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EDITOR'S PICK

Q&A with Mark Kennedy | Leading CU toward the 'fourth industrial revolution'

Dan Njegomir, Colorado Politics Sep 23, 2019 Updated 2 hrs ago



The University of Colorado's new president, Mark Kennedy. (Photo courtesy University of Colorado)

Higher ed just wouldn't be higher ed without a good dust-up over a new university president. So, maybe it was inevitable that the anticipated retirement this year of longtime University of Colorado President Bruce Benson, and the hiring of his successor, Mark Kennedy, on a party-line vote by CU regents would be attended by heated debate. Lots of it.

Perhaps all the more so considering Kennedy served at one point, years back, as a Republican member of Congress from his home state of Minnesota. And to think he now was getting the keys to CU's corner office in Denver, in a congressional district that hadn't sent a Republican to Washington since Watergate. It was enough to make some blue voters see red.

Momentarily drowned out in the uproar, of course, was Kennedy's more recent history of extensive immersion in academia, including at his immediate previous post as president of the University of North Dakota. And that's not to mention his tenure before that as a corporate exec.

With the dust now settled and a new academic year underway, we reached out to Kennedy for this week's Q&A. We asked him at turns to tap into his business, political and academic expertise to glean insights as to how he will pilot Colorado's signature university system. He graciously indulged us at length; it's an enlightening read.

Colorado Politics: While there are big differences between the University of North Dakota and the University of Colorado, most state universities share plenty of the same priorities and challenges. During your tenure at the helm of UND, it increased graduation rates by 10% and was listed among the 25 most innovative universities by U.S. News & World Report.

How might some of the strides made under your leadership in North Dakota, as well as some of the tough decisions you had to make, guide your work in Colorado in one way or another? More generally, what are your top priorities since assuming your new post July 1?

Mark Kennedy: My first priority since arriving at the University of Colorado has been to get to know this great university system, the wonderful state it represents and the faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, legislators and community leaders who contribute to its success. My travels have brought me frequently to our campuses in Boulder, Denver, Colorado Springs and Aurora, but also to Pueblo, Fort Morgan, Grand Junction and Durango, with more communities to come. In doing so, [wife] Debbie and I have found Coloradans welcoming and dedicated to working together for a better tomorrow.

A key early focus has been laying the groundwork for a systemwide strategic plan to better position CU to propel Colorado and the nation forward into the fourth industrial revolution. This new age is powered by intelligence. Sensors in our pocket, on our wrist, in our thermostat and car capture ever more data transported at faster speeds through 5G telecommunication to ever more powerful computers in the cloud, fueling machine learning that will drive our cars, process our loans, file our taxes, analyze our x-rays.

McKinsey predicts that automation could replace 44% of U.S. jobs by 2030. They predict jobs requiring a four-year college degree will grow, but those requiring lower skill levels will not. With nationwide college enrollments declining for nearly a decade, the only way to produce enough bachelor's graduates is to not only meet the needs of high school graduates (an increasing share of whom are less-represented minorities and from lower-income families), but also mid-career adults — those with some college but not a degree, those with a degree seeking a new skill to elevate their role or change course, and those wanting to stay current in their careers.

Today's digital natives will increasingly shun being forced to learn at the same place at the same time at the same pace in the same way as their classmates, increasingly looking for courses that supplement classroom discussion with digital adaptive learning platforms that know what each student knows, what they don't know, what learning style best suits them and what incentives encourage them to learn more.

CU must educate students who have more need for financial aid and advising, who are increasingly seeking technical degrees that cost more to deliver, while investing in adaptive learning programs, adding online delivery and new programs tailored to mid-career students. All this will add costs or require up-front investments at a time when on-campus enrollments are declining, state funding levels remain uncertain and pressures on tuition are rising.

CU will only thrive by fully harnessing technology and being among the nation's most innovative universities. We must also be mindful that skills typically associated with the liberal arts — problem solving, working in teams and critical thinking — will also be valuable in the fourth industrial revolution.

