The CU Denver Puksta Fellows Program is based on an innovative partnership with CU Denver’s Department of Communication, its Department of Ethnic Studies, the Dean’s Office of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Puksta Foundation, a Denver-based organization committed to working for social justice and training civic leaders for the 21st Century. Our goal is to empower a new generation of young scholars and activists committed to building more equitable and humane modes of democratic life. Our Fellows complete a series of classes meant to combine rigorous academics with experiential immersion in local communities. During the 2015/16 academic year, our Fellows completed over 1,000 hours of community service while playing leadership roles across the greater Denver metro area.
How the Program Works

**WHAT IS IT?** If selected as one of ten Puksta Fellows, students are awarded $2,000 to pay for two classes during their Senior Year and are designated a Puksta Fellow, an elite title. The goal of our program is to enable Puksta Fellows to graduate with stellar communication skills, professional experience, outstanding academic credentials, and intimate knowledge of social justice leadership. Recent Puksta Fellows have completed projects working as tutors in Colorado prisons, as an advocate for equity in education in Latino/a communities, as a web-designer merging new media and civic engagement, as practitioners of intercultural communication in business communities, as a mediator in end-of-life health care situations, as a spokesperson for the Colorado Progressive Coalition, and others.

**WHAT DO STUDENTS DO?** Puksta Fellows complete a three-semester-long program consisting of three steps:

1. In the summer before their Senior year, Fellows complete a social-justice-based for-credit internship, thus both learning and practicing professional communication and leadership skills in real-world settings. Puksta Fellows choose their internships in collaboration with Departmental advisors, internship directors, and UC Denver’s Experiential Learning Center.

2. In the fall of their Senior year, Fellows take a senior-level, writing-intensive course wherein they spend the semester writing an essay discussing their social justice goals and practices. This class is meant to produce conference or publication-worthy work, thus driving the Fellow’s intellectual growth.

3. In the spring of their Senior year, Fellows complete a for-credit capstone project combining hands-on social justice work in the community and academic excellence.

**OUR PARTNERS:** In addition to the program outlined above, all Puksta Fellows participate in other Puksta Foundation activities, including two annual student leadership retreats, topic-
specific public engagements, training sessions, celebratory meals, and other events attended by the Puksta Fellows from Colorado State University, the University of Denver, the University of Colorado Boulder, and Metro State University. These events create remarkable opportunities for networking with the state’s future leaders.

**MONEY:** Each Puksta Fellow receives $2,000 to be used toward tuition and an additional $250 to support Puksta-related professional development.

**TO APPLY:** To be selected as a Puksta Fellow, students apply to either the Department of Communication (of which those students must be majors) or the Department of Ethnic Studies (of which those students may be majors or minors); in both Departments, students must have an overall CU Denver GPA of 3.0 or higher and a Departmental GPA of 3.5 or higher, and must be in the Junior or Senior year of study. Application packets must include a transcript (students may use unofficial, online versions) and a 1-page letter of intent describing the student’s social justice goals and experiences; applicants will also submit one letter of recommendation, written by a faculty member, with that letter submitted directly by the faculty member to the Department. The application process is formally announced each March, with selections for the following academic year announced in April.

**MASTERS STUDENTS:** The Department of Communication considers applications from current MA students; this year’s class of Puksta Fellows includes two Communication graduate students.

---

*Puksta Fellows Amanda Butler (left) and Carly Fabian (Right) at the Fall 2015 Puksta Retreat on the CU Denver campus.*
The Incoming Class of Puksta Fellows for 2016/2017

**Patrycja Humienik, COMM**
Patrycja.Humienik@ucdenver.edu

My Puksta project goals are centered on the role of the arts in education and conflict transformation, with a focus on the intersection between mass incarceration and human rights. In the coming year, I intend to further my communication activism research by integrating creative methodologies (creative writing, dance, speaking, and art) into my approach to teaching in Denver-area prisons. Through organizing the Denver group of Dances for Solidarity, a national initiative to share dance with incarcerated people in solitary confinement through letter writing, I plan to collaborate with our incarcerated pen pals on a small publication and performance event.

