



CU On The Air Podcast

August 24, 2021

CU President Todd Saliman

Emily: The university of Colorado has a huge impact on the state of Colorado, and its return on investment is substantial. CU President Todd Saliman speaks with CU on the Air about the value of education, how the institution, its students, faculty and staff are adapting today; and how a collaborative environment is guiding the university and the state into the future.

President Saliman, thank you so much for being here with us today. I don't need to tell you that this is a time of great transition for CU. We're still facing challenges related to the pandemic, we're resuming hybrid working in learning and the regents are starting a search for CU's next president. While I'm sure that leading a four campus public research university is never an easy job. How has it leading to you during a time of such uncertainty and how would you describe your approach to the job of president?

Todd: Well, it is definitely an uncertain time, but it's also an inspiring time to see the students, faculty and staff responding and rallying when in the face of adversity has been extraordinary and to see how everybody has been able to adapt to the changing modalities and the changing rules and requirements has been incredible. Sometimes, as we know, higher education has the reputation of being, something that has a difficult time adapting and changing. Well, if we've seen anything, is that higher education actually can adapt and can change and can be responsive. And my hat goes off to all of the students, faculty and staff who have who've done just that.

Emily: How do you approach the job of president? Is it sort of a one day at a time type of thing, or do you have any, method to your madness, so to speak?

Todd: So I definitely approach it collaboratively. I think that my first job is to is to help the campuses excel and to support their work. The campuses, the students, the faculty, the staff, our alumni, they are CU, and my job is to help all of them do what they do well. So I want to work with the students, faculty and staff. I want to work with the campuses to make sure that what we do, what I do supports and promotes their work.

Emily: What are some of your priorities as president of CU?

Todd: One of the things that is very clear is that we need to use that collaborative environment to maximize our ability to operate efficiently and well. And so I am working closely with the campuses and with system staff to make sure that the work of the system administration and the work that we do with the campuses runs well. I also feel like it's very important to make sure that we communicate effectively about the University of Colorado, and higher education in general, to the people of Colorado. One of the things that I think we've seen develop over time is a misunderstanding about the value of higher education, both to individuals who go to college, but also to communities. What is crystal clear and all the data support this is that a college degree is well worth. It, it's a great value and that we are a huge part of the state economy.

- Todd: We're the third largest employer of the state. And I want to get that message out that we we're, we're a great value. Higher education is a great value for students and a great contributor to the state. There's a perception that the cost of getting a college education has been going up. And that's actually not the case. When you look at the out-of-pocket costs for families and students, the actual cost of getting a degree at CU. And you look at that for every income group at all of our campuses is essentially gone down when adjusted for inflation over the last five or six years. That means that that it's cheaper to go to college now than it was a few years ago. And there's this perception that that's not the case. And we want to turn that around. The other critical thing that I want to talk to Coloradans about and communicate is the value of the diversity of our campuses and not just the diversity of the people on our campuses, but the diversity of the work that's done at our campuses. All of our campuses have a unique role in the CU ecosystem and in the state of Colorado, there's something for everyone at CU. And we want to talk about those differences and celebrate those differences because that's the strength of CU.
- Emily: Wonderful. So diversity equity and inclusion and freedom of speech are critical issues and priorities at CU, where does CU stand on these issues?
- Todd: So those are critical issues at the University of Colorado, and we actually have built them into our strategic plan. So when you look at the strategic plan, which is now on our website, cu.edu, you can see that we have specific goals when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion. And we have set those goals in terms of graduation rates, retention rates, but also in terms of, of the number of students, faculty, and staff, you know, trying to ensure that we have a diverse student population and a diverse, and a workforce at CU. We also have we've created something called the University of Colorado culture survey that our students and faculty and staff will be taking in October. There are a variety of those of questions on that survey, but you know, a couple of them ask about things like, do you feel like you belong at CU? Do you feel like your opinions are respected to see you to feel like you are heard at CU? And, we are really encouraging our students and faculty and staff to participate in that survey because we want to make sure that people feel valued and that they are exposed to diverse opinions here.
- Todd: We'll have information on that survey so we can see what, you know, what types of students or how students feel based upon different groups. Based upon ethnicity, based upon political affiliation, all of those things are provided voluntarily and all the, responses to the survey are confidential. And so we won't know who said what. We're hoping that people will fill it out, because we want to know if people feel listened to, and, and that they feel welcomed at the university. We are committed to exposing people to diverse opinions that the university of Colorado, you know, as Bruce Benson always said, we'd like to teach people how to think, not what to think. And I couldn't agree with that more. And we are committed to making sure that, diverse students and diverse opinions are represented at the University of Colorado.
- Emily: Well, what are some of the challenges you anticipate you will face in the months ahead.
- Todd: Well, we're not sure what challenges and we're working hard to try to mitigate those challenges. The campuses and our leadership and the students and faculty and the staff are taking this Delta variant and COVID very, very seriously, and we are wanting to do everything we can to try to keep our campuses safe so that we can keep our near normal experience throughout this fall semester and throughout the year. So we're not exactly sure how it's going to end up, but we, what we can control is how we respond. And we are responding in ways that we think are, are balanced that put student faculty and safety first.
- Todd: One of the other challenges, all of higher education faces in Colorado is funding. Now the legislature and the governor have really stepped up for higher education and have increased funding significantly over the last few years and we're incredibly grateful for that. Despite their efforts, we're still funded at a very low level compared to other states. I think we're 47th in the nation. Now that doesn't mean that the work of the legislature and the governor hasn't been appreciated and value because it has been. Without their work, we would be ranked even lower. And it's hard to claw your way up on that ranking scale. That being said, the fact that we are under-resourced in Colorado means that we have challenges that higher education doesn't face in many other states. And it also makes us a bit vulnerable because other states have more money and they can provide scholarships to Colorado high school graduates and Colorado

