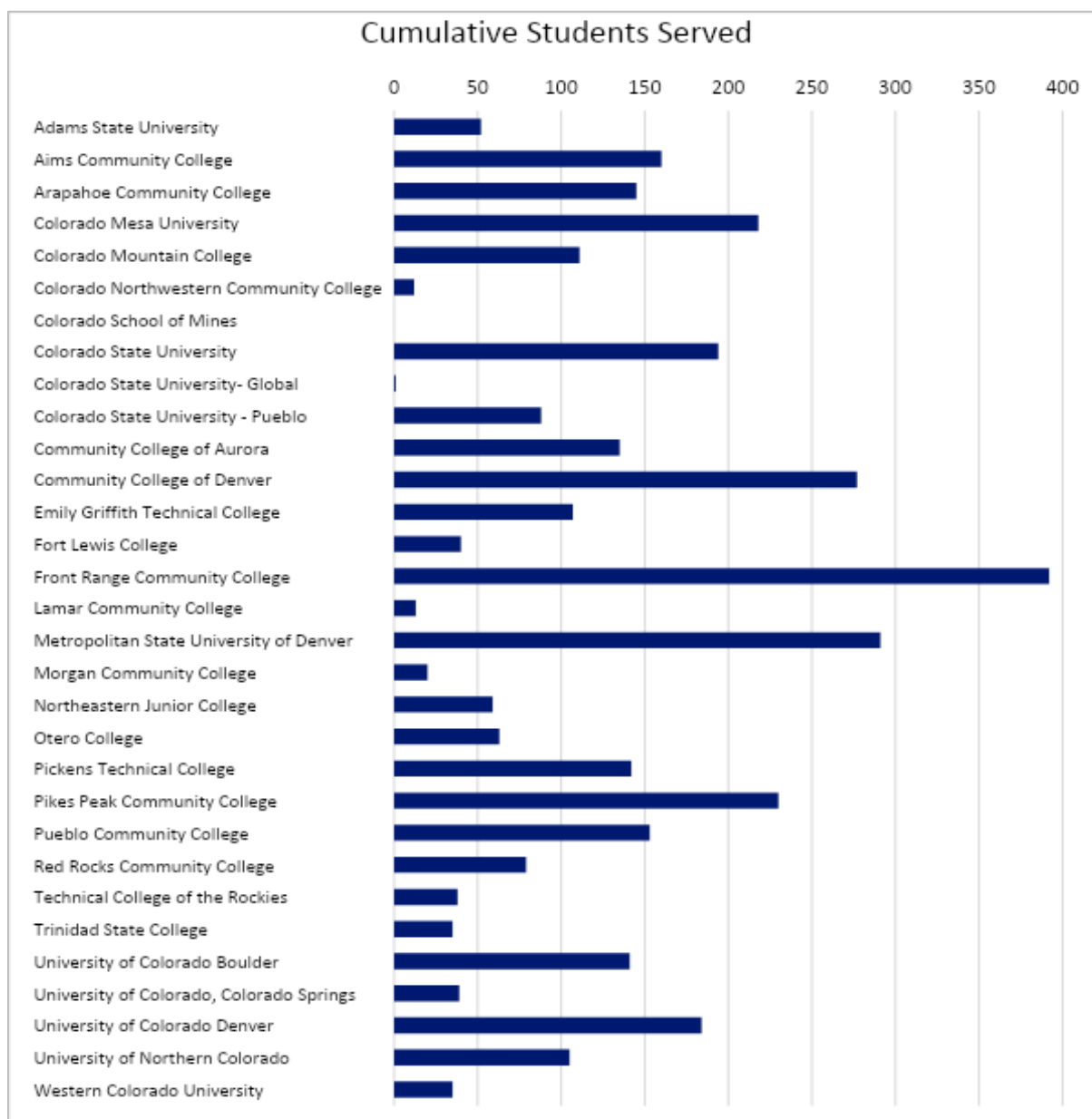
**The amount each institution spent in providing direct student financial assistance to eligible students and in providing services and support to eligible students and the types of direct student financial assistance and services and support provided.**

The statute states that the institution must report on the amount of funds spent on direct student financial support, which includes scholarships, other educational expenses, and/or incentives provided directly to the students, and indirect student support, which funds personnel, programming, and marketing. With the intent that a greater percentage is spent on direct student supports. Based on 2022-2023 annual reporting metrics, the majority of institutions reported spending more on direct support than indirect.



