

AURARIA CAMPUS

**Community College  
of Denver**

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**University of Colorado  
Denver**

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**Metropolitan State  
University of Denver**

## Project Title

Executive summary for:

Envisioning the future for the Auraria Campus:

A study of physical connections, campus vitality, and how to position Auraria for  
the rest of the 21st century

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## Recital:

Capstone Project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning, College of  
Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver

## Date of Submission

May 15, 2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the center for three educational institutions, the Auraria Higher Education Center (AHEC) is a hub of education for the Denver metro. AHEC is well positioned for continued success given the strength of the educational institutions and its downtown location; however, despite its location in downtown Denver and future planned development, the physical barriers of large arterial roadways and railroad track barriers will continue to inhibit the flow of people between Auraria and the adjacent downtown districts and nearby neighborhoods. In addition to campus leaders' concern that Auraria is an island surrounded by physical barriers, they are also interested in exploring ways to improve campus vitality and positioning the campus for future success by best serving the needs of students and the wider community. This capstone seeks to help campus leaders have meaningful discussions concerning the continued evolution of Auraria as an educational center by focusing on improving physical connections, invigorating campus vitality, and positioning Auraria for the 21st century.

There are many ways to approach researching and creating solutions to the central problem facing Auraria. The background research conducted for this capstone was done to help the author learn how similar problems have been approached by academics, through case studies, and in existing plans. One important lesson learned from a paper written by Meagan Ehlenz, professor of Geography and Urban Planning at Arizona State, was that university investments can significantly impact adjacent neighborhoods and therefore adjacent neighborhoods need to be consulted when decisions are being made so that their values are considered.

The work done by the University of Pennsylvania to improve connections between the campus, downtown Philadelphia, and adjacent neighborhoods also offers excellent parallels for this capstone. For example, one way they approached the issue of connectivity was by exploring the concept of campus gateways. They also viewed the campus in terms of its unique land use and development zones, which will be a useful way to view the Auraria campus when assessing how to incorporate more non-academic functions on campus.

MIT also looked at connectivity in relation to the development of the east side of campus. They started the analysis by posing a series of connectivity related questions organized into Campus Connections, Connections to the City, and Connections to the River. A similar line of thinking will help frame the connectivity issues facing Auraria. Additionally, the methods used in the study to judge urban design could prove important in the sense that urban design helps facilitate connections and create a sense of place. Finally, the last key takeaway from the MIT study was the work done to assess the creation of a vibrant retail and active use corridor, which correlates to campus leaders' goal of improving the vitality on Auraria campus.

Interesting work has also been done in Cleveland in relation to downtown connectivity and campus development. The key lesson learned from the case study for downtown Cleveland was the prioritization that was done, which is important for this capstone given budgets are limited and the most impactful solutions should be prioritized in a clear manner. When reviewing the case study for Cleveland State, one key observation was how that plan employed extensive statistical analysis to help frame the issue, which—in a more limited extent—will help frame the issues related to AHEC.

The author reviewed the Central Platte Valley Plan Update, Blueprint Denver, and the Downtown Area Plan Midpoint Reflection as part of the existing plan review for background research. One key observation from the Blueprint Denver plan was the importance of using equity to measure outcomes. Many lessons were learned from the other plans given that significant portions were devoted to topics directly related to AHEC. For example, the potential future of Speer Boulevard was discussed in the midpoint reflection while the relationship between AHEC and the potential development in the Central Platte Valley featured prominently in the Central Platte Valley Plan Update. All three plans helped define the parameters of existing planning thought to be leveraged for this capstone in addition to informing the methodology the author used to do the analysis.

The methodology employed to find solutions to the

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issues facing AHEC involved the collection of quantitative and statistical data from a variety of sources, the use of data to create illustrative maps of key concepts, the thorough review of existing plans to understand what has already been considered and what the future may hold, and a case study review to learn about solutions to similar issues. Finally, the critical piece of the capstone methodology was the separation of the analysis into three distinct sections looking at Improving physical connections between the campus and surrounding neighborhoods, enhancing campus vitality, and positioning AHEC for the 21st century.

There are many existing plans that contain relevant elements for the Auraria campus including transportation plans, master plans for specific districts, a plan for an urban trail network, and more. Understanding these plans is instrumental for the proposed recommendations and solutions to the challenges already identified because these city plans represent current planning thought and a collective vision for the future of much of the area surrounding the Auraria campus. Plan elements cover a wide range of topics including transportation investments, roadway improvements, the creation of entirely new neighborhoods, artistic endeavors, and innovative partnerships.

