

# CU DENVER **FUTURE FEST**

## **2021 CU Denver Inaugural Future Fest Delivered by Chancellor Michelle Marks on September 28, 2021**

How about that vision video? I know, right? This is the vision that you all painted for CU Denver and that inspires everything we do together – including events like this one. I could not be prouder. Welcome to CU Denver’s first-ever Future Fest! It’s great to be here with all of you in this fun venue.

I’d like to acknowledge some special guests:

- Jake Jabs, entrepreneur, owner of American Furniture Warehouse, and valued benefactor to CU Denver
- Colleen Walker, CEO of the Auraria Higher Education Center
- Rick Gardner, professor emeritus and member of the CU Foundation Board of Trustees
- Mike Sandler, CU System Vice President for Communications

And thanks to Associate Dean Theo Edmonds, both for that kind introduction and for emceeding our entire program today. How cool is it that we have a cultural futurist?! Theo’s one of nearly 40 new faculty who have started at CU Denver this year, an exceedingly talented group whose expertise ranges from healthcare-system financing, to the intersection of urban planning and air pollution, to particle acceleration.

And thanks to our events team and everyone who figured out how to create this great outdoor program so we could gather safely and celebrate today. So how many students do we have in the audience today? It’s so great to see you. Thank you so much for joining us! This is Future Fest, and *you* are the future. Can we have a round of applause for our students?

### **Social Mobility**

I just have to start with some incredible news. As you know, we at CU Denver see higher education as a tool to transform lives, and believe access to a great education should be available for all learners, not just the privileged few. And now our commitment to change the trajectory of our students’ lives is being recognized nationally. Two weeks ago, *US News & World Report* released its rankings for “social mobility,” which is an indicator of how low-

income students are succeeding here. This year CU Denver jumped more than 50 spots. We're now ranked the #1 institution for social mobility in Colorado and #55 in the nation.

We did this, together.

### **Recognition of Faculty/Staff**

If you, like Theo, and like me, have just joined CU Denver in the last year or two -- whether as faculty, staff, or student -- can you please wave? Thank you all for choosing CU Denver to work and learn! We're excited for the fresh perspective you bring.

We also appreciate the wisdom and contributions of those who have been here for multiple years, helping CU Denver achieve tremendous growth since its founding in 1973. Will everyone who has been here for 3-10 years please wave?

How about 11 or more?

However long you've been with us, you have my deep gratitude, especially for your incredible efforts over the past year and a half -- not only to get us through one of the most challenging years in memory, but to accomplish so much to position us for action this year.

### **Purpose and Format of the Event**

And we have an incredible program lined up for today.

- First I'll share some highlights of our recent successes and exciting things in store for this year.
- Then we'll hear from some of our new campus leaders about what brought them to CU Denver and what they're most excited about this year.
- Next we'll be treated to a lightning round of presentations on the scholarship, research, and stories of our faculty, staff, and students. I think you're all going to really enjoy this.
- Then we get to catch up with people you may not have seen for a while, get refreshments and giveaways from the food trucks and carts, listen to more music, and sign up to get involved in some of the things we'll be talking about today. And if I haven't had the chance to meet you yet in person, please do find me and introduce yourself.

### **Campus Updates**

When I reflect on these past 15 months since I became your chancellor, I'm both humbled and heartened. Humbled because of the grace and stamina you've shown in maneuvering through these tumultuous times. And heartened when I see the incredible work you have done to help CU Denver emerge even stronger than we were before.

## **COVID**

Speaking of the pandemic, thanks to the hard work of this community, we achieved the safe return of our community to campus, twice – partially in person last year and fully this year.

At a time when many schools were having mass quarantines and shutdowns, our safety has been a standout success. From the beginning of the pandemic through today, we've had no evidence of classroom spread. That safety is further enabled now, of course, by the availability of vaccines—still our best defense against COVID and its variants. Thank you to the 97% of employees and 93% of students who have been vaccinated.

We've all had anxiety, especially as we return to campus. But I've heard so many stories from our community about how, with our practices in place, people are really glad to be back. I know I'm glad to be with you in person today. Students, are *you* glad to be back?

## **Physical Changes to Campus**

Let's talk for a moment about our physical campus. This very space where we're gathering looks very different than it did a year ago, and it's had a makeover in the last decade. Just in the last month we've celebrated three transformational additions to our neighborhood.

Last month we opened City Heights, our new first-year residence hall in the middle of campus. 555 new students moved in and joined our second largest-ever entering class. The building's full! And last week we celebrated the opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Learning Commons. For the first time ever, we have a hub dedicated solely for our talented faculty – all kinds of faculty. We've never had that kind of space before. There are lockers, a kitchen, and places for faculty across the campus to connect, collaborate, and create together.

Also last week, our mascot became larger than life when we unveiled The Lynx, a 1,000 pound, 8-foot bronze statue, right over there! I can see it becoming the site of many celebratory photos to come. These recent changes join the 2014 addition of the Student Commons building and the 2015 Lola & Rob Salazar Student Wellness Center, and you can see that CU Denver is taking on a whole new campus presence.

We did this, together.

## **Strategic Plan**

And as of this June, we also have a new CU Denver-specific 2030 Strategic Plan.

When we kicked off our strategic planning effort in January, I challenged you to dream big to blaze a new path for us that capitalized on our strengths: in less than six months AND in the middle of a pandemic. It was a lot to ask. But you more than rose to the occasion.

3000 of you participated in one way or another to create a strategic plan that we can all be truly proud of. And we did this using home-grown talent -- like Kris Wood and his team of

faculty, staff, and students from InWorks and the Comcast Center, who used design-thinking tools to help guide our process.

We did this, together.

The title of our plan is “Make Education Work for All.” It’s designed to create social mobility for students whose success is not guaranteed. “Make Education Work for All” expresses how we’ll shape ourselves into a university that Colorado and the nation need but currently lack. I know many of you know our five strategic goals by heart. And if you don’t already, we’ll be sharing plenty of fun ways today to help you remember them!

Our plan and our goals are ambitious and inspirational. But we know we need to do more than dream big on paper to become the powerful engine of opportunity we have the potential to be. We also need our goals to be actionable. We’ve been working over the summer to make the shift from planning to executing. With input from so many of you, we’re creating roadmaps that set priorities and direct resources and to realize our ambitions.

We’ll need your input on these roadmaps. And we have planned for many ways to engage you in the execution of our plan, starting this fall. But there are some things we know we need to get started on now. Let me tell you about those.

### **Goal 1: Equity-Serving Institution**

Last April, our Equity Task Force set the goal for CU Denver to become an exemplar equity-serving institution. This task force doubled as a vision team for the strategic plan, so this is also the first goal in our strategic plan.

I am so excited about the progress we’ve made in a very short time – under a year! -- to position ourselves to really move the needle on equity. Since the task force set out a roadmap last spring, and I announced our commitment of \$4 million to the effort, we have a leg up on implementation in this area. Here are a few highlights:

We’ll be implementing equity-minded professional development, eventually for all employees but starting this fall with me and my cabinet and deans, associate/assistant deans and associate/assistant vice chancellors.

As we progress toward federal recognition as both a Hispanic Serving Institution (or HSI) and as an Asian American/Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (or AANAPISI), we are working to better support our student community. We’ve already submitted for millions of dollars in federal grants to help us better serve and support our students.

And this year all of our schools, colleges and campus units will start the planning to diversify the ranks of our faculty and staff. Our plans are ambitious. There are no turnkey solutions to these issues. But we will be implementing changes this year, and every year from now on until we achieve our goal of being a true equity serving institution.

We can do this, together.

## **Goal 2: University for Life**

Our second goal is for CU Denver to become known as a “university for life,” providing access to educational excellence over a lifetime, from age 17 to 117.

With the shelf life of new knowledge getting shorter and people living longer, more learners want and need new ways to access affordable learning across their lives and careers. We aim to deliver high-quality, relevant education that fits the practical reality of people’s lives, whenever and wherever they seek it over their lifetimes.

Our first step is to develop a strategic enrollment plan that focuses on the learners we serve, including students coming to us from high schools in Colorado and outside of Colorado, and our beloved international students. And that focuses on students transferring from other institutions like community colleges, our first-generation students, veterans, working students, and parents who need education delivered more flexibility to meet the demands of their lives.

