

# **Accessibility and Learning in Arizona**

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**Faculty Stakeholder Group  
Arizona University System Redesign Study**

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## Introduction: Accessibility and Learning in Arizona

Arizona faces unprecedented structural, financial, and cultural barriers to accessibility. Any remedy must be comprehensive – if we only address one or two of the barriers, we will leave a large proportion of first generation college students, who are disproportionately Latino, behind. If we address all barriers, we can make this system redesign truly unique for Arizona and truly embrace the multi-diversity that will move Arizona in the forefront of the global knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our goal must be that all eligible students have the opportunity to pursue higher education in a format that best suits their needs. Arizona's higher education system faces massive challenges in every major area of accessibility.

- ❑ **Physical Access.** Arizona is a geographically diverse state that already has much fewer full-fledged universities than other states of comparable size. Therefore, large segments of the population are not located conveniently near full universities. This problem is exacerbated by the increasing demand for graduate education and the dearth of institutions offering masters, professional, and doctoral degrees in the state.
- ❑ **Cultural Accessibility.** For all too many of our students, attending university is akin to crossing a border into a world in which they are unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For example, a large number of our students and their parents do not have an adequate understanding of the benefits of a college education or the process to enter a college or university. A recent national study by the Sallie Mae Fund found that 3/4 of young adults NOT currently in college would have been more likely to attend college if exposed to better information about financial aid. Inadequate information especially affects Latino students. More than half of all Latino parents and 43% of Latino young adults could not name a single source of financial aid and more than 2/3rds of Latino parents did not receive any financial aid information while child was in K-12.
- ❑ **Financial Accessibility.** For way too many of Arizona's families Arizona's higher education system is financially out of reach. While Arizona traditionally has had some of the lowest tuition rates, they have also been the least affordable due to a lack of statewide and university-level financial aid. This problem will most likely only get worse as Arizona's universities continue to raise tuition to unprecedented levels.
- ❑ **Learner-Centered Accessibility.** Do your friends go to college? Who you hang out with in high school may be a factor in whether you go to college. Causes: this is life, lots of pressure on students and it starts early. Solutions: pick your friends carefully! Parents and secondary schools and universities could find ways of getting young students exposed to things that excite them about advanced learning and work on ways to address the peer pressure issue, find ways to fight stereotypes, offer more AP courses and exploratory courses via internet and summer camps. Virtual high schools might play a role here. Experiences on

campus/retention - some experiences turn out bad. Causes: money problems, lack of academic preparation, no peer group of your culture or intellectual ability or interests easily available on campus, too much fun gets in way of learning, your best learning style is not provided on campus, campus too big or too small. Solutions: improved ways of assimilating new students into a new environment, assessment tools to determine learning styles and fields of interest, more time to explore course offerings/subjects before having to declare a major. Competing demands on your time - this is mostly older students or those already working and cannot come in as "regular students". Causes: working so little time to go to school (therefore cannot live on campus), time spent on travel to school is too much considering only part time student, too tired to work and go to school and perhaps raise a family. Solutions: more e-learning offerings for those not close to a campus that has what they need, more flexibility in courses and related services by the university so these students can get all the regular offerings but at more convenient times.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Accessibility**

While one or more "access" problems may prevent a student from going to the university, often you probably have more than one factor, which makes it even more difficult to come up with a solution. These accessibility factors are intertwined and often subject to the vagaries of the state budget process. California's recent budget crisis not only affected physical accessibility as more students have sought a degree and financial accessibility, but has had a profound effect on cultural accessibility as the governor's recent budget proposed eliminating state funding for all outreach programs. Thus, the answers are not discrete packets of solutions, but a range of solutions that treats the problem holistically - the patient here is the student, the university, parents, finances, friends, exposure to new ideas, and so on. Mediated (technology-driven) learning is a partial answer, but one that could be fraught with all sorts of cultural problems. Studies have shown that Latinos students benefit most from face-to-face contact with fellow students, faculty members, and advisors,