

Dean Cathy Bradley wins 2025 Excellence in Leadership Award ^[1]

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For Cathy Bradley, collaboration embodied an integral part of her first major leadership position. As a department chair tasked with setting up a new department at Virginia Commonwealth University, she quickly realized she needed to build connections with other university departments to ensure her incoming faculty would have collaborators and mentors, and form productive teams.

This represented a major shift for someone with extensive experience as a researcher, working independently to access grants and develop her own research teams.

“We’re trained to go at it alone,” Bradley said. “And it wasn’t until my first leadership position as a department chair where it was all about understanding how we can work effectively together, that I realized the power of collaboration.”

Now, collaboration and interdisciplinary understanding are foundational parts of her leadership as the dean of the Colorado School of Public Health. Bradley was first recruited to the Cancer Center at Anschutz Medical Campus as associate director in 2015 and held numerous leadership positions before being named dean in 2023.

Bradley is the 2025 winner of the Excellence in Leadership Award, which recognizes an Excellence in Leadership Program (ELP) alumnus who has shown exemplary leadership at the university in one or more areas: exceptional leadership, impactful contributions and community engagement.

Through monthly sessions, ELP provides university leaders with an immersive understanding of CU's operations at the system and campus levels.

Bradley will be recognized at a luncheon on April 4 at the Benson Hotel.



Cathy Bradley, dean of the Colorado School of Public Health at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, demonstrates leadership through connection.

Breaking down silos opens new opportunities

While shifting from self-directed work to a more cooperative philosophy may have presented a learning curve, it's now a consistent quality echoed by nearly a dozen people who supported Bradley's nomination for the Excellence in Leadership Award.

Time and again, nominators cited her ability to break down silos as one of her greatest strengths.

Lead nominator Christine Gillen, the associate dean for Administration and Finance, highlighted an example of how this played out, specifically from a financial standpoint.

"One of the limitations of the old budget model was that it created internal competition

between departments for tuition dollars and student enrollment,” Gillen said. “And Cathy came right in, eyes wide open, and said, ‘We have to start thinking smarter and internal competition is not going to get us to where we need to go.’”

Bradley brings broad experience to this area, holding a Pd.D. in health policy and administration with a minor in economics. She’s built expertise in the interconnection of health and economics through decades of research into the myriad ways health care intertwines — and often conflicts — with socioeconomic factors, such as the labor market and complexities of accessing health insurance.

“Financial impact of illness is such a big deal to people, and the way we organize health insurance in our country, it leaves them with a pretty stark choice,” Bradley explained. “I’m sure people going through chemotherapy would love to take time off, but they’re not going to risk losing their jobs and health insurance. A hallmark of my work was getting started addressing, documenting, and finding alternatives to the stark choices people face.”

Creating opportunities

During her decade at CU, she’s made an impact with her leadership, research, and teaching. Madiha Abdel-Maksoud, associate dean for Academic and Student Affairs, was teaching a cancer epidemiology course when she invited Bradley to give a talk on the economics of cancer.

“I had heard about her as an incredible researcher, but didn’t know much about her as an educator, and I was blown away,” Abdel-Maksoud said. “No exaggeration, she’s an incredible teacher. A very clear speaker, very articulate and gave a very important talk.”

Bradley’s attention to the quality of education at CU Anschutz is reflected in her leadership as much as her teaching. She’s working to create more opportunities for practical, hands-on student experiences from the classroom to the community.

“She’s pushing to create opportunities for a lot of students so they can experience things that could be building blocks for the path they choose,” said May Chu, the interim director of the Center for Global Health.

Bradley continued her focus on collaborative education with initiatives that bring together multiple disciplines. Abdel-Maksoud noted Bradley’s call for proposals focused on innovative educational programs, which resulted in bundled courses that combine two or more intersecting disciplines.

“For example, we have a climate and human health degree, and we have a population mental health degree, and some of the courses focus on the mental health impact of climate change,” Abdel-Maksoud said.

Leadership is all about people and connection

Bradley's career reflects a pattern of continual growth and learning. When she participated in ELP's 2019 – 2020 cohort, she came away with a greater sense of the variety and complexity of functions and resources across the whole university system.

"I think that was enormously helpful, to get that bigger introduction because as you progress in leadership, you have to depend more and more on things that aren't directly in your organization," Bradley said. "You can't run your organization without that cohesion with other parts of the university."

That insight informed ambitious projects at the Colorado School of Public Health. Shortly after she became dean, the school underwent its seven-year accreditation review and passed with no commentary from the reviewing team. Bradley is currently leading the School of Public Health's development of a new strategic plan.

Bradley offers two foundational pieces of advice for prospective leaders — whether a person knows they want to pursue leadership, or they're conflicted about taking on the responsibility.

"First, give it a try. You don't know until you try, until you see if you like being in that role," she said. "We often have that voice in the back of our head saying we can't do it, and we just have to put that aside and say, 'I want to try.'"

Of course, that's only the first step. Once a person is in a leadership position, Bradley advises them to gather information and experience from as many facets of an issue as possible.

"I would say the second bit of advice is to listen to other people. Really listen and get a lot of feedback, because people have good ideas and they want to contribute," she said. "Go ahead and get it all and integrate that into other things you know."

Bradley's focus on listening is impactful: Nominators frequently spoke of Bradley's willingness to listen and ability to synthesize multiple points of view into responsive and multi-dimensional actions.

"We feel quite comfortable with the way she listens and allows you to speak. And allows you to be open. Not all leaders are that way," Chu said.

For Bradley, the Excellence in Leadership Award recognition is as much about the community she's fostered at CU as it is about her leadership.

"I was overjoyed, I just felt so honored. I'm really grateful for the people who took the time to acknowledge me in this role. It means the world to me," she said. "I think this is a great environment to thrive in. And part of being a leader is matching the personality with the institution and the environment, and this has been an environment where I could really grow."

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