



University of Colorado

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Emily: Engagement at the University of Colorado is a priority that covers vast areas, ranging from enrollment and learning opportunities, to fundraising and building relationships with diverse communities. Today, on CU on the Air, we're talking to Assistant Vice President for Engagement, Tony Salazar, about the many facets and importance of building sustainable relationships that reach every corner of Colorado. Tony Thank you so much for being here.

Tony: Thank you.

Emily: Just to kick things off, can you describe your role as Assistant Vice President for Engagement and tell us a bit about the scope of your position and what you strive to do for CU?

Tony: Absolutely. In 2019, after President Kennedy was brought to CU, Senior Management, Senior Leadership of CU made outreach and engagement a major priority for the university. After having that conversation, they thought it was best to invest in a staff person to actually do this work, which had not been done before by the system office. There are engagement outreach staff at the campus level. They look a little different based on the campus needs and so forth, but we didn't have that one person at the system office to really do that outreach and engagement. And actually the title is very intentional on the job position. It is engagement because that entails ongoing engagement, ongoing efforts to connect with the community and not just one time outreach.

Emily: Great.

Tony: I came here in November of 2019, and I had about four months of work in the community, going out, meeting people and so forth, and then pandemic hit, so it changed a little bit at that point, but what I do, my purpose for being here, really is to engage key audiences in Colorado that are important to our strategic priorities. In my work, I really touch upon a lot of different things, legislative relations, enrollment, research collaborations, opportunities for us to provide internships or learning opportunities for students, fostering experiential employment opportunities, those kind of things. Fundraising, I do end up being in the same space as some of the donors from time to time, or the industry or corporations that also play a part in being part of our ecosystem.

One of the things that the leadership really wanted me to focus on was building connections with diverse communities, so that's a big focus of what I do and of who I am personally, so I think that was one of the key drivers there. Then, I think the other thing is perceptions of CU and higher ed in general across the State of Colorado, and I think the last thing is the public-private partnerships.

Emily: Okay.

Tony: I touch upon a little bit of all of that, and I think my job is to really look at opening doors for CU and for the campuses, and I've been really upfront with the campuses since day one to say, "My job is not to step on or step over the work you're doing, it is to try and add value to what you already have." They're doing great work on their own, but if I can provide some new relationships, some new opportunities for campuses to utilize, that's really where I think my value comes in, and I know that at the system level, nothing's going to happen unless the campuses take those relationships and make those programs, make those relationships come to fruition, so I understand that in the role I'm in, but all in all, it's a great job, it's a fun job. It allows me to connect with a lot of different people across the state and build those opportunities for this great university.

Emily: That sounds like a really, really interesting job, and you must meet a lot of great people in Colorado.

Tony: I do.

Emily: That's cool. Well, you and President Todd Saliman and many of the regents, I believe are planning tours across Colorado in the coming months. Can you tell us a little bit about where you're planning on going and what you're hoping to accomplish with these visits?

Tony: These visits are about a year late. We had a grand plan to do all this in early 2020. Thought we were going to be out in the summer, fall. Never happened, of course, because the world shut down in many ways, so we're excited to get back to this now. I think these engagement tours have a little bit of a different twist to it because of the timing of where we are at CU, so they're going to be multipurpose tours, planned for later this year, starting as early as possibly next month in August, going through the end of the year, and into early 2022 as well.

Really, what they're focused on is bringing CU to stakeholders across the state. I think sometimes it's easy to get caught up in being in the Front Range or in the Denver Metro community, not getting out to the different parts of the state, the four corners, if you will, so this gives us an opportunity to bring CU to people, to understand what their needs are, what their issues are on their turf, and I think going to where people are is really important for this university, to listen, and as President Saliman now says, "Listen and listen some more."

Emily: Right.

Tony: That's really what we're going to be trying to do. The third piece of this is really, because of where we are with our timing right now, we're going into a presidential search, so it provides us an opportunity as well to gather some feedback and engage with the community members about what they would like to see in the qualifications for the next president, whomever that may be.

Emily: Well, why is it important to go to some of these smaller communities beyond the front range?

Tony: I think there are perceptions of CU that we're always fighting a little bit. I think when people think of CU, they think of CU Boulder, which is our great flagship campus that we're very proud of, but they don't often realize that we have these really fantastic other campuses to offer as well. We have UCCS down in Colorado Springs, CU Denver and, of course, the CU Anschutz Medical Campus. They all offer individual strengths and opportunities for students that, I think it's important for people across the State of Colorado to understand. Going back to the tour conversation, I think what's important there is that I've been told by regents what a great learning opportunity that is for them to do their jobs well.