Mark Kennedy

- President, University of Colorado system, since July 1.
- President, University of North Dakota, 2016-2019.
- Director and professor, Graduate School of Political Management, George Washington University in Washington, D.C., 2012-2016.

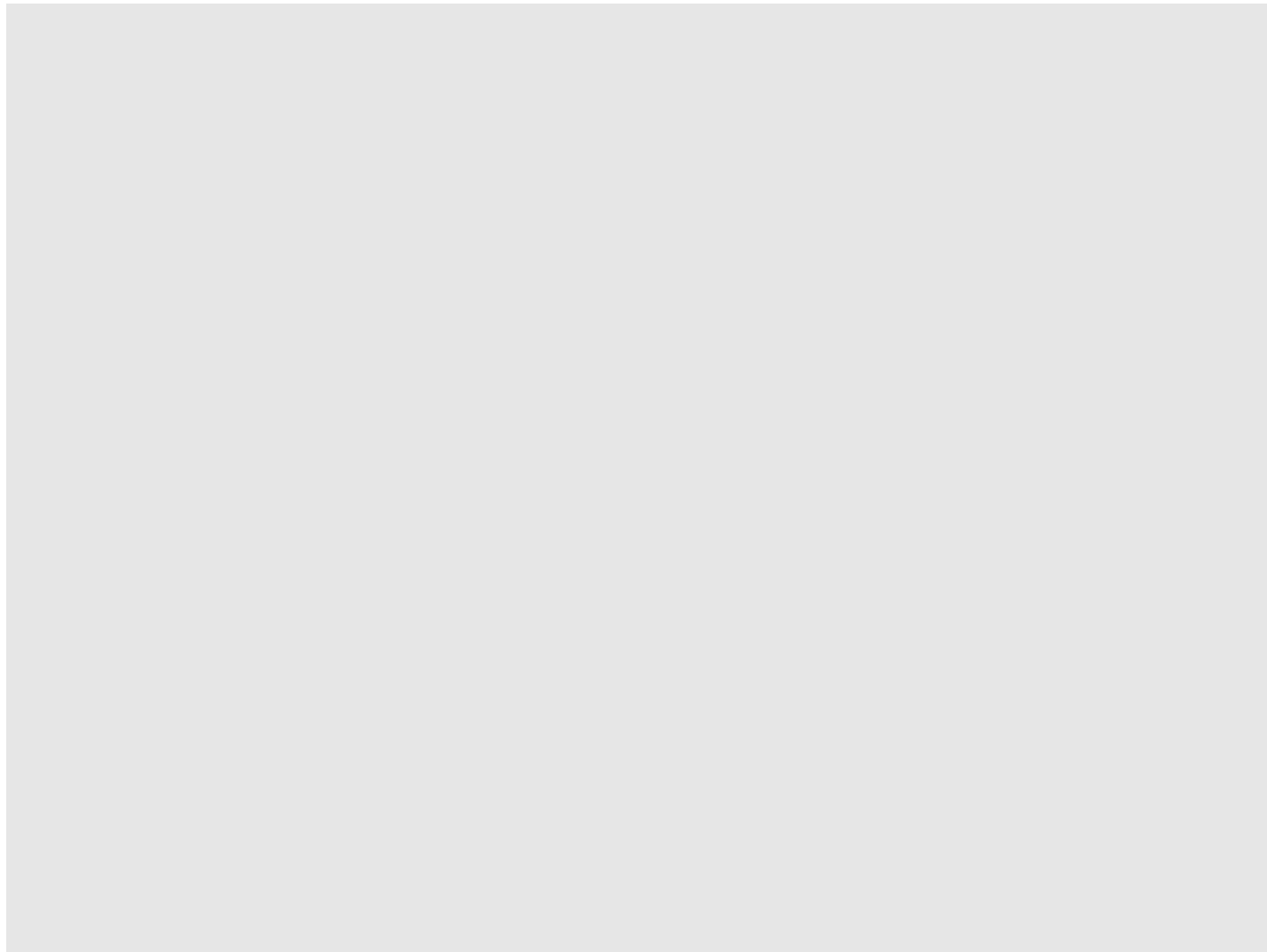
- Executive in residence, Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School, Baltimore, Maryland; 2011-2013.
- Elected to U.S. House of Representatives from Minnesota's 2nd District and later its 6th District, 2001-2007.
- Earlier in his career served as senior vice president and treasurer for Macy's (then Federated Department Stores), 1987-1992; director of corporate finance for the Pillsbury Company, 1983-1987.
- Holds a bachelor's degree from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and an MBA from the University of Michigan.