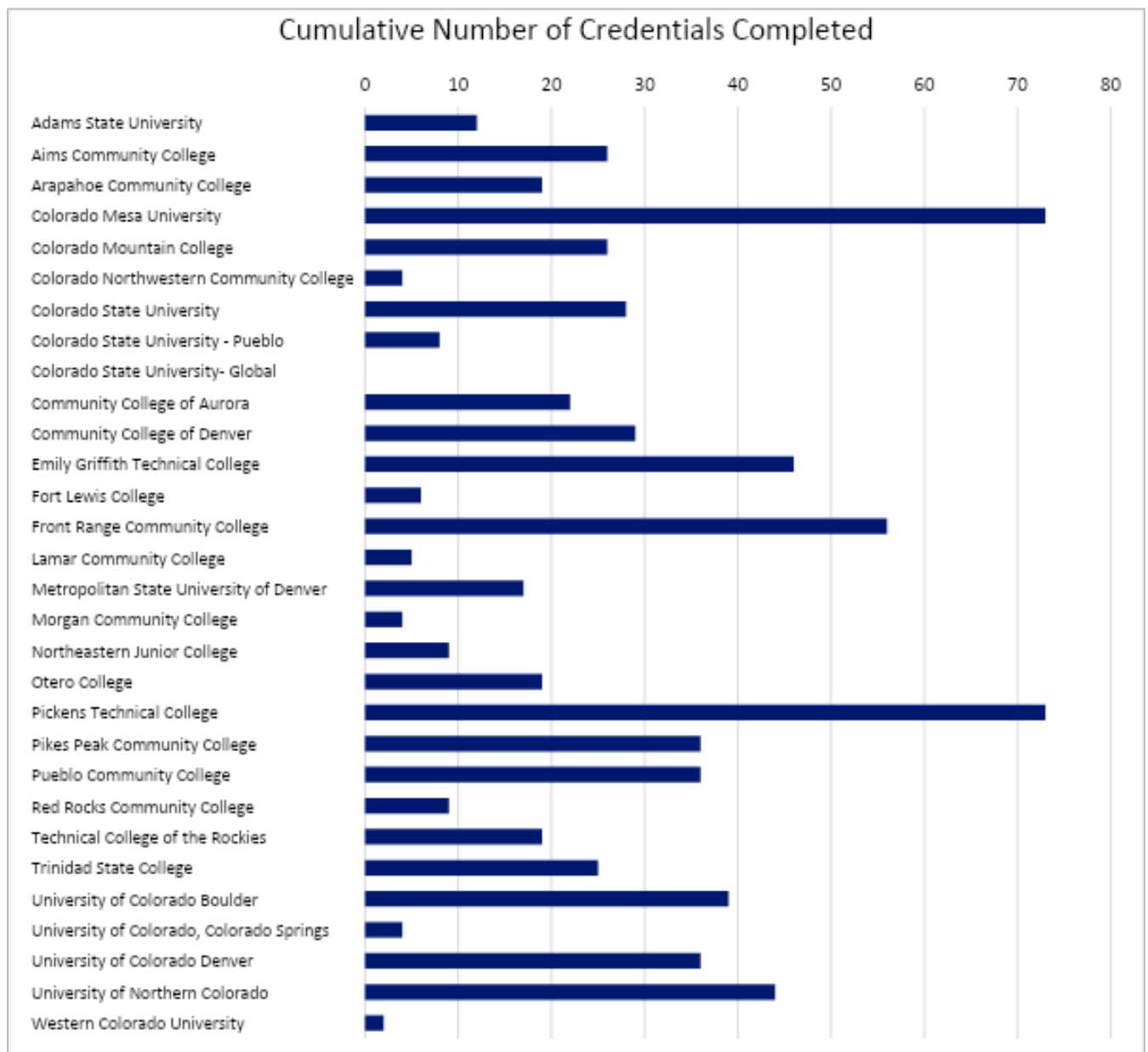
**The number of eligible students who re-enrolled in the academic years in which each institution's student assistance plan was implemented.**

Based on quarterly reporting and as of June 30, 2023, the 30 participating FWYS programs reported a cumulative total of 3,559 students served through June 2023.



## The postsecondary credentials awarded to eligible students who received assistance through each institution's student assistance plan.

Based on the quarterly reporting and as of June 30, 2023, the participating institutions reported 732 credentials were completions. Based on the implementation timeframe (two years of service and 1.5 at full function), COSI anticipates credential completions to steadily increase through the final years of the grant, as most students require more than two semesters to complete their credentials.



## Conclusion

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CDHE is witnessing the strength and resilience of institutions and, specifically, the staff who support the program. Although not without its challenges, the continued work of institutions, CDHE, and the state highlights the commitment to student success and supporting those most impacted by the pandemic. Success would not be possible without the unique and intentional structure of pairing wraparound support with financial funding, creating a holistic support system serving primarily adult students. The continued support of this population through the Finish What You Started program will help to negate the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on those most disproportionately impacted and will produce a credentialed workforce.