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Excellence in Leadership Program marks 25 years with cohort retreat [1]

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The University of Colorado's Excellence in Leadership Program [3] (ELP) welcomed their 26th cohort during a two-day retreat Aug. 6–7 at CU Anschutz. The participants, drawn from experienced faculty and staff across CU's four campuses and System Administration, will embark on a year of learning sessions, campus visits and other opportunities to understand CU's operations at all levels and build community across campuses.

Sponsored by TIAA, the event provided an orientation for the fellows as they embarked on the program's year-long curriculum. For 25 years, ELP has created opportunities for CU faculty and staff across all campuses to gain a greater understanding of all aspects of CU's organizational function, cultivate community among university leaders [4] and strengthen leadership capabilities.

A group photo of the 26th ELP cohort
Members of the 2026–27 ELP cohort at the ELP retreat on Aug. 6 at CU Anschutz.

Since the ELP's inception in 2001, approximately 620 fellows have completed the program.

Getting around the social barriers

As a welcome exercise Thursday morning, participants were organized into a pair of wagon-wheel-style conversation circles. Attendees were divided in half at opposite ends of Krugman Hall with people at each end standing in two concentric circles — a small circle of people facing outward surrounded by a larger circle of people facing inward. Participants were encouraged to get to know the person standing across from them while retreat organizers periodically directed the inner or outer circle of participants to move one person to the right or left.

Members of the 2026–27 ELP cohort engage in a welcome activity during the ELP retreat on Aug. 6 at C
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A major emphasis of the retreat was creating opportunities for participants to connect with colleagues from different campuses, specialties and professional roles. The ELP program brings together faculty and staff from a broad array of academic and professional disciplines who each face their own concerns and challenges within the context of a large, complex organization.

Sriram Sankaranarayanan is a professor in computer science and chair of the Computer Science department at CU Boulder. "There are a lot of challenges we are facing, especially in

my field of computer science," Sankaranarayanan said. "We've been really challenged by artificial intelligence, and I am trying to learn how the university is addressing this issue and what we are planning to do about it as a campus."

Xochil Herrera is the assistant vice chancellor of accounting in the Controller's Office at UCCS, and her primary focus during the year-long ELP curriculum is to expand her firsthand knowledge of the campuses and strengthen her connection with people across the CU System.

"I've seen different cohorts from my campus, and I was just really excited to be a part of this program and learn more about the other campuses," Herrera said. "Of course, I have the opportunity to do some working groups across campus every now and again, but I am looking forward to spending some time on each of the campuses, getting to know some of their people, goals, strategies and overall what's happening."

Facing the future together

Sankaranarayanan has been with CU for 17 years, and Herrera for three. One participant has been at CU less than a year — Tony Gherardini joined CU in April [5] as vice president of human resources for CU and chief human resources officer for CU System Administration.

After the welcoming activities, Tony moderated a Q&A with CU President Todd Saliman. The session focused on leadership styles, facing challenges and plans for the future of the university.

CU President Todd Saliman (left) speaks with Vice President of Human Resources Tony Gherardini dur

Image not found or type unknown
CU President Todd Saliman (left) speaks with Vice President of Human Resources Tony Gherardini during the ELP retreat on Aug. 6 at CU Anschutz.

"What I'm worried about is folks undervaluing higher education," Saliman said. "I feel like higher education and what you all do and what we do on this campus — on all of our campuses — is part of what has made America great."

Sankaranarayanan has witnessed the same changes Saliman spoke to.

"I'm also interested in what CU is planning to do collectively to make sure that higher education earns — if you will — people's trust, and that they value and respect what we do for society, as opposed to viewing higher ed, professors and intellectuals with suspicion," Sankaranarayanan said.

Members of the 2026–27 ELP cohort listen to the discussion with CU President Todd Saliman during the

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Members of the 2026–27 ELP cohort listen to the discussion with CU President Todd Saliman during the ELP retreat on Aug. 6 at CU Anschutz.

Amid serious conversations about the concerns and challenges facing the university — and higher education as a whole — were messages of resilience about how to face those challenges.

When discussing the two biggest lessons from his career, Saliman said, “I think the two keys things have been to work hard and to be kind to others.”

“That doesn't mean you're not tough, it doesn't mean that you're a doormat, but it means that you try to act with kindness in your career, just like you should in your life.”

ELP [6], Professional Growth & Training [7], leadership [8], CU Anschutz [9]
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