CP: In recruiting new leadership, universities long have faced the scholar-vs.-administrator tradeoff. That dynamic inevitably drove some of the debate over your hiring at CU. But does it have to be an either-or? In addition to having served in elected office, you have both an extensive background in corporate management and experience on the academic side of higher ed — having structured and taught grad-school curriculum at some distinguished institutions before running UND. Is one side of that coin preferable to the other? Is there a balance? Does university administration ideally require experience in both?

Kennedy: While I believe it is essential that a campus provost has a Ph.D. and comes through the academic ranks, given the diverse challenges facing a campus leader, much more so a system CEO, a significant share of universities and systems have not made this a prerequisite for presidential leadership. Even so, successful academic leaders must have a passion for student success and an understanding and appreciation for the academic mission of teaching, discovery and service with a commitment to free expression, academic freedom, tenure and shared governance.

Having led research at Penn, taught at Johns Hopkins, lectured at leading universities like Cambridge, NYU and Notre Dame, led the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University, published peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and a book from Columbia University Press, and led the University of North Dakota, I have a deep appreciation for academia.

As president of a university, I have found the skills gained from all three of my careers — business, public service, academia — to be highly valuable. In the end, given the escalating pressures facing higher education, the most important skill required of any academic leader is the ability to help guide an enterprise that has been historically resistant to change to embrace the change necessary to remain relevant in a fast-changing world.



Mark Kennedy, then the University of Colorado presidential finalist, in the University Hall at UC Colorado Springs on April 23. (Kelsey Brunner, The Gazette)

CP: In your experience, is there enough diversity of thought — and tolerance for dissent of every stripe — among social science and humanities faculties in higher ed across the country? How about among students? What’s your take on CU in that regard?

Kennedy: A lack of tolerance for differing views is pervasive in our nation. A recent poll by Pew Research reported that that eight in 10 Americans from either party believe leaders in the other party should compromise more, but only four in 10 believe leaders from their own party should compromise more. Another Pew poll showed that one third of those in each party see the other party as a “threat to the nation’s well-being.” These intolerant public views underlie the partisan gridlock that disables the ability of our political leaders to address the most serious challenges facing our nation.

There has never been a greater need for higher education to be effective in expanding students' abilities to understand different viewpoints and to effectively engage those with whom they disagree in a thoughtful and respectful manner. We do a great service if the result of a college education is that students graduate believing that both sides equally have an obligation to understand each other's position and find a middle ground when possible. Differing views do not threaten our nation's well-being, but intolerance does.

Critical thinking is nurtured by asking difficult, piercing questions and then leading students in a discussion that considers the strengths and shortcomings of various answers. This is best accomplished when both sides of legitimate disputes are presented with equal validity – Hayek and Keynes on economics, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson on foreign policy. Admittedly, this ideal is not always the reality, and nobody should read me as supporting a debate about whether the Earth is flat. Professors should encourage students to question the viewpoints they brought to college. This is the way you teach students how to think.

Done right, teaching in the social sciences and the humanities expands students' curiosity and critical thinking. Critical thinking is not cultivated in students by exposing students to those who believe that "I am a critical thinker, therefore if I can get you to think like me, you will be a critical thinker." Those who teach that way do students a disservice.

I have witnessed conservative students navigate liberal campus environments and not only maintaining, but solidifying their core beliefs, even as mere prejudices were corrected. Indeed, I have found the most thoughtful and articulate conservatives graduate from liberal schools where their ideals were tested in the crucible of continual debate.