The Auraria campus is unquestionably in the difficult position of being ringed by large arterial roadways designed to move cars as quickly as possible along the corridors. While these roads do an excellent job of bringing car traffic to the campus, they significantly impede the movement of pedestrians across these corridors. Four unique gateways at various intersections ringing the campus have been proposed to help alleviate the issues of impaired connectivity across the roadways and rail tracks while simultaneously imbuing these intersections with a renewed sense of place. The Cherry Creek Gateway will take advantage of planning work being done for Larimer Street to help create a crossing of Speer Boulevard that invites people across and extends some of the ambiance of Larimer Square toward campus. The La Alma Gateway will improve the experience of crossing Colfax Avenue and will honor the history of Auraria in collaboration with the La Alma Lincoln Park neighborhood. The

Entertainer's Gateway will capitalize on the proposals for the 5280 Trail and the development of the River Mile neighborhood on the north side of the CML through the creation of a thematic gateway complete with attractive design elements, wayfinding, and an homage to Colorado athletes and musicians. And finally, the Artist's Gateway will help to re-define the western edge of campus through the creation of an inviting space where student and community art can be showcased.

The Auraria campus is busy with activity during the typical class hours and then becomes relatively dormant once students, staff, and faculty leave the campus to go home. Improving campus vitality at all hours will take a concerted effort by campus leadership to accept new ideas and new ways of leveraging campus real estate and its location at the center of the Denver metro. A critical first step will be to construct more campus housing so that students can live on campus instead of having to commute from all over the region. One common method of constructing new student housing is by partnering with private industry in a public-private partnership so that the AHEC or the Auraria institutions can leverage the private sector's technical expertise and access to financing.

Apart from housing, there are many other ways to improve campus vitality and create new revenue streams for AHEC and the Auraria institutions. These include an amphitheater, a retail-oriented campus village, community events on the Tivoli Quad, an outdoor gallery honoring Colorado athletes and musicians, an Auraria history museum, incubator space, and more alternative education programs like tertiary and continuing education programs. The hope is that a combination of new campus attractions, programming, and housing will encourage more people to enjoy the campus, therefore creating additional revenue streams and contributing to a renewed campus vitality.

The educational landscape is evolving and institutions that do not adapt risk being left behind. Universities need to rethink how space is allocated and recognize that capital intensive construction projects for new facilities may not be a prudent investment, particular-

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ly considering the shift toward more remote learning. The Auraria institutions also need to maintain connections with important regional industries so that educational programs help nurture students who will excel in these key employment sectors and growth industries. As the world becomes more and more globally connected, AHEC must respond to the shift toward a more interconnected learning environment and embrace the “Networked Community (College)” model by creating space and an opportunity for the model to thrive. This will require increasing the level of coordination between academia, community, industry, and civic organizations to harness the full potential of an aggregated and connected learning environment. The manner in which AHEC and the Auraria institutions engage with the community must strive for an “Us & Them” or a “Th-us” conception of community relations if they hope to ensure continued relevance. This entails an increasingly blurred line between the two such that community and academia become viewed as one in the same.

The implementation and prioritization plan for the recommendations made in this capstone is critically important so that there is a clear path forward to achieving campus goals. Prioritizing the four gateways involves understanding the prospective timelines for related projects like the Larimer Street bridge reconstruction, immediate versus distant campus and community needs, willingness of external stakeholders to partner or cooperate with AHEC and the Auraria institutions, and other relevant factors. This phased implementation of the Cherry Creek gateway first, La Alma Gateway second, Entertainer’s gateway third, and the Artist’s Gateway last, does not mean one gateway is more important than the other, but rather represents a proposed logical implementation sequence given existing constraints and immediate opportunities to be leveraged.

There is a tremendous opportunity to improve campus vitality by housing more students on campus, which is why the construction of student housing is the top priority that AHEC and Auraria institution leadership

