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CEOs know bleak state of higher ed

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By Diane Carman

So now what?

When former U.S. Sen. Hank Brown gave up a nice job at the Daniels Fund to become president of the University of Colorado in August 2005, it was in the midst of utter chaos.

He was dealing with that talk-radio nightmare, Ward Churchill, and his "little Eichmanns" debacle; the sleazy and depressing football recruiting disgrace; and the biggest scandal of them all - the systematic looting of state funding for the university over the past decade.

A year and a half later, Brown told CU regents Thursday that he's done what he came to do. "The reason to leave is because you've completed the job," he said. CU "has become more transparent and accountable."

OK, that's nice, but it's not nearly enough. Like the rest of public higher education in the state, CU is on life support, a victim of nothing less than a fiscal holocaust.

Sure, Brown never promised to fix that.

But somebody must if the state is to retain anything resembling economic vitality in the next 20 years.

Zach Neumeyer, chief executive of Sage Investment Holdings, has been studying higher education - along with the rest of the education sinkhole - and is convinced Colorado is headed for an imminent economic/cultural/political come-to-Jesus.

"It's so blindingly obvious," he said. "The funding issues, the administrative issues, how the whole higher education system is organized - it's really poorly put together."

The business community deals with the consequences every day.

Colorado companies "are having a lot of trouble finding qualified people," Neumeyer said. Then, even when companies do lure highly skilled employees from out of state, they often leave because they're dissatisfied with the schools for their children.

CEOs *get* the importance of education, he said, even if politicians and taxpayers are a little slow on the uptake. So Neumeyer has created an organization of business leaders called Colorado Succeeds.

Among the companies involved are Lockheed Martin, Ball Aerospace and Frontier Airlines. The Donnell-Kay Foundation also is working with the group.

The business leaders decided to focus first on higher ed based on findings they collected in a recent study titled "Higher Education in Colorado - an Economic Engine Running on Empty."

The data reveal that Colorado ranks 49th in state and local support for higher education, 48th in higher education spending per capita, 32nd in students entering college within a year of graduating from high school and 37th in job growth in 2004.

That's grim. But it doesn't begin to reflect the seriousness of the problem. Because while Colorado is falling behind the rest of the U.S., the U.S. is falling badly behind the world.

Even the states that still do invest in higher education are struggling to produce college graduates who can compete with the generation of highly skilled, well-trained, driven engineers, mathematicians and scientists from the developing world who view U.S. complacency as their best chance ever for the good life.

Neumeyer admits that there are no quick fixes, but he's convinced Colorado Succeeds won't be just another feel-good, do-nothing committee.

"There's a real sense of urgency," he said.

The first priority is to educate the public about the seriousness of the problem and what everyone stands to lose by ignoring it. "Part of this is for people to feel a sense of moral outrage and patriotism."

Only then can there be any hope of untangling the kudzu of reckless constitutional amendments, funding restrictions and provincial animosities that have reduced universities to begging for higher tuition just to stanch the bleeding.

Tough as Brown's job was to rehabilitate the tarnished reputation of CU, it's nothing compared with what his successor will face.

As Neumeyer's study says, if the state doesn't do something dramatic and fast, "higher education - and Colorado's economy - will slowly starve."

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