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# Excellence in Leadership Luncheon recognizes two extraordinary leaders [1]

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The 2026 Excellence in Leadership Completion and Award Ceremony examined leadership and teamwork, as Excellence in Leadership Program (ELP) [3] alumni and current program participants gathered at the Benson Hotel on the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus April 10.

Sponsored by TIAA and hosted by CU System Administration, the event fostered continued collaboration, networking and leadership development, celebrated the completion of this year's ELP program and recognized impactful CU leaders.

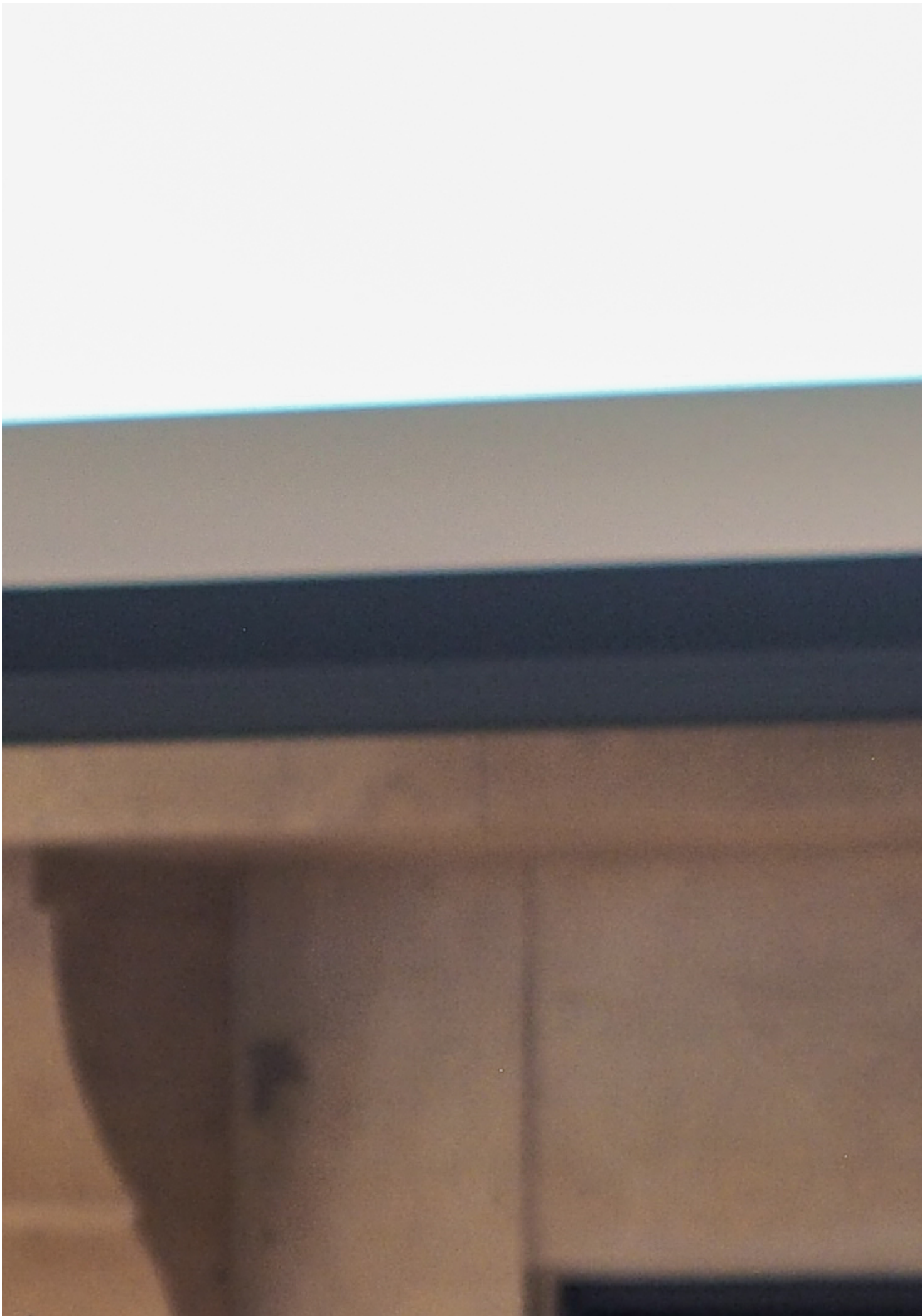
ELP provides opportunities for CU faculty and staff across all campuses with a greater understanding of all aspects of CU's organizational function, cultivating community among university leaders and strengthening leadership capabilities.