residents, and essentially draw them away from our Colorado higher education institutions to other states. And so we know that the legislature is aware of this. We know the governor is aware of it. We know they care a lot, and we are committed to working with them to try to solve this, but it will be an ongoing challenge for higher education in Colorado until we figure out a solution to that problem.

Todd: And so one of the things that we have to do in response is to operate well and to, into, to get squeeze every ounce of value we can out of every dollar that comes into the University of Colorado. And so we are committed to efficiencies both on the education side, but also on the operation side. You know, when you look at CU Boulder and you look at spending on administration per student, compared to their PAC 12 peers, CU Boulder is ranked number 11. That means that we have the second from the lowest administrative spending rate at CU Boulder compared to our PAC 12 peers. That's an example of what we're doing to try to keep costs under control so that we could focus our resources on what matters most. And that's our mission.

Emily: Wonderful. You've talked a little bit about some of the messages you'd like to convey. And last month we spoke with assistant vice president for engagement, Tony Salazar, who talked about upcoming outreach tours across the state. And I'm wondering, what are you hoping to accomplish with this outreach? And will you be offering these messages you're discussing today to Coloradans across the state?

Todd: Well, the first thing we'll do when we go out and about, and go on these outreach tours is listen. So we have a lot to say, but we also need to listen a bit. We need to hear from Coloradans, what they want from the University of Colorado. We want to hear from them, what, what will it take for, them to choose us when it comes to sending, sending a student to college or engaging with the higher ed institution for some sort of business partnership. We want to be Colorado's first choice. We also want to support the work of our colleagues around the state. So there are lots of important and good institutions around Colorado. And there's always a little bit of competition, of course, but we're also partners. And so we want to be able to engage and partner with our fellow institutions around the state.

Todd: We just talked about the value of higher education, the affordability of CU, the diverse missions of our campuses, those are things that we want to talk to all of Colorado about. And not just one and done. This needs to be a sustained effort where we talk to the people of Colorado, where we listened to the people of Colorado, and we make this an ongoing conversation where we continue to go back to communities throughout the state and show our commitment to them because we want them to be committed to us as well.

Emily: You've said, quote, CU is all about opportunity and serving our communities, state, nation and world. How is CU succeeding in this regard?

Todd: All it takes is a quick walk around our campuses to see how we're succeeding. And my favorite part of my job in the paper part of my prior job was when I got to spend time on the campuses and hear from students and hear the extraordinary things that they're going to be doing with their lives and hear from faculty and tour their labs, and hear about how they're changing, how they teach, so that people learn better and faster. And it's really just inspiring to see the students and the faculty and the staff and what they do and how they are truly transforming the world every day, one person, and one idea at a time. And how are we doing that? How are we transforming Colorado? You know, how *aren't* we, I guess, is the question. We are, we are in every nook and cranny of, what it takes to make a society tick.

Todd: We're building rocket ships and we're educating social workers. We're doing everything it takes to make Colorado a successful state. And, we want to hear from Colorado what they need from us. And to the extent to which we need to change what we're doing to adapt to the workforce needs in Colorado, we are all ears because that's exactly what we want to do. There's more to going to CU than just getting a job. It improves your life in ways that go beyond your pocketbook. People who get a four year degree live longer, they're more civically engaged. They have happier, longer lives. And we want to be part of that. And we want to deliver that to the people of Colorado.

Emily: Is there anything that the university might do better to deliver that to the people of Colorado?

Todd: Definitely. I mean, we're a big place and we're awesome, but we can always be better. And that will never change. As soon as I'm done with this job, the next person will come in and they'll be able to make it better too. And, that's what we need to be committed to. We need to do more to make sure that we are serving all of Colorado, that the face of our students, faculty and staff reflects the diversity of Colorado. We need to do better when it comes to graduation rates for all of our students, but also especially for underrepresented minority students. We have the gap at most of our campuses in terms of graduation rates, where underrepresented minority students are graduating at a lower rate compared to our, to our total student population. That's not acceptable. We need to fix that. And that's one of the reasons why we've targeted that challenge in our strategic plan. The campuses have created five-year goals to close that gap, and they developed action plans to actually do the work that it takes to close the gap. Talking about this stuff is easy. It's the work that that's tough and it's the work that's important. And so are there things that we need to do better? You bet, and we're committed to doing them better, but we also can't pretend that we're going to fix things overnight. It's going to take hard work and intentional work. And that's what we're committed to.

Emily: You're a native Coloradan, a CU Boulder alumnus, a long-standing CU employee. You served eight years in the Colorado legislature, and you were in the cabinet for two of Colorado governors. How are those experiences and connections benefiting you in your current role as CU president?

Todd: Well, I love Colorado. Born and raised. And I wouldn't be talking to you today, if it wasn't for CU. I was headed in one direction when I walked through the doors at the University of Colorado in Boulder and then I changed direction because of my education and because of the experience that I had at CU. And I feel that my connection with the University of Colorado and my connection with Colorado, gives me an important perspective when we're talking about the values of our state and the needs of our state and how to connect with the people of Colorado. It doesn't mean that I know everything about Colorado and anybody who thinks they do well, they're wrong, they don't, because Colorado is a changing and dynamic state with lots of different people with lots of different needs. But I do feel like I have a good feeling for the heart of Colorado and what Coloradans generally expect from higher education and from the university. And I think that's incredibly helpful and valuable thing to me. And, you know, I've been around for a little while now, you know, and I know a lot of folks and I'm grateful for that. And, and it's funny, we're, we're a growing state, but we're also kind of a small state. And it's incredible how after you've been working in this state for a long time, you'll just continue to bump into people because it's not that big of a state and people who are interested in higher education or business, or whatever sector they're, interested in, and if dedicated their time and their lives too, they meet up throughout their careers, even as they've changed jobs. And so I'm grateful to be able to form those relationships throughout Colorado. And I'm excited to meet more people and to form more relationships as time goes on in this great state of ours.

Emily: Can you tell us how is CU working with our state and federal leaders to advance the priorities of the university?

Todd: So we work very closely with our state and federal legislative delegations and the governor's office to help make CU a better place and help make all of higher education in Colorado better. And when it comes to our federal delegation, they've been incredibly supportive during the last year and a half or two years to get us the support we need and that how all higher education needs to continue to thrive during some very challenging times. And we saw our revenues just plummet during the pandemic. And we saw our expenses go up and every institution in Colorado had that experience. Our federal delegation stepped up and they came through for us and for the other institutions. And we were able to continue to provide a high-quality experience for our students because they helped us make that possible.

Todd: Now are now we're working with our federal delegation on the next step for higher education. We are communicating to them the importance of doubling Pell grants for students all over the country. And especially here at CU. That will help make higher education more affordable for, for students all over the,

all over the nation. In terms of our state, our state legislators, we work very closely with them and with the governor's office to communicate the priorities and needs of the University of Colorado, but to also better understand what the state needs from CU. When I talk about us doing outreach to communities across Colorado, that includes our elected officials, because they're connected to, to their communities. And of course the governor is connected to the state. We want to hear from them what they need from us. Our job is to deliver for the people of Colorado, but we also let them know what we need from them.

Todd: You know, the fact that we're funded at a lower level, than higher education in other states that impacts our ability to do our work, but we don't stop with just saying, you know, we get less money than the other than other institutions around the country. We talk about what we would do with it. How will we do our jobs better? How will education become more affordable? How will our research improve? How will the quality of the education improve? That's what we talked to folks about, how will we become a more diverse institution? How can we help students leave college with less debt? These are things that are very important to us, that we talked to our state leaders about,

Emily: Are you looking forward to most in the months ahead,

Todd: I'm looking forward to moving the needle when it comes to the discussion about higher education in Colorado. I'm looking forward to people, better understanding the value of a four-year degree, and also better understanding the affordability of CU. I'm looking forward to people having a better understanding and a better appreciation for the diversity of our missions on our campuses and what they add to Colorado. I'm looking forward to *us* doing better when it comes to making progress on our strategic plan. And our goals in critically is graduation rates, retention rates, and affordability, access, research, fundraising. All these things are critical things. So I'm looking forward to moving the needle and to leaving, see you a little bit left better than I found it. And that, that should be the goal for everyone is to be of use and make things better than how we then how we receive them. And that will be the goal for the next person to make it better. There's lots of work to do, and there are incredible students, faculty and staff, and community partners who are committed to that work. And, um, and I'm excited to work with all of them to, make CU in Colorado and the world a better place.