**Career goals:** I seek to further develop dynamic, creative approaches to facilitation and collaboration in order to become a more impactful writer, educator, interdisciplinary artist, and collaborator. Through cross-cultural collaboration with other educators, organizers, and artists, I intend to create multimedia performance work and arts-based practices that address inequity. The intention of this work is to affect policy, build empathy, and bridge gaps of understanding, thus helping to foster a more humane world.

**Family history:** I am a first-generation college student, and the proud daughter of Polish immigrants. My parents’ 22-year struggle to obtain citizenship fueled my interest in language, borders, identity, and justice. Neither of my parents had the opportunity to pursue higher education. My parents’ hard work, commitment to my education, and dedication to their vision continue to inspire my work within and beyond the academic setting.

**Miranda Johnson, COMM**
Miranda.Johnson@ucdenver.edu

My project will focus on the overlapping realities of child welfare, poverty, and limited life opportunities. I plan to improve the lives of at-risk youth by helping them build a sense of confidence, well-being, and community. I plan to study how we can use our communication skills to stand up for justice for oppressed populations.
Career Goals: My career goals involve opening my own non-profit dedicated to improving the lives of at-risk youth by providing numerous resources for success, thus building a community with supportive relationships.

Family History: My father is a Latino who never graduated high school because he needed to provide for his siblings; my white mother attended Barnes Business College and achieved certification in business management; neither of my parents had the opportunity to graduate with a college degree. My multi-generational household includes my unmarried parents, my grandmother, my two nephews, and myself. Had it not been for my parents, I would not have the drive or confidence to attend this university, and my nephews may have been at risk in the foster system, or worse. Many family dynamics unfold beneath our roof, but at the end of each day I still feel extremely blessed to be surrounded by my loving family.

Sarah Sunderlin, COMM
Sarah.Sunderlin@ucdenver.edu

As a current volunteer and co-facilitator of the Democratic Communication Workshop, my goal is to reformat our current teaching and learning model (which focuses on men and women in prison) to address the needs of the families of incarcerated individuals. Building upon national best practices, I hope to launch a service-oriented program that would bridge our campus, Denver-area prisons, and local prison-impacted communities.

Career Goals: Upon completing my MA, I intend to continue with my education in a PhD program. My research interests include the intersectionality of race, class and gender; the rhetorics of sexual assault discourse; and communication practices about and within incarcerated family structures. My long-term goals are to incorporate my academic research into advocacy work for both incarcerated parents and parents of prisoners—for I hope to help foster healthy communities that can use communication to create alternatives to mass-incarceration.

Family History: I am a native Hoosier who recently moved to Colorado with my long-time partner, Sean. I am blessed to have a loving family that has always supported my interests—educational and otherwise. I grew up in a home where challenging beliefs and asking the tough questions about the world was not only respected, but welcomed. I am confident that this has made a significant impact on my choice to seek civically engaged scholarship and to continue to ask the tough questions.
I have been surprised to discover a need for help on our very own campus for students who are homeless. Many of these students do not have the resources they need to be successful in school. To respond to this crisis, I would like to create an annual event to help gather supplies and resources for these individuals; at the same time, I plan to develop public marketing to raise awareness about the conditions of and responses to homelessness.

**Career Goals:** My ultimate goal is to work for an organization that aids others in the pursuit of their dreams and social justice. But first, upon graduation, I would like to work for the Peace Corps.

**Family History:** I was born in Sacramento, California, and am the first in my family to go to college, so I hope to set a great example for my younger siblings. My mom passed away in 2011; she, like many others, battled drug addiction. My dad and my step-mom live in Colorado with my two sisters, while my brother lives in California with my step-dad. I love these people in my life very much and am proud to have come from a colorful background. Everything that has happened in my life has happened for a reason, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to live, study, and work in Colorado.
Alejandra Armenta, ETST
Alejandra.Arement@ucdenver.edu

I was born in Cuernavaca Morelos, Mexico, and when I was four years old my father applied for a teaching position in Commerce City, Colorado. I’m really thankful because now I am part of a new culture. I learned a new language and I embrace this country every day.