Since 2000, approximately 620 fellows have completed the program.

## Leadership that defies gravity

"So, I was not anticipating that the space shuttle would be coming back to Earth," Karen Marrongelle explained, prefacing her keynote address. "I'm not going to be talking about any astronauts, but I hope it really is within this larger context of why science is so exciting that I'm thrilled that things lined up in that way for us today."

Marrongelle is provost and executive vice chancellor for Academic Affairs at CU Denver, as well as a professor of mathematics. Her talk, "Defying Gravity: How Visionary Leaders in Science Turn Resistance into Breakthroughs," highlighted examples of scientific leadership that withstood the resistance of established thought and rigid social mores.



*Provost Karen Marrongelle gives the keynote address at the 2026 Excellence in Leadership Luncheon and Lecture on April 10, 2026.*

Through the stories of four scientists who made world-changing discoveries in the face of overwhelming odds, Marrongelle highlighted three foundational skills among exceptional leaders:

1. Reframe the problem.
2. Hold truth without applause.
3. Expand who gets to lead.

“Breakthrough leadership rarely emerges in the absence of gravity,” Marrongelle said. “It appears when someone decides that what's at stake is worth pushing against the resistance.”

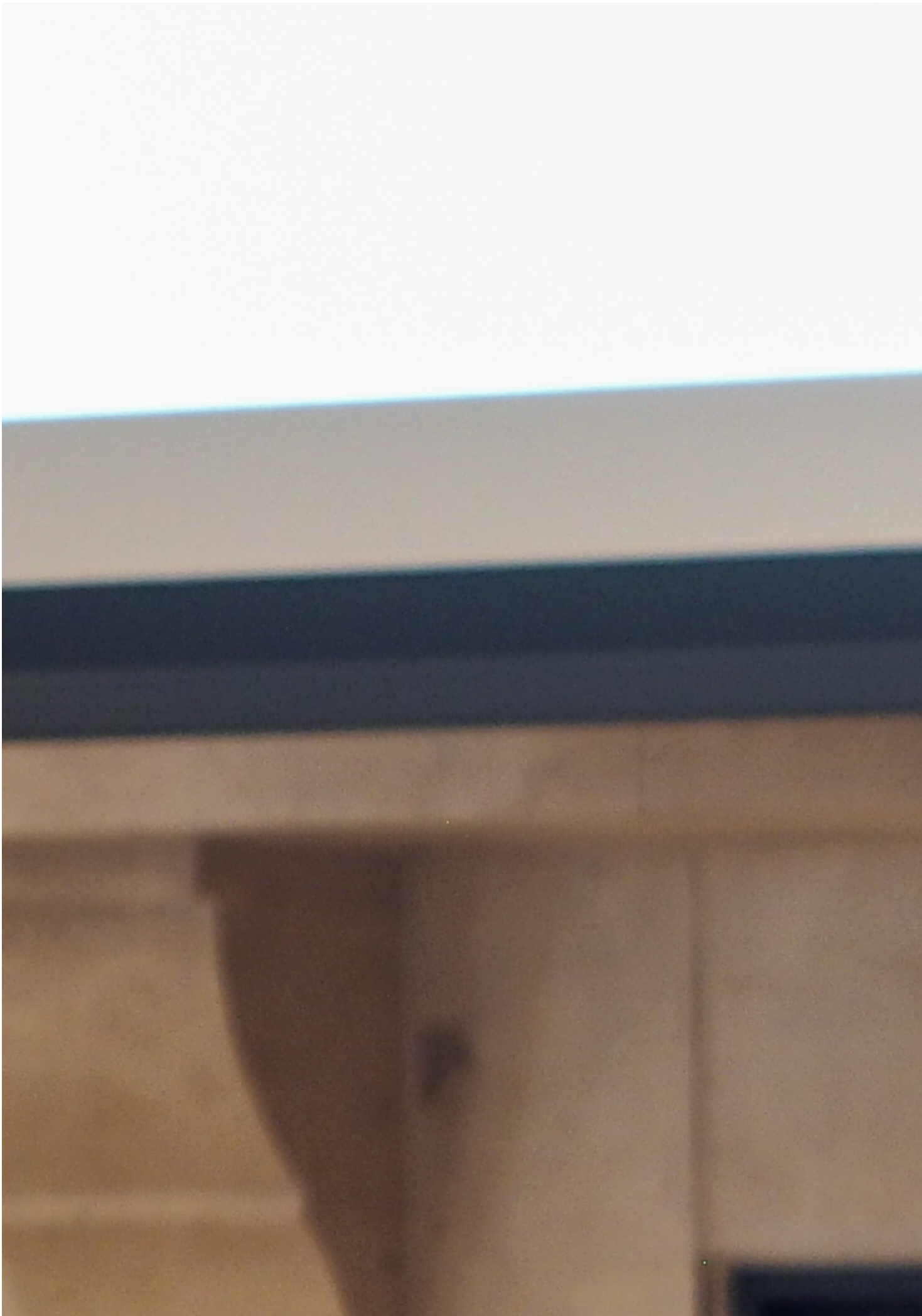
“So, the leadership question before us all is not, how do we avoid gravity? It's this: What are we willing to commit to when resistance is the cost of progress?”

