

Public Work at the University of Colorado

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Tag: CU Boulder can strengthen our role and status as a public university by supporting deep and reciprocal partnerships that use research to advance the public good with community groups, civil society organizations, and public agencies.

Whether talking about the environment, health care, or political participation, we are living in an era where robust conceptions of the public are being undermined through legislation, disinvestment, and political polarization. This diminished public sphere is also affecting higher education¹, and CU Boulder is no exception. In addition to the decrease in state funding (currently 4.4% of total budget)², we also see a persistent gap between student enrollment and the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of this state: the CU student body is more white and more affluent than the population of students graduating from public high schools in Colorado.³ Moreover, as the social safety net gets weaker, students understandably shift towards more marketable and credential driven education programs.⁴

In this climate and context, **what can CU Boulder do to reassert the meaning of the public and fulfill its role as a flagship public university?**

Here I propose three specific, mutually reinforcing priorities, which contribute to CU Boulder's mission of cultivating leaders and impacting humanity, and in turn strengthen our ties with the residents of Colorado.

Catalyze and sustain initiatives that use research to advance the public good in partnership with community groups, civil society, and public agencies.

Just as various campus units develop partnerships with private companies to advance research and development, so too should we actively seed and sustain public partnerships that are non-partisan and motivated by the desire to respond to complex public challenges. Although there are some university units and research centers doing this work, they only have the resources to support a small fraction of the research enterprise at the university. It is not just about funding: we can do more to support faculty participation through changes to our incentive system (i.e., tenure and promotion) and structured opportunities for training and interdisciplinary communities of practice.

Consider a project that draws on the expertise of geographers, environmental scientists, and social theorists to develop a community-wide response to the problem of dust-on-snow in southwestern Colorado. Or imagine a project in Aurora to leverage the many languages spoken in its high schools that brings together linguists, education researchers, and computer scientists to develop language as a resource that is a model

¹ Leonhardt, D. (2017), *The assault on colleges – and the American Dream*.

² https://www.colorado.edu/bfp/sites/default/files/attached-files/howcuisfunded_0.pdf

³ <https://www.colorado.edu/oda/institutional-research/student-data/diversity>

⁴ Deresiewicz, W. (2015). *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (Reprint edition). New York, NY: Free Press. See also,

for school districts around the country. These are just two examples meant to show what such reciprocal partnerships could look like. Aside from the local impact, such partnerships contribute to CU's reputation in partner communities and enable CU researchers to contribute to knowledge in their respective fields.

Such an initiative could also revolutionize doctoral training for students who want to apply their academic training to address public challenges. Although some students learn these practices through trial and error, the university can do more to provide structured training and apprenticeship in the practices of engaged scholarship, including communication, relationships, and understandings of equity and inclusion.

Prioritize the recruitment and retention of faculty, staff, and students who reflect the diverse racial and ethnic composition of the state of Colorado.

In 2016 CU undergraduate students identifying as Latino/a were 11.6% of the campus despite representing roughly 33.5 % of public school students and Black and African American students were 1.5% despite representing roughly 4.5% of public school students.⁵ This persistent disparity is wrong and undermines our effort to be the flagship university for the state. We are more likely to become a more racially inclusive campus when there is a critical mass of students, staff, and faculty of color on campus. Creating a campus that reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of this state, though a modest aim, would be a measurable improvement.

This goal works in tandem with university community partnerships: High quality, equity-oriented community engagement programs contribute to academic persistence and retention for students from under-represented groups (Holland, 2014). Lasting and reciprocal partnerships with organizations in historically marginalized communities build trust and new opportunities for learning and applied scholarship.

Create opportunities for undergraduate student learning in the context of community partnerships.

Students seek opportunities to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways by working alongside faculty members to solve unscripted problems; they're drawn to learning that goes beyond reproducing information on tests or writing papers just for their instructor. Community-based learning opportunities, which integrate academic inquiry with socially relevant problem-solving, prepare students for the unpredictable and open-ended dilemmas of civic practice. Because of its strong core of innovative programs, engaged researchers, and public-minded students, the University of Colorado Boulder is positioned to be a national model in this regard.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (2015) has recommended a framework called "Signature Work," in which students use their cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem they define. Flagship 2030 made experiential learning a central goal and spoke in broad terms about providing real-world experiential learning opportunities and service to Colorado, the nation, and the world. These are laudable goals and we have begun to see pockets where they are realized, but

⁵ (See <https://www.colorado.edu/oda/institutional-research/student-data/diversity> for CU Boulder information and <https://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/20171212edfacts> for state information).

more could be done to support greater scale and quality implementation of high impact practices. One way to do all of this is to shift the delivery mechanism for learning from semester-long in-person courses to supervised internships, service learning placements, apprenticeships, and team capstone projects. Such a shift calls for structural changes to teaching contracts, how credit hours are accumulated, and the role of the instructor. It also calls for training and support. But it can be done!

These different action steps all contribute to a stronger public role for the university in the civic life of Colorado. Existing units, including, but not limited to, the Office of Outreach and Engagement, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Community Engagement (ODECE), and CU Engage (the last of which I serve as faculty director) are doing important work to cultivate public engagement and build community partnerships. Such work, however, will accomplish more profound impact when supported by infrastructure for partnerships (space, personnel, training), staff, faculty, and students who represent the diverse communities of Colorado, and structural incentives for staff, faculty, and student engagement.