They represent the entire State of Colorado in these regent roles, and for them to understand and be able to appreciate the needs and the wants, if you will, of what is out there across the state is a great opportunity for them to do their jobs better, to represent CU in the State of Colorado, so we're excited about that piece, and we're going to invite the regents to all of these, so we might have nine of them. We might have three of them or four of them, just depending on what they are, so we're going to do two-day tours in different parts of the state.

Emily: Oh, cool.

Tony: Right now, we're looking at, everywhere from the Eastern Plains to Southwestern Colorado, Southern Colorado. By the way, we did one in Northeastern Colorado in December of '19, which was six weeks into the job for me, but-

Emily: Okay. Wow.

Tony: I don't know if I was quite ready for it at that point, but Regent Sharkey said we really need to get in this part of the state, and we did that, and it provided a great blueprint for us for future engagement tours.

Emily: Great.

Tony: Two days is about right. It allows people to join us. Our regents, I think we sometimes forget, they have other parts of their life. They have other jobs.

Emily: Right. Right.

Tony: They're trying to make a living, support their family, so asking people to take two days out of their life is a lot easier than asking for four or five.

Emily: Yes.

Tony: I see us doing about five of these probably before the winter weather comes, which in Colorado could be at any time, right?

Emily: Cool. Okay. Yes. Right.

Tony: But I think between like August and November, we'll probably try to go out to the far reaches of the state, and then focus on the front range after that, and probably also during that time as well, but it's a little easier to get to, let's say Fort Collins in winter weather than it would be going across the mountains.

Emily: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Tony: That's kind of the plan from here until probably beginning of next year.

Emily: That's great. Well, you mentioned some of the perceptions or misconceptions about CU. Because CU is a world-class public research university, some people think that they can't afford a CU education, for example. How do you address that misconception?

Tony: Yeah, I think contrary to recent editorials that have been written, CU has worked very hard to contain costs for students and for families. I'll give you a couple examples of that right now. We've really worked hard to keep tuition fees in check. I don't think people realize either that we're the 48th funded state when it comes to state higher ed funding in the nation.

Emily: Right.

Tony: There are only a couple states below us, so we have to be very, I would say entrepreneurial and creative in terms of how we maintain our costs, but we've kept those costs below tuition. I think people don't understand too that for students and families that make below \$60,000 a year, we're probably most affordable up in Boulder anyway, we are the most affordable institution to go to across the State of Colorado.

Emily: Really?

Tony: They're probably going to be more likely to get more aid and tuition assistance there than they are in any other university in the State of Colorado.

Emily: Right.

Tony: I don't think people realize that. The other thing that is great, and this is on the Boulder campus as well, is we have a tuition fee guarantee for four years. Very transparent. Families, students will know what they have to pay, and that's been approved by the regents to go through the incoming class of '24, '25, so we're talking about all the way down to high school sophomores right now, will have an idea of what they pay for the next four years, as long as they finish on time.

Emily: Wow. Sure.

Tony: I think that's pretty unique.

Emily: That's pretty great. I wish I had had that when I was in college.

Tony: I am too, think of that solution to be on the phone, and you're like, "Oh, I wasn't expecting that," so yeah.

Emily: Yeah. Yikes.

Tony: This does provide a lot of transparency for families in terms of what they can plan for.

Emily: That's cool. Well, are there other misconceptions about CU that you'd like to address with our listeners today?

Tony: Absolutely. I think one of the things we've learned in some of our travels across the state is that people, again, like I said earlier, only think about CU as Boulder, and frankly, in some of the rural areas, that's not the perception that is popular in some cases, right?

Emily: Right.

Tony: The perception of CU being too liberal or too expensive or, "I can't get into the university." Again, I think that's where it's important to try to take on some of those misperceptions as well, but also remind people that we have these other campuses, so if you want to go to school in El Paso County, we have a great anchor institution, UCCS down in that part of the state. Very ingrained in the community, very trusted by the community, offers wonderful programs like cybersecurity and other programs that are on the leading edge of what the workforce needs. We have the most diverse research campus in the State at CU Denver, right downtown, located next to all of the businesses, the business district corporations and industry and so forth. What's important there is that we talk about inclusivity at CU. That's a majority, minority-serving campus now. Over half the students are students of color.

Emily: Right.

