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Congressman Gallego, Press Conference

“Keeping Tuition Affordable” – April 27, 2015

Rich Nickel’s Remarks:

Thank you for your powerful remarks and your leadership on this issue, Congressman Gallego. I am Rich Nickel, President and CEO of a statewide non-profit called **College Success Arizona**. Our organization is committed to helping more Arizona students achieve their higher education goals, leading to a stronger and more highly educated workforce. We do this through providing a combination of financial and education supports such as scholarships and professional mentoring. College Success Arizona scholars graduate at a rate of 71%, which is roughly double the graduation rate of similar students that don’t receive these intensive supports. We also advocate for keeping tuition as low as possible to ensure we get more students into the higher education pipeline, especially those students that have not traditionally been part of this pipeline; the success of these students is crucial to growing Arizona’s skilled labor force over the next decade.

You may be surprised to find out, that only 37% of Arizonans between the ages of 25 and 64 have earned an associate’s degree or above. For our Latino population, that number is only 17%. Studies show that by the year 2020, nearly 70% of all jobs in Arizona will require education after high school. If the fastest growing segment of our population are those of Hispanic origin, and we only have a 17% higher education graduation rate, we must focus on raising that rate for all Arizonans. In particular, we must aggressively improve the attainment rate for Arizona’s Latino students. We must have more students enroll in postsecondary programs, and then succeed once they get there, to satisfy Arizona’s future business needs.

At College Success Arizona, we have first-hand experience in providing hundreds of 4-year scholarships and complimentary mentoring services to Arizona's neediest students. We know there are many reasons why young people aren't graduating, or even attending college. As the Congressman laid out, financial barriers are debilitating, especially for traditionally underserved students. With many students exceeding the \$29,000 student loan debt mentioned earlier, we must focus on making higher education more affordable to all. This year, Arizona's budget will reduce funding to the three public universities by nearly \$100 Million. To make up the difference, all three state universities will be forced to raise tuition and fees, effectively placing a larger burden on students and families to reach their higher education goals.

College Success Arizona understands that high tuition not only hurts access to higher education, but also completion. Along with keeping tuition affordable, our students will tell you that additional supports such as college mentoring, are crucial to help them navigate their pathway to success. At the end of the day, if a student starts school, but can't complete their program because tuition is too high, then that student may actually be in a less favorable position than if they had not attended at all.

There is some good news to report: data just released by the National Student Clearinghouse showed slight progress in yearly college retention rates. We're glad to see retention rates increase last year, even if by only 1%. However, it is also a stark reminder that we still have a long way to go to ensure all incoming freshman make it to graduation day. College dropout rates remain as high as they were in 2009. And, sadly, it's low-income and minority students that make-up the majority of those not reaching their educational goals. In fact, it is estimated that only 37% of Arizona students entering college this year will graduate in four years. The six-year rate is better at 58%, but those two extra years add additional debt for housing, tuition, and other expenses.

We look forward to tackling this issue together as a state and a nation, if we're to continue to compete in an ever-changing world economy, and give our students the competitive advantage they deserve.