In the future, I plan to become a doctor. I strongly support LGBTQ+ rights, and work with our campus groups to make a positive contribution to the quality of student life.

In my activism and campus leadership, I don’t allow myself to be burdened with problems; I put my time and energy into positive things, for I know that if I develop my dreams into goals, and use my personal experience and difficulties as resources, then these goals can become my reality. I have the capacity to be a successful individual and contribute to society, but it is my responsibility to take initiative and make this planet a better place. I am passionate about social justice, and will continue to engage in activities that work for social change.

Nancy Garcia, ETST
Nancy.Garcia@ucdenver.edu

I owe my passion for culture and values to my parents, who, though “undocumented,” struggled to survive, support, and educate my siblings and I. Both of my parents, with elementary education, have supported me emotionally, because they are unable to support me economically. At sixteen years old, I started working two jobs. Since freshman year I have been working three jobs to support myself and my education. I attribute my education, anger, and passion for justice to my loving family and the great teachers who work in our Ethnic Studies Department at CU Denver.

I am committed to supporting services that address the social, economic, health, emotional, cultural, and educational needs of under-resourced families in Westminster. Due to gentrification, many lives are changing, so I hope to pursue a social justice project that tackles housing and renter rights.
Hue Phuong, ETST
Hue.Phong@ucdenver.edu

I was born and raised in Westminster, Colorado, and will be the first person in my family to go to college. I am a Vietnamese-American whose family has endured a lot for me to be here today; that journey of struggle informs my goal to help others seek social justice. Some of my family members came to America on a boat, where they saw pirates raping the women and girls. Throughout their journey, they dealt with physical abuse and starvation. Once they arrived in America, all they thought about was their blessings, so my parents worked tirelessly to provide for us. Looking back now, I can see that coming to CU Denver and becoming a Puksta Fellow is a testament to how hard my parents worked to enable me to become successful.

Drawing upon my experiences, and hoping to give back to my community, I want to work with kids who live in lower socioeconomic status, struggle with mental health issues, and come from Asian and Asian American communities. I think that there are many pressures within Asian cultures to suppress emotions and feelings, meaning mental issues often go untreated. Thus, to honor my parents and my community, I hope to become a counselor, so that I can be a support for people who may be struggling with mental health.

Monay Turnbough, ETST
Monay.Turnbough@ucdenver.edu

When Trayvon Martin was killed on my 16th birthday, I organized a hoodie march at my school to raise awareness about his death among the student population. Ever since, then, I have thought that people need to be taught about the difficulties and complexities of growing up Black in America, so I dedicated myself to someday teaching African American studies.

I am on the path to receive my degree in Ethnic Studies, with a concentration in African American studies; my goal is to educate African American children against the stereotypes that may be pushed onto them as they grow up, and to support the demand that we need African American studies in school curriculums. I never ever thought that I would be a teacher, but now I cannot wait to step into my field and make a difference. Working with the Ethnic Studies Department and my Puksta Fellows, I hope to work toward the end of racism in America.
Puksta Program Leadership & Thanks

- For questions about Department of Communication Puksta Fellows, please contact Dr. Stephen J. Hartnett, at 303.315.1914, or Stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu.

- For questions about Department of Ethnic Studies Puksta Fellows, please contact Dr. Donna Martinez, 303.556.6556, donna.martinez@ucdenver.edu.

- To contact the Puksta Foundation, please reach out to NiChel Meis, Director of Development, Puksta Foundation, 303.915.6979, Nichel.Meis@gmail.com.

- Thanks to Johnny Mulstay and NiChel Meis and everyone at the Puksta Foundation for their love and support; to CU Denver College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean Pam Jansma for her support; to JoAnn Porter for helping with finances; to Jessica Web and the Development Office for programmatic support; to Michelle Medal for everything she does for our community; and to Bryan Reckard for photography and layout.

- And Please welcome to our Puksta family Dr. Sarah Burke Odland, who is joining the team in August 2016, when she will begin offering mentoring to our undergraduate Fellows. Welcome aboard, Sarah!

Mark your calendars for the 2016 Fall Puksta Retreat, to be held on the CU Boulder Campus, on Saturday, September, 17th.