As with every facet of life, it is the most egregious cases of teaching with a biased view that draw media attention. This focus distorts the dedicated efforts of the many professors who seek to swim upstream in a culture increasingly unwilling to have its own views questioned.

While recognizing the need to constantly promote respect for diverse views, I consider CU to be a leader among public research universities in ensuring that viewpoints are judged on their objective merits. The CU regents have added political affiliation and philosophy to the categories of identity for which the university provides protection against discrimination. Our polling measures the campus climate for students from diverse backgrounds.

CU's campuses, including Boulder, have a track record of successfully hosting speakers who were not welcomed on other campuses. Boulder's Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization and the Hernando de Soto initiative add to intellectual diversity.

CP: Every state university president has to be at least one-part lobbyist in navigating the budget process at the legislature. Maybe not so much at CU, however, given its diverse funding portfolio. It derives the lion's share of its revenue elsewhere, notably from tuition. Direct state appropriations comprise under 10% of CU Boulder's budget. Does that go-it-alone approach risk estranging the university system from the state's overall educational priorities? Is CU too reliant on tuition as a result, and could that price out too many students?

Kennedy: The nation is putting its future at risk by not more robustly supporting higher education. As nations like China graduate more bachelor's degree recipients and will soon be investing more in research, the innovative edge upon which America's prosperity and security relies is threatened.

Ranked 48th in its per-student support for higher education, Colorado arguably leads the nation in risky approaches toward cultivating talent. It seems unreasonable for Colorado to depend indefinitely on out-of-state students to subsidize in-state students and sustain excellence at Colorado universities, as well as to continue to depend on college graduates from other states to meet Colorado's workforce needs. The current approach is not in the best interests of the state.

The nearly decade-long nationwide trend of reduced on-campus college enrollment is motivating other states to work harder at keeping students and graduates at home, as well as recruiting Colorado students to their institutions. Rising real estate costs make it less attractive to move to Colorado. In today's knowledge economy, Colorado could find itself hampered tomorrow by insufficiently investing today in developing the talent within the state essential to advancing the state.

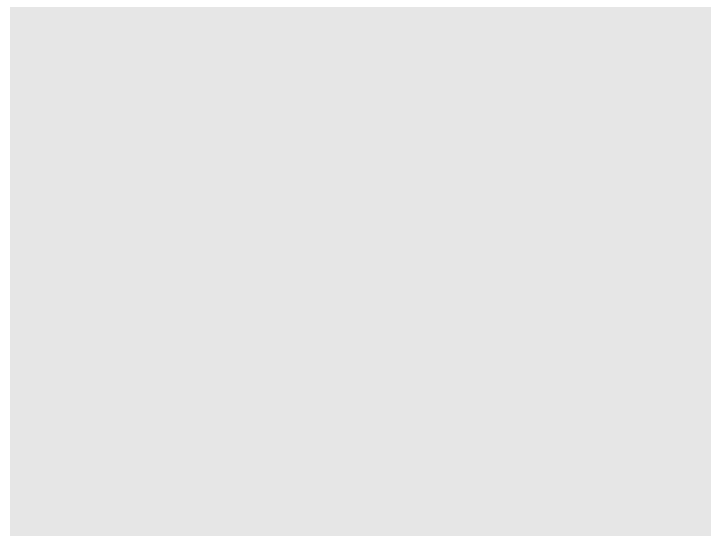
As a result of low state funding, all Colorado state universities are highly tuition dependent. Colorado universities have constrained in-state tuition only by being among the most efficient in the nation, with CU Boulder's education and general fund expenses being lower than most other research universities, including Purdue. Even so, there can be little doubt that reduced state funding has increased the cost of education for many students.

Too many perceive higher education as only a private benefit. Over their lifetimes, bachelor's degree holders on average receive approximately \$75,000 less in government spending than high school graduates and pay \$275,000 more in taxes, a \$350,000 positive impact on government resources.