## “It's amazing how much one can accomplish if you're really supported.”

Following the keynote, this year’s Excellence in Leadership awards winners were introduced. For the faculty award, Dr. Shanta Zimmer introduced Natalie Serkova [4], a professor of radiology at CU Anschutz and director of the Colorado Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute (CCTSI)’s Colorado Pilot (CO-Pilot) Grant Program.

Serkova spoke repeatedly about the value of support.

“It's amazing how much one can accomplish if you're really supported,” Serkova said, “and if you really have a mission in your head and among your colleagues.”



*Natalie Serkova receives the 2026 Excellence in Leadership Award for faculty on April 10, 2026.*

She went on to reflect on her 20 years at CU and thank her colleagues at the CU Cancer Center and CCTSI. But she had a special message for the 41 ELP fellows who received their completion certificates at the luncheon.

“Congratulations to all who have graduated today.” Serkova said “I'm just looking forward to seeing one of you here [receiving this award].”

“Right now, I'm just getting the award, which we all deserve. I was chosen, but everyone who was nominated deserves it as well.”

## “Everybody in this room is here for a reason.”

Following Serkova’s acceptance, UCCS Chancellor Jennifer Sobanet introduced Stephanie Hanenberg [4] for this year’s Excellence in Leadership Award for staff. Hanenberg currently serves as interim vice chancellor for enrollment management and student affairs at UCCS, but she joined the campus as director of Health Services over 20 years ago.

“She envisioned something different for our students,” Sobanet said. “Something integrated, human-centered, and truly transformational. And then she made it real.”

Hanenberg took the lectern in a swell of humor and joyful tears.

“I get emotional when I speak in public, if it's close to my heart,” Hanenberg said. “But I will not make the mistake I made when I gave my presidential speech for the American College Health Association in front of 2,000 people by saying, ‘I don't know what's wrong with me,’ because two doctors in the audience tried to diagnose me.”

Once the laughter quieted, Hanenberg continued, “I don't need to be diagnosed. I just am an emotional person, and if you've ever worked with me, you know it.”



*Stephanie Hanenberg receives the 2026 Excellence in Leadership Award for staff on April 10, 2026.*

From there, Hanenberg reflected on the many people she's worked with through the years, from the leaders she admired to those she collaborated with, supervised and mentored.

"What I learned is to be a good leader you empower your people that are amazing and then get out of the way," Hanenberg said. "You remove those barriers, you advocate and let them go and shine."

"But thank you all for the amazing work you provide across CU. We are blessed to have each and every person in this room," Hanenberg said. "Everybody in this room is here for a reason."

Excellence in Leadership Award nominees for 2026 included:

- Yonca Ertimur, Tandean Rustandy Esteemed Endowed professor and chair of accounting division at CU Boulder
- Genia Herndon, associate vice chancellor for Student Affairs at CU Denver
- Denée Janda, director of University Advising at CU Denver
- Lisa Keränen, University President's Teaching Scholar and professor at CU Denver
- Daryl J. Maeda, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor at CU Boulder
- Kristi Ryujin, associate dean for Graduate Programs at CU Boulder

Learn more about the Excellence in Leadership Program [3].

ELP [5]
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