

**To: Members of the House Education Committee**

**From: Lucas Guerrero, Young Invincibles & Colorado State University Student**

**Re: [HB26-1006 Thriving Institution for Designations for Higher Education]**

Madam Chair, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony. My name is Lucas Guerrero, and I am representing Young Invincibles as part of the Colorado Student Voice Coalition. I am a Front Range Community College alumnus and a transfer student who graduated from Colorado State University with a Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience. I am here today to encourage you to **support HB26-1006**.

I am a first-generation college student from a family of immigrants, and I am the first in my family to pursue a career in science. I struggled early in my education. I failed my freshman year of high school and graduated with a 1.9 GPA. When I applied to in-state Colorado universities, I was turned away from all of them except Front Range Community College.

In August 2021, I enrolled at Front Range without a clear plan for my future. I was interested in science, particularly endocrinology based on my family's health experiences, but I did not know how to navigate higher education or plan for transfer. Like many first-generation students, I lacked access to clear information and long-term advising. At the time, attending a four-year university felt completely out of reach.

That changed when I learned about transfer initiatives in a math class, where I overheard a conversation about the Wolves-to-Rams program. This was the first time I realized that structured transfer support existed. After being accepted into Wolves to Rams, I connected with advisors who helped me understand financial aid, created a clear transfer plan, and chose courses that would prepare me for a career in science.

Because of this support, I successfully transferred to Colorado State University and graduated with a 3.8 GPA. That outcome did not happen by chance. It happened because institutions invested in transfer students and used data to evaluate whether their programs were producing the right outcomes.

Programs like Wolves to Rams demonstrated measurable success and informed the development of the Ram Transfer Academy, which continues this work today. The Wolves to Rams model also received competitive funding from the National Science Foundation, and the Ram Transfer Academy has since received a \$500,000 grant from the American Talent Initiative. This shows how data-driven success can attract further investment and expand support for transfer students.

As a first-generation, Latino, Pell Grant recipient, it was critical for me to attend an institution where I knew I would be supported and could thrive. HB26-1006 matters because thriving institution designations create transparency around which institutions are supporting students

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well, encourage other institutions to improve their outcomes, and increase transparency for students to find the ideal institution for their goals and ambitions.

I urge the committee to vote **yes on HB26-1006**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lucas Guerrero | B.S. Neuroscience  
Colorado Student Voice Coalition | Young Invincibles

## References

### 1. Front Range Community College

Front Range Community College. Ram Transfer Academy.

<https://www.frontrange.edu/student-experience/transfer-planning/ram-transfer.html>

### 2. National Science Foundation

National Science Foundation. Award No. 1930092.

[https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/show-award/?AWD\\_ID=1930092&HistoricalAwards=false](https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/show-award/?AWD_ID=1930092&HistoricalAwards=false)

**To: Members of the House Education Committee**

**From: Vanessa Ponce, Young Invincibles & Red Rocks Community College Student**

**Re: [HB26-1006 Thriving Institution for Designations for Higher Education]**

Madam Chair, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony today. My name is Vanessa Ponce, and I am representing myself and Young Invincibles. I am a first-generation, Latina college student pursuing a degree in civil engineering with a minor in global engineering. I began my higher education journey at Red Rocks Community College and am working towards transferring to CU Boulder full-time. I am writing to you today to support House Bill 26-1006.

As a first-generation student starting at a community college, I chose that path because it was the most affordable and accessible option for my family. But affordability alone does not guarantee success; it also relies on trust. My family didn't have experience navigating higher education, so I relied heavily on what institutions promised about support, advising, and student success. Navigating these "promises", such as advising systems, transfer pathways, and institutional expectations, often felt like solving a puzzle without a guide. And I quickly learned that not all institutions are set up to truly help students thrive, even when they have the talent and motivation to succeed.

In my own journey, the difference between struggling and succeeding came down to whether my institution invested in strong advising, accessible resources, and intentional support for students like me. When those systems were in place, I felt supported and empowered. When they weren't, I had to advocate for myself, figure things out on my own, and risk falling behind not because I lacked ability, but because the system wasn't designed with students like me in mind. That gap can delay graduation, increase costs, or push students out entirely.