The only genuine way to keep tax rates down long term is by prioritizing support for more bachelor's degrees.

CP: What kinds of things did you learn in Congress that eventually helped prepare you for the world of higher ed?

Kennedy: My career of serving two different congressional districts, one rural and the other largely suburban, helped me understand the varying concerns of citizens across a state and the importance of staying attuned to their needs. That is why I am committed to active and sustained outreach across Colorado to keep the talent and discovery CU delivers aligned with not only what the state and its citizens need to succeed in a fast-changing economy, but also what they will need in 10-15 years.



University of Colorado President Mark Kennedy, left, shakes the hand of UCCS Chancellor Venkat Reddy while visiting the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs during his first day on the job July 1. (Courtesy of UCCS)

My public service experience taught me the importance of collaboration and partnerships. In addition to our four campuses, CU delivers engineering degrees in collaboration with Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction and Western Colorado University in Gunnison. Our medical school is exploring adding a cohort in Fort Collins in conjunction with Colorado State. Our campuses have two-plus-two programs with the state's community colleges that define pathways to complete in four years. I will encourage our campuses to explore other mutually beneficial collaborations.

Spending three terms in Congress helps me to understand the legislative process. I look forward to working with my fellow university presidents and other partners to make the case for investing in the future our state and its citizens by supporting higher education.


CP: Tell us a little about your upbringing in Minnesota and the early influences that set you on your trajectory later in life.

Kennedy: I am one of seven children of a rural insurance agent and homemaker. My parents instilled in us that we are on this earth to serve others, "any job worth doing is worth doing well," and we are more likely to do that job well together than at odds. Both modeled these beliefs by helping to

educate others. My father served on the school board for 27 years. My mother founded and led the largest 4-H club in the county.

Even though my dad made only \$25,000 annually, my mother scraped up \$500 a year to contribute to four years of education for all seven of us to be the first generation in our family to graduate from college. I started working at age 14, picking strawberries for 25 cents a quart, washed dishes at a bakery and pumped gas at a bait shop to be the first boy in my family to graduate from college, which transformed my life.

The other major event in Minnesota that changed the trajectory of my life was marrying Debbie. We met as state 4-H ambassadors at age 18, but didn't start dating until we gathered for an ambassador reunion five years later. No matter where I have traveled, I have spoken with her ever day in the 40 years since. Debbie is a true life partner. She was active in my work as a congressman and continues to be so at CU. With a master's in fine arts in costume design from George Washington University, Debbie has found a way to benefit artistic programs wherever she finds herself. Our four children and soon to be six grandchildren remain the center of our focus.

 **CP:** Would you ever want to return to the classroom, perhaps full-time?

Kennedy: I love to teach and hope my calendar will allow me to do a bit of teaching as president of CU.

This could include lectures to business or law school students on the topic of my book from Columbia University Press, "Shapeholders — Business Success in the Age of Activism."

If I taught a course, it would likely be "What Does Peace Through Strength Mean Today?" The last time I taught it, my students reviewed the most recent risk assessments of the military, intelligence community, Council on Foreign Relations and the World Economic Forum. They picked the global risk they were most worried about and gained insights on those risks through dedicated time with the guest speakers I brought to campus. Students wrote opinion pieces on what strengths we needed to invest in to detect, defuse, deter, and defeat their chosen threat. The local paper published the top three submissions. Students reported the class really redirected their thinking to the world's biggest challenges.

If after long service as president of CU, I chose to teach full time, it would likely be focused on Great Power geopolitics. I have long mused about writing a second book, this one with the placeholder title, "Where's Winston?" William Manchester's three volume biography of Churchill — The Last Lion

— begins by describing the excessive power the British Empire held as Winston was born. Churchill's life story reflects helping the United Kingdom navigate the changing geo-political landscape until at the end of Churchill's life, the UK handed the baton of leadership to the United States. As America navigates its place as it transitions from being a unipolar power to a world where its relationship with China and the need to collaborate more closely with other countries becomes more paramount, we need another Winston to guide the way.

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