Dear Alumni and Friends,

My wife Debbie and I were first-generation college students, meaning none of our parents had a college degree. The degrees we earned opened the world for us and fostered opportunities we still realize today.

That’s why we are so passionate about ensuring those same opportunities for CU students. And the university delivers on that promise. It surprises some people, but CU's campuses combined are educating some 13,000 first-generation students this year (about one in five CU students).

Likewise, we serve more than 13,500 students who receive Pell Grants, a federal aid program in which low-income students get up to $6,000 they don’t have to repay. Students get full or partial awards, depending on need.

We work hard to enroll these students, and just as hard to ensure they graduate. At our campuses in Boulder, Colorado Springs and Denver, graduation rates for first-generation and Pell students trail those of all students, but the percentage difference is in single digits. We’re working to narrow the gap. Those students graduate with a valuable degree from a quality institution.

Serving first-generation and Pell students is not only the right thing to do and in keeping with our mission of ensuring access, but it’s also our present and future. Virtually all of CU’s enrollment growth in the past decade has come from underrepresented minority students (many of whom are first-generation and/or Pell recipients). In fact, since 2010, their numbers have increased 100% (7,043 in 2010 to 14,085 last fall). They now account for 21% of all CU students. By contrast, the number of white students has increased 1% over the same period (41,055 to 41,463) reflecting the changing demographics of our state and nation.

The increased diversity on our campuses is a strength. It enhances the learning environment. It mirrors the society our students will graduate into. It brings different voices, viewpoints and perspectives, the hallmark of intellectual inquiry. We are exploring securing Hispanic-Serving Institution status for our Denver campus, the most diverse in our system. The designation comes with the opportunity to secure more federal grants and to improve access.

Serving a changing student demographic also comes with challenges. I know from personal experience that first-generation students benefit from financial aid and support services. I received grant aid as an undergraduate and took full advantage of advising and other services. That combination had a particular importance in my success. Universities can be complex and intimidating places to navigate for those unfamiliar with them. Similarly,
underrepresented minority students benefit from campuses that are inclusive and welcoming. Providing a variety of support services leads directly to student success.

Financial aid is also critical. Pell awards make up 16% of CU’s grants and scholarships. The number of Pell recipients at CU has increased by 34% over the past decade. We also generate more than $200 million annually (the bulk from philanthropy) in financial aid to support our students. Our institutional aid has increased 102% in the past decade.

Still, academic services that support students can be expensive. We work to account for that in our internal budget deliberations, as well as in our funding conversations with state legislators. They quite rightly expect us to serve all students, and we work to convey to them just what it entails for us to ensure student success.

We are committed to advancing CU’s role as Colorado’s university of choice for all learners, including first-generation, Pell and less-represented minority students. Our track record of success in enrolling and graduating them is something we will build on in coming years as demographics continue to shift. I want every CU student to have the same opportunities Debbie and I had, those that emerge after receiving a quality education at a great university.

All the best,

Mark Kennedy President

For feedback, contact officeofthepresident@cu.edu [2]

To receive President Kennedy’s monthly newsletter via email, contact us at contact@cu.edu [3].

Newsletter Archive

2019

- November [4], Addition, not subtraction
- October [5], CU research: life changing and record setting
- September [6], The Fourth Industrial Revolution
- August [7], An eventful entrance
- July [8], Excited to be at CU
- June [9], A fond farewell
- April [10], At the heart of CU, great faculty
- March [11], Liberal arts renaissance
- February [12], Essential CU
- January, CU for Colorado [13]

2018
- November [14], The cost of college
- October [15], Engineering success with collaboration across Colorado
- September [16], A shot of adrenaline for CU’s medical powerhouse
- August [17], Back to the Future
- June [18], Bright CU ideas
- May [19], Teaching students how -- not what -- to think
- April [20], Teaching innovation
- March [21], Reflecting on a decade
- February [22], A festival of ideas
- January [23], CU’s greatest asset

2017

- November [24], Fostering community
- October [25], University of Innovation
- September [26], Open exchange of ideas
- August [27], Pathways to address the teacher shortage
- June [28], Building on a proud history
- May [29], My favorite time of year
- April [30], Mapping MOOCs
- March [31], Innovation sparks creation
- February [32], Advocating for CU
- January [33], State funding quest

2016

- November [34], Performance plus medicine
- October [35], A collection of records
- September [36], Sustaining CU
- August [37], A snapshot of you
- June [38], The administrative myth
- May [39], Seeking insight
- April [40], Connecting health
- March [41], Free speech forum
- February [42], History and humanities

2015

- December [43], Enriching diversity
- November [44], Veterans: Impact and opportunity
- October [45], Tackling mental health
- September [46], Marketing a great university
- August [47], Coming of Age
- June [48], Sunny futures
- May [49], Vision to see the future
- April [50], Momentum in Denver
- March [51], Public higher education’s changing face
• **February** [52], Health and medicine: modest beginnings, lofty aspirations

**2014**

• **November** [53], Leadership lessons
• **October** [54], Learning how to learn
• **September** [55], CU's largest real estate gift
• **August** [56], What for, not how much
• **July** [57], The bogeyman in the basement
• **May** [58], Private gain or public good?
• **April** [59], Funding outlook: sunny today, stormy tomorrow
• **March** [60], Expertise and passion
• **February** [61], Soaring in southern Colorado
• **January** [62], It all starts with reputation

**2013**

• **November** [63], To Mars and Beyond
• **October** [64], Medicine gets personal
• **August** [65], CU For Colorado
• **June** [66], MOOCs, blended classrooms and clickers
• **May** [67], Why we're here
• **March** [68], Five energizing years
• **February** [69], Groundbreaking Alzheimer's research
• **January** [70], The window into CU

**2012**

• **December** [71], The threat from legal pot
• **November** [72], Good news comes in threes
• **October** [73], CU labs: a magnificent microcosm
• **September** [74], Is college worth it?
• **August** [75], A lasting legacy and a record set
• **July** [76], Getting there from here
• **June** [77], Serving those who served
• **May** [78], Indelible impact
• **April** [79], Bruce on Bruce
• **March** [80], Perception and reality
• **February** [81], Leading leaders

**2011**

• **December** [82], We're most proud of this CU uniform
• **November** [83], From python hearts to Tebow's cleats
• **October** [84], We want you
• **September** [85], How to succeed at college and save $20,000
• **August** [86], Reputation drives results
• July [87], Teaching an old president new tricks
• June [88], A message from the president
• April [89], CU announces $1.5 billion Creating Futures campaign
• February [90]

2010

• December [91]
• October [92]
• August [93]
• June [94]
• April [95]
• February [96]

2009

• December [97]

• October [98]
• August [99]
• June [100]
• April [101]
• February [102]

2008

• December [103]
• October [104]
• September [105]

Bennet letter [106]

Gardner letter [107]

Groups audience: Office of the President

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[3] mailto:contact@cu.edu