House Bill 26-1006 matters because it helps redefine what it means for an institution to be successful. By recognizing "thriving institutions" based on student outcomes and equity, this bill encourages colleges, including community colleges and transfer-serving institutions, to prioritize completion, mobility, and student-centered support, not just enrollment. For students like me, transparency about which institutions truly support minority, first-generation, and transfer students can change educational and economic outcomes. When institutions thrive, students thrive. Those students become the skilled workforce, innovators, and civic leaders that Colorado depends on.

As a young Coloradoan, a first-generation student, and someone navigating the community college transfer pathway, I urge you to vote yes on House Bill 26-1006. I am part of the future of this state. Investing in institutions that help students succeed benefits Colorado's economy, communities, and long-term prosperity.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Ponce

Red Rocks Community College and CU Boulder Student

Colorado Student Voice Coalition Member with Young Invincibles

Written Testimony in Support of HB 26-1006 with Amendment  
House Education Committee  
February 10, 2026

Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 26-1006.

My name is Marcella Schieffelin. I am a caregiver and disability advocate, and a former fellow with JFK Partners LEND program at the UC Anschutz Medical Campus, where I worked on person-centered disability policy and supported decision-making systems.

I support House Bill 26-1006 with an amendment to explicitly include accountability and equity outcomes for all students, not only those who already have access to opportunity.

The intent to recognize and elevate thriving institutions across Colorado is essential. However, thriving should reflect how well institutions serve the full diversity of Colorado's students, including underserved communities, rural regions, and students with disabilities.

I would like to share a concrete example of why equity and accountability must be central to how success is defined.

Colorado Mesa University was presented with a clear opportunity to receive available state funding and technical assistance to establish an inclusive higher education program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities through the Inclusive Higher Education Opportunities grant program created under House Bill 22-1107.

I know this firsthand because I served on a parent-inclusive higher education committee that was specifically created to bring this grant program to Colorado Mesa University, in large part because of its location and accessibility for families in Western Colorado who otherwise lack nearby options.

This was a strategic and equity-focused effort to expand access in an underserved region.

Despite funding, support, and community involvement being in place, Colorado Mesa University declined to move forward.

No reasonable explanation was provided.

There was no transparency.

There was no engagement with families or the disability community.

The outcome was that students with disabilities in Western Colorado lost access to opportunities that were intentionally designed to improve inclusion, independence, and long-term consequences.

In contrast, Western Colorado University chose to move forward and accept the opportunity to build inclusive higher education programming, demonstrating that these programs are achievable even in rural communities when institutions engage.

I share this example not to assign blame, but to highlight why clear expectations and accountability matter.

If institutions are to be recognized as thriving, that recognition should include **demonstrated efforts to expand access, serve underserved populations, and responsibly utilize available state resources to improve outcomes.**

## **Amendment Purpose Statement**

This amendment strengthens the thriving institution designation by ensuring that accountability, equity outcomes, and transparency in the use of state resources are central to how institutional success is defined and evaluated.

Including this amendment would ensure the bill promotes meaningful improvement across Colorado's higher education system.

Thriving should mean that every student, regardless of ability, location, or background, has genuine access to opportunity and support for success.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to improving higher education outcomes for all Coloradans.

## **Proposed Amendment Language to HB 26 1006**

In the section establishing criteria for designation of a thriving institution, add the following language:

The department shall ensure that the criteria for designation of a thriving institution include measurable equity outcomes that reflect the institution's effectiveness in serving underserved student populations, including but not limited to students with disabilities and students in rural or geographically isolated communities. The criteria shall also include transparency regarding the utilization of available state resources intended to expand access and improve student outcomes.

In the section describing the duties of the advisory committee, add the following language:

The advisory committee shall incorporate equity-based performance measures and accountability standards into its recommendations and annual reporting to ensure that institutional success is evaluated across diverse student populations.

Respectfully submitted,

Marcella Schieffelin

Caregiver and Disability Advocate

Former LEND Fellow, JFK Partners, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus