

## OPINION &gt; OPINION COLUMNISTS

# Commentary: Jim Martin: Universities, including CU, should embrace offering an associate degree

By **JIM MARTIN**

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Hats off to Colorado's Legislature for recently passing House Bill 21-1330. It's designed to, among other things, enable four-year colleges to offer an associate degree, not just a bachelor's degree.

Section 6 of the bill creates the Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) Initiative, which encourages students who left college earlier than planned to return. Lawmakers sweetened the deal by encouraging four-year colleges and universities to award an associate degree to those who return and secure the required credits or who want

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The state's flagship school, the University of Colorado, should set an example by recruiting former students back into the fold and help them earn an associate degree. And though it's optional for universities to participate in the initiative, all of them should embrace this idea.



Jim Martin For the Camera

We must do something to improve these numbers:

Just 41% of first-time college students nationally earn a bachelor's degree in four years and only 59% earn one in six years, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

It shouldn't be all or nothing; you could be just one or two classes short, and thus can't get your diploma. The new associate degree would make students more marketable.

That has all changed from the 1970s and '80s, when just some college credits or an associate degree could reward you with a career at IBM or another major Fortune 500 company.

This CORE Initiative also can help somewhat with the reality that about 44 million Americans collectively owed \$1.57 trillion in student loans as of 2021 — and many still lack a college degree.

Former students should not be punished for having to leave school because of military service, economic deprivation during the pandemic, becoming caregivers for a family member at home, running out of money to pursue an education or other life challenges.

The University of New Hampshire, University of Southern California and New York University have gotten out in front of this issue of graduation rates by offering a three-year bachelor's degree.

"There are students who went three or 3.5 years to a four-year institution and dropped out for whatever reason," said Angie Paccione, executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education. "Life happens — they enter the marketplace and the highest credential they have is a high school diploma. That is not right. You should have something to show for it that is marketable."

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The money will come from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.

That's why four-year colleges and universities need to take a hard look at how they prepare students for the workforce. Is 120 hours of academic credits really that important?

The money also will be used to enable schools that offer only four-year degrees to award associate degrees.

Let's give our full support to the CORE Initiative, which is redefining how colleges and universities can help prepare students for the real world while easing their path to earning a job-winning academic degree that will enrich their lives beyond a high school diploma.

In one way or another, something has to be done if we're going to restore higher education as a guarantor of opportunity rather than simply consigning it to being a gatekeeper for empty promises.

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<https://www.dailycamera.com/2021/09/18/commentary-jim-martin-update-labor-day-to-honor-all-american-workers-2/>

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