Tony: Represents the community in terms of Metro Denver very well. Just recently named a Hispanic-serving institution and AANAPISI institution, which serves Asian and Pacific Islander students.

Emily: Oh, that's great. Yeah.

Tony: I mean, CU Denver is now referring to themselves, and I think adeptly so, as an equity-serving institution.

Emily: Absolutely.

Tony: That's exactly what they are, so reminding people that we have those and all those different opportunities, and again, the strengths of the campuses. Individual strengths are so strong, and that's one of the things I try to do too, is make sure that my work really helps the ecosystems in which we're already present, become stronger.

Emily: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tony: At Boulder, we have these wonderful aerospace programs, nationally ranked programs and so forth. We have those in all of our campuses. It's just people tend to think Boulder and not so much the other places. Then, of course, there's Anschutz, the leading medical campus.

Emily: Right.

Tony: They provide so many programs and research opportunities for people across the State of Colorado, leading medical campus in the region.

Emily: Yeah. There's really something for everyone, so ...

Tony: Absolutely.

Emily: Well, what are some positive outcomes that have resulted from your engagement work to date?

Tony: Well, I'll give you one even that started before I got here.

Emily: Great.

Tony: A couple months before I was hired, when the regents and leadership made outreach and engagement a top priority for us, we visited Southwestern Colorado, met with the Southern Ute tribe, heard some of the concerns and some of the needs of the indigenous people down in that part of the state, and we followed up the session, so we give our Government Relations team a lot of credit on this as well and former regents who brought this to us as a priority, and Senate Bill 29 was passed. That offers in-state tuition to Native American students from tribes with historical ties to Colorado, so that was a big step forward for recognizing what land we're on and the people who have been here since before many of us.

Emily: Yup. Yes.

Tony: Since I got here, I think we've been building connections to communities using our university resources, and I'm one of those. In Northeastern Colorado in the first six weeks on the job, we spent two days in Fort Morgan, Sterling, Burlington and Limon. We visited with school districts, higher ed institutions, hospitals, health care providers, research networks, elected officials, chambers of commerce, and had a community event as well.

Emily: Wow.

Tony: We're able to bring a lot of the feedback from that visit back to CU into our campuses to help foster those connections that either the people in the community didn't know that they can make with CU or that CU just wasn't aware of in terms of what those needs were.

Emily: That's great.

Tony: There was some follow-up and I think some positive outcomes from that particular trip, and I think we'll start to see more of that as we're out and about more, which we haven't been able to do a whole lot in the last year.

Emily: Yeah. Right.

Tony: I think most importantly, it's about building relationships and trust for the university. Again, the title of my job is intentional. The title of the office is intentional. We want to make sure that we're not just going out and seeing people once, but that we have an ongoing dialogue, trust and relationships with the people and across the State of Colorado to know that CU is here to help serve their needs.

Emily: I love that. That's great. You mentioned the pandemic. We all know about the pandemic. You started basically right before the pandemic.

How did you facilitate engagement when the world was locked down? What kind of workarounds did you use to keep going?

Tony: Well, after the panic ended in terms of, "How am I going to do this work?," right after four months of being on the ground and really getting to experience the community, but not just the community, but also the campuses, my job, I think it's really important to understand the programs we offer, the student populations that we have, the different people on the campuses, what they do and what they're really good at and what they need, and I was just starting to really delve into that in those first four months, so now we're getting back to that, which is great, but yeah.

Emily: Yeah.

Tony: It was a tough change at first. It took me about six weeks to really figure out how to do this in an effective way, and I think that's about as much time as it took the world to make the adjustment as well, so it went to all virtual. I mean, it's not the same as being in a room with someone, shaking somebody's hand, even having a refreshment with them, let's say, and just really getting to learn about somebody in what they do and who they represent, but it works.

Emily: Right.

Tony: I think one of the most rewarding things about the environment that we've been in, and now the, back to a little bit of normality here is you've built these relationships with folks you've never met.

Emily: Right.

Tony: Even with coworkers, right?

Emily: Right.

Tony: You've talked to over the screen or on the phone, and then when you finally meet them, it really is a rewarding experience to be able to do that, so I find the same thing to be the case with people in the community and the strength of those relationships that have been built virtually, which do offer some opportunities that you don't have normally.

Emily: That's great.

Tony: I mean, I don't know how I would have been able to build that much of a relationship with somebody who's out of town in a different part of the state if it hadn't been for those on-screen opportunities.

