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Thought Leader

Thought leader: CU President Bruce Benson reflects on a decade of tough decisions

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Bruce Benson, who recently passed the 10-year mark as president of the University of Colorado, is a businessman — an oilman, specifically — to his core.

He was dinged by critics when he took the helm of the state's flagship university for having only a bachelor's degree in geology from CU.

But the self-made millionaire, who founded the Benson Mineral Group in 1965 — a year after graduation, has brought a businessman's eye to the job.

His mantras?

Hire from within, to signal that there's opportunity to move up.

Don't put a square peg in a round hole, but match people to positions where they'll excel.

And, get the job done.

"Most presidents don't want to take things on, but you have to make decisions," Benson, who turns 80 on July 4, said during an interview in his downtown office, as



KATHLEEN LAVINE, DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

"You have to teach kids how to think, and not what to think," said University of Colorado president Bruce Benson.

hawks soared above the state Capitol in the distance.

“If you’re drilling a well you have to decide. You can take 30 minutes to think, not a week or a month. Risks are something we do, and you better be right a lot of the time, but as an oil man you’re taking a risk every time you put a bit in the ground,” he said.

As for mistakes, you should learn from those too, he said.

“If it didn’t work, analyze it and figure out why it didn’t work.”

His track record at the university, which covers four campuses in Boulder, Denver, Colorado Springs and the Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, is impressive.

CU’s budget for fiscal 2018 has nearly doubled to \$4.1 billion, from \$2.2 billion a decade ago.

Research funding nearly doubled to \$1.03 billion, up from \$660 million.

CU’s endowment doubled to \$1.2 billion, up from \$640 million.

Internally generated financial aid more than doubled to \$184 million, up from \$88 million.

Enrollment at the university rose 21 percent to 65,375.

Minority enrollment is up and the percentage of international students has more than doubled to 10 percent.

CU also figures it’s saved \$112 million in the last three years alone through efficiencies or cutting costs.

State funding, however, remains below the \$227 million notch seen in fiscal 2008, although it’s recovered from the low of \$144 million seen in fiscal 2012.

For fiscal 2018 CU will get \$194 million, and has requested \$212 million for next year.

Those are impressive numbers, but Benson is most proud of his work on issues that are harder to quantify: diversifying the viewpoints on campus and building collaboration.

CU recently expanded the number of engineering degrees it offers to Western Slope students at Colorado Mesa University, with CU faculty living and teaching at the Grand Junction university.

The university also is planning to physically connect the Boulder business school and engineering school.

“They each need more training in each other’s areas. You have to collaborate,” Benson said.

Bringing more diversity to CU also is a big driver for Benson.

“You have to teach kids how to think, and not what to think,” he said.

“It’s about getting it all out there, all the points of view. You don’t have to agree with it but you should hear it.”

He’s proud of the Center for Western Civilization, Thought and Policy, which aims to air liberal and conservative views on CU’s traditionally left-leaning Boulder campus.

The center has had five visiting scholars, “major scholars, deep policy thinking people,” Benson says, who have taught 18 courses to 374 students and hosted events that drew 2,500 people in the last few years.

Benson points to the campus reaction in January 2017 to an on-campus speech by right-wing commentator Milo Yiannopoulos — whom Benson calls a “provocateur.”

A month after Yiannopoulos spoke in Boulder, riots broke out at the University of California Berkeley, causing \$100,000 in damage at the school and leading the school to cancel his speech.

But in Boulder, “we had three tickets given to three people we’d never heard of, plus two others,” Benson said.

“I want free speech, to teach people to think,” he said.

Why?

Benson looks askance at the question.

“It’s obvious, or it should be,” he says.

“You have to learn to think. If you always hear one point of view then you’ll never learn. If you’re going to be in a leadership position you have to be able to sit down

and talk. The people have to realize and understand that this is the real world.”

Bruce Benson

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