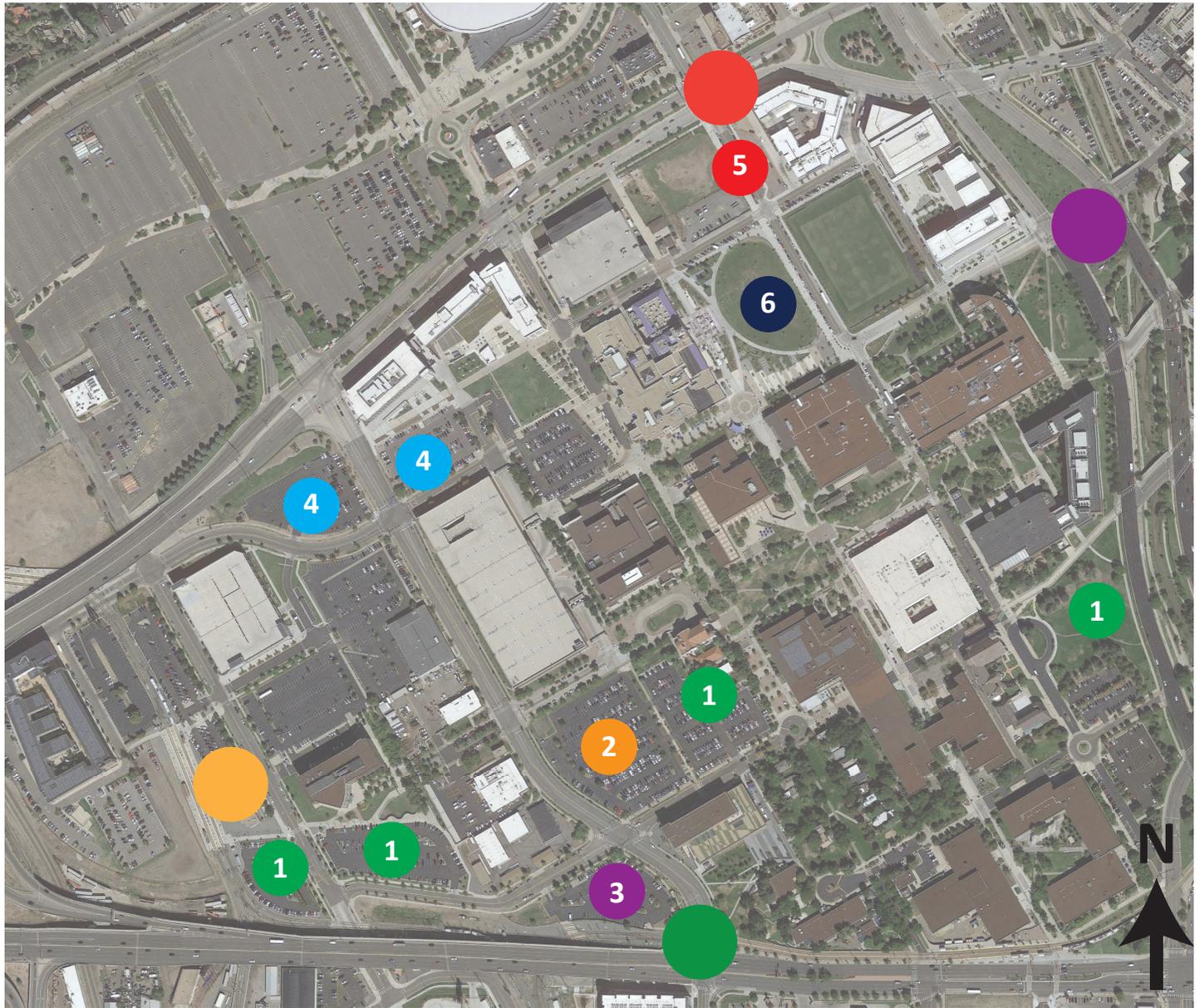
must consider acting upon immediately. The other proposed ideas can be phased in over time to help improve campus vitality by encouraging new populations to enjoy the campus. Some of these ideas like Auraria Village and the Alumni and Entertainer’s Walk are dependent on the coming to fruition of other City plans, while leadership could immediately start discussing how to create the Auraria History Museum and the campus amphitheater, which do not benefit as much from external plan coordination but rather are dependent on coordination with adjacent neighborhoods, financing, and AHEC willingness to re-purpose parking lots.

AHEC and Auraria institution leadership have the privilege to plan for the future of the campus, which starts with the recognition that the delivery of higher education will evolve such that Auraria must be positioned to succeed for the remainder of the 21st century. This will involve planning the future classroom, rationalizing the need for physical space, leveraging the Denver metro’s growth industries, studying how other universities are piloting networked-community (college) concepts, recognizing the increasingly collaborative—academia, civic, private, community—nature of higher education, and reaching out to the wider community to better understand how to close the gap between community and university.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FIGURE 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY GRAPHIC



## Campus Gateways

-  Cherry Creek Gateway
-  Entertainer's Gateway
-  La Alma Gateway
-  Artist's Gateway

## Campus Vitality Ideas

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-  Housing
  -  Auraria Village
  -  Amphitheater
  -  Alumni and Entertainer's Walk
  -  Auraria History Museum
  -  Tivoli Quad Activities