Emily: Right. Yeah.

Tony: That's really going to be beneficial for us as we go back into the state now and meet with folks and help them, have those folks help me understand, "Who do I need to be talking to in these particular towns or parts of the state as well?"

Emily: Sure. Well, the pandemic aside, what are some of the challenges in building engagement within our communities?

Tony: I think the big challenge is just trying to resume where we were in 2019.

Emily: Okay.

Tony: We started really well in the first couple months. Had some meaningful engagement, had some follow-up, and now we got to kind of get back to that. I think for us, it's going to be really about listening, as I mentioned before, because the needs of communities have changed so much in the last 14 months.

Emily: Sure.

Tony: Whether it be from a health care standpoint, from an education standpoint, all of those things have been turned on their heads a little bit, so I think that's going to be the big challenge, is getting back out there. I have to say, even in 2021 here is we have a 70% vaccination rate and people are getting a little bit comfortable coming back and meeting in-person, that's going to be part of the sensitivity we have to gauge as well because some people won't be there for various reasons, so we're going to really try to be careful about that as we get back out into the world.

Emily: Right.

Tony: I'm hoping by next year, we'll be back to as much normal as we can, but I don't know if we ever will be back to normal at this point, you know?

Emily: Right.

Tony: We're going to have to just gauge that and really be good guests, I think, and understand if you're going to people where they are, you have to understand what their comfort level is too.

Emily: Absolutely. Yeah. Well, diversity, equity and inclusion are priorities at the university, and I'm wondering, how does your role, you mentioned kind of reaching out to diverse communities before, how does your role help facilitate CU's efforts in these areas?

Tony: Well, I have to say, this is one of the things that really made the job appealing to me. I do a lot of work on my own, volunteer work, spend my time and resources in this area in my personal time, and for me, it's really important because I'm a first-generation student. I'm a student of color or person of color. I'm not a student anymore.

Emily: Right.

Tony: That was a long time ago.

Emily: Student of life.

Tony: Student of life, continuous learner.

Emily: Yes.

Tony: Right. I think it's important because I feel like we have the ability as a university to help students like me, who maybe couldn't have afforded school, didn't have the resources to really understand what that took to get through higher education, so personally, it's very important, but I think for the university, it's become something that is not only the right thing to do, but also a business decision. This state and this nation are getting more diverse by the day, so if we want to look at our future enrollment, and we're in a state where high school enrollment is starting to level off, and our fastest-growing population, for example, is Latino population here in Colorado, 23, 24% of the population now, a third of the state by 2030, which isn't that far away, and almost half the state by 2050, it's an economic decision for us, as

well as making sure that we have a student enrollment that we can count on, a workforce that we're developing that's prepared to go out and contribute to the economy, and I would even say it's a national security issue in terms of making sure we remain competitive with countries like China and having our leaders, future leaders train, not just our business people, but our future elected leaders, our future policy makers and so forth. I think that's our job as a university to do that.

My role really is to make sure that the university is a resource to foster these effective connections with the diverse communities, I think understanding those needs, and again, talk about Latino community, the hardest hit, if you will, during the pandemic, so making sure that we are responding to that. It also becomes an effort for us to recruit and retain diverse students, faculty and staff, so as we look at our student population changing, I think we also need to look at our professors and our faculty and the people who support those students changing as well. The other thing that I think may not be known by a lot of our listeners too, is that during the pandemic, CU brought in our first Chief Diversity Officer, Theodosia Cook. She's been here now for about a year, little over a year. I do work pretty closely with her on some efforts as well, but I think having people who have experienced some of this in their own lives will help the university not only focus on these efforts, but also bring words to action.

That's really what I'm trying to do in my work, is make sure that we are connected to these communities and that we are responding to what the changing needs are, so I'm hopeful that I can continue to do that in a better way as we start to open up again here.

Emily: Well, you referenced some of the stakeholders you engage with before, but an important aspect of your role is to engage with various stakeholders.

Tony: Right.

Emily: What are some of the groups that you're involved with?

Tony: I serve on various boards on behalf of the university. I'm on a chamber of commerce board in the South Metro area, now on the Fitzsimons Innovation Community Board, which is the redevelopment of the Fitzsimons space for biosciences park, which has a great potential to impact not only research, but the economy here in Denver and in Colorado. On my own time, I'm also the Board President for the Latin American Educational Foundation, so those being in that space, I think is really helpful for us because it makes sure that we're at the table on important topics and that we know about events and efforts to help move things forward.

Emily: That's great.

Tony: I try to be as present I can. I think you have to be very picky about which board you serve on, so there's a lot of opportunities for that out there and it becomes a bandwidth issue at some point, but that's one way that we do it.

Emily: Yeah.

Tony: The other thing is we have, through my engagement budget, really tried to support organizations that either have an impact directly on students or on diverse communities as well in Colorado, so we are members of several different things through my office that I think are important for CU, again to be at the table there. That helps us build an understanding of what is needed, as I said before, and make sure that we're listening and learning.

Emily: Yeah. Absolutely.

Tony: The other thing it does is it provides us an opportunity to be part of those programs as well.

Emily: Right.

Tony: So not me, but bringing other people like the President or people from campuses to talk about, "Here's a great program we have at this particular campus you may not know about, so please take advantage of that or think about how you can be part of it."

Emily: Right. That's great, so that benefit for the university is very apparent. How do these connections benefit sort of the broader communities?

Tony: I think in terms of the impact there, it provides opportunities for us that we may not have known about. It can be as broad as going from a, creating a new program that we may not have right now to providing people in the community to actually participate in different types of programs that we have, so it varies, I think based on where you are, but there's a lot of opportunity there for all of that.

Emily: Right. Sure. Great. Well, are there specific stakeholders you have a goal to reach out to and/or engage with?

Tony: Yeah, I think in future engagement, I do. One of the things I really want to do is get more involved with our veterans community. We talked about diversity in our student enrollment, our student body, making sure that we offer learning opportunities for all students, so there's a thriving veterans community here in Colorado, disabled students, so the disabled community, I think is another one I'd like to make more inroads with over the next year. Regional groups, I think sometimes we get very focused on Denver, and it's easy to do that because a lot of the organizations are based here, but would really like to get more involved with the organizations that represent the community around the state.

Emily: Right.

Tony: I think one that's been brought forward as well, and especially when it comes to diverse communities is really understanding the needs of immigrants from all nations, new to the state, new to the nation, and also potential future students, we hope, right?

Emily: Sure. Yeah. Right.

Tony: I think that'd be the top of the list. There are some great organizations around the state with whom I've already interacted, and I think we want to do more there too, like the regional advocacy groups, Club 20, Action 22, Pro 15, chambers and so forth, and we're going to really try to take more opportunities to do that as we get back out in the road.

Emily: Well, you're going to be very busy, Tony.

Tony: It's going to be a busy fall. Yes it is. That's for sure.

Emily: Given the sort of grassroots element that comes with engagement efforts, what can our listeners do to promote engagement both with CU and in their own communities?

Tony: Well, I think one, when we're out and about, we're going to have community events, and I'm going to try to work through the alumni offices and the other campus offices to promote those. It'd be great to see people at those events.

Emily: Yeah.

Tony: I would love for people to think about ways they could connect the university with their employers, or student opportunities, internships and so forth.

Emily: Oh, right.

Tony: We would really like to try and provide as many of those opportunities as possible for students who are about to graduate, but also coming into the system right now. We also have a CU Advocates network, that is a good support system for the university as well, that we try to keep informed on what we're doing and how to utilize those folks to help us either with public policy or just being present at events.

Emily: Yeah.

Tony: I think those are great ways to do that, but I think as well, I hope people just understand that I'm here, and there's an office of engagement and that we are interested.

Emily: Yeah. Right.

Tony: I will take a call from anyone, and if there's a chance to engage, I don't shut any doors because you never know where that conversation can lead.

Emily: Absolutely.

Tony: I hope that people would, if they know that I'm here, call me and say, "Hey, I'd love to talk to you about this or that," and I can make the right connections on who needs to be the end point on the campuses.

Emily: Tony, you've given us a great idea of the scope of your job. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us today?

Tony: No. I would just reiterate what a fun job this is, I think, to be representative of a great institution like CU. Really proud to be here and love CU and hope I'm here for a very long time, but there's so much more we can do as a university, whether that is in the state or even beyond the state borders, to help people understand all the things that we provide, but also make sure that people understand that this is an accessible and affordable place to go to school. And I hope that people, especially when they have kids, grandkids or so forth, remember CU is a place that you can be.

Emily: Well, Tony, we hope you're here for a very long time too. Thank you for everything you do for the university and thank you so much for your time today to be featured on this podcast. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

Tony: Thank you very much, Emily. Appreciate it.

Emily: Thanks.