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Building a Community of CU Leaders: Inside the Excellence in Leadership Program [1]

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The University of Colorado's Excellence in Leadership Program [3] (ELP) kicked off its 24th year with a two-day retreat on Aug. 7-8 at CU Denver's Lawrence Street Center.

Each year, the program provides a select cohort of university leaders with an immersive understanding of CU's operations at the system and campus levels, delivers leadership insights from CU experts, and builds community among CU leaders.

On a quiet Thursday afternoon, leaders from across the University of Colorado system came together—not in a boardroom but seated in small groups around yellow cloth circles laid out on the floor. At one circle sat a collection of personal items: figurines, books, photos and even a stuffed turtle. Each object symbolized a participant's personal approach to leadership. This exercise sparked a conversation that will echo throughout their nine-month journey: *What makes a CU leader?*

For some, leadership meant being open to criticism. For others, it was about challenging their teams, empowering colleagues or fostering trust and ambition. There was no single answer—only a shared commitment to growth, collaboration and impact.



Nicole Rodriguez shares a drawing created by her daughter as part of an Excellence in Leadership Program activity where participants were asked to discuss an object that represents their leadership style.

Gaining a System-Wide Perspective

ELP is designed to elevate leadership across CU's four campuses and system administration. Through monthly workshops, campus visits and leadership panels—including conversations with the university president and chancellors—participants gain a deeper understanding of CU's community, mission and culture.

The program also includes a visit to the State Capitol, connecting legislative advocacy with university objectives.

"This is a fabulous opportunity to learn from others, to understand the greater depth of the system in each of the campuses and see what makes those campuses special," said Meg Hohnholt, an ELP participant and director of Design & Construction and campus architect at CU Denver.

Program director Ashley Eschler emphasized the importance of breaking out of campus silos. "I think a lot of us tend to work in our little bubbles. To get leaders out to see what other campuses are doing—and how they are doing it—changes how we think about and do our work every day," she said.

Building a Community of Leaders

The program fosters a rich learning environment by bringing together staff and faculty from diverse roles and backgrounds. Participants are typically high-performing individuals at the director level or above for staff and associate professor or higher for faculty.

Each campus manages its own nomination process, with selections usually finalized between February and May.

Tawnya Boulier, director for Strategic People Operations at CU Denver, shared her dual perspective as a former participant and current liaison, "Everybody's job is to support students' success."

That bigger picture includes understanding CU's impact on Colorado and beyond. The program encourages leaders to think strategically, communicate effectively and collaborate across departments and campuses.

Celebrating Leadership

Each year, the ELP culminates in the Excellence in Leadership Luncheon, where over 150 alumni and executive leaders gather to celebrate the cohort’s achievements. One alum is honored with the Excellence in Leadership Award for their outstanding contributions to the CU community.

ELP continues to shape the future of leadership at CU. The 2025-26 cohort will spend the academic year developing leadership skills and enhancing CU’s community of leaders.

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