We’ve learned many valuable lessons about online learning during the pandemic, including the most effective formats in which we offer classes. It’s increasingly clear that the future of education is not only inside a classroom, and it’s not just behind a screen. It’s both. Our plan acknowledges that learners need new ways of learning that work for their lives. This year we’ll be working on a campus-based digital learning strategy.

## **Goal 3: Research**

On the research front, Provost Constancio Nakuma and Chief Resource Officer Marty Dunn will be collaborating with our deans, faculty, and staff this fall to activate goal 3: to be internationally known for our research and creative work impacting five of society’s grand challenges.

We’re kicking off this effort this fall with the Strategic Plan Research Symposium, a series of two Friday morning sessions – on Oct. 29 and Nov. 19 -- to bring out the best ideas from our community on the research and creative works we should invest in to enhance our impact and national prominence. By spring, we expect to have determined the first two grand challenges we’ll tackle and allocate seed funding to get those efforts off the ground.

The fact that we are a research university in the heart of the city is one of our key differentiators. I’m excited to see how this process will help bring together a diversity of researchers, artists, and designers to break down disciplinary boundaries and create innovative and impactful outcomes to solve big problems facing our society.

## **Goal 4: Building an innovation district**

Our fourth goal leverages this incredible location we have in the heart of one of the coolest cities in America. We’re going to build an open innovation district right here on and around our campus that brings together faculty, staff, students, and community members with entrepreneurs, companies, and government and civic leaders to foster new forms of entrepreneurship, economic development, partnerships, and transformative education.

We are actively in conversations to begin crystallizing that vision, and this year we'll check off two major boxes bringing us closer to a clear picture of what the innovation district will look like:

1. First we'll determine the specific niche that our innovation district will fill for Denver. We'll leverage the grand challenges we identify in goal 3, partnerships with industry, the needs of our community, and the ambitions of our city and state to define this niche.
2. In tandem, we're going to FINALLY move forward on construction of a new building to house interdisciplinary computing and engineering as the anchor for our innovation district. For years we have been hopeful the state would fund this building, but we can't wait any longer. We'll still be working with the state, but we'll also launch an ambitious fundraising effort to support this effort. Late this fall and into the spring we will engage our community and a design firm to define what we need from this new space.

These are two giant steps toward creating a vibrant innovation district for our community, city, and state.

We will do this, together, and I can't wait.

#### **Goal 5: Best Place to Work**

It's fitting that we "bat cleanup" with Goal 5 – being a people-centered best place to work and learn – because *you*, our faculty and staff – are the reason our students are here.

We heard loud and clear over the last year that we need to do more to support you. You said it was critical that we take real steps to value our employees as people, create a culture of empowerment and belonging, and provide tangible opportunities for career development and success. And we're listening.

Our first step toward becoming a people-centered best place to work is to hire a CU Denver-specific Chief People Officer, our first ever, who will lead our work to create an organizational culture focused on trust, empowerment, and collaboration. This is a new model for us; these are our values and we intend to live them by honoring the humanity, talent, and hard work of our people – making work meaningful, impactful, and fun.

We also heard clearly over the last year that we need to do better for our instructional, research, and clinical faculty. I am thrilled that Provost Nakuma has already charged a task force with developing recommendations to improve the IRC faculty experience. We expect their report to be delivered in November.

You have heard me say before that our people are our greatest asset. I'm confident these investments will put us closer to a workplace where you feel valued and supported in your personal and professional growth.

## **How We'll Get There**

As we seek to accomplish our five ambitious strategic plan goals, creating a stronger structure for philanthropy is a must for us. And, we can no longer be a best kept secret. We intend to shout our specialness from the rooftops. The time for CU Denver to be meek, or the proverbial underdog, is over.

## **Conclusion**

By committing to this work together – as one powerful university – we will expand the impact and the value we deliver to families, our state, and our society over the next decade. We will need everyone's help, ideas, contributions. This is CU Denver's moment. We are *ready* to realize our powerful potential to be a true equity-serving institution that provides opportunity, strengthens democracy, and indeed, works for all.

*We will do this, together.*

I can't tell you how excited I am about our next chapter together. There's no place I'd rather be, no work I'd rather be doing, and no people I'd rather be doing it with than right here, with all of you. Now I'd like to go out the way I came in: with an inspirational video filmed with the help of several of our community members.

Thank you all.