



COLORADO COLLEGE

State of the College | January 2026

A conversation between President Manya Whitaker and Royce Hinojosa '26, Student Body President

Royce Hinojosa:

Hello everyone. My name is Royce Hinojosa, student body president and Class of 2026. I'm so excited to be here with President Whitaker to deliver an update on the state of the College.

Rather than a formal address, we thought we'd try a more conversational approach this time around. Today we're going to be talking about achievements from the academic year so far, College priorities for the months ahead, and the broader landscape shaping higher education today.

President Manya Whitaker:

Great, thanks so much, Royce. I'm excited to be here, and I appreciate you taking the time. I'm happy to share some updates.

Royce:

Amazing—let's dive in. Before we look ahead, I think we should definitely think about the fall. It's been a busy, busy time here on campus.

In November, you were inaugurated as Colorado College's 15th president. What was that like? Can you share some key takeaways from that day?

President Whitaker:

Absolutely. I think for me, the takeaway word would be gratitude. I am deeply appreciative of everybody who made the day magical—from the President's Office to the Events team, the Office of Communications and Marketing, Facilities—everybody.

It was really just a moment that I never anticipated having, and it still remains very special. But if I think about what I will carry with me, it's the reality that everybody showed up. I mean, it was a Saturday morning, and to see faculty and staff come to work on a Saturday was really exciting.

The students who performed in the Tiger Jazz Band, as well as Ellement A Cappella group—it was just so nice because they showed up also for rehearsal to prepare for that day. And perhaps what was most striking was that other institutions sent delegates and the Colorado Springs community showed up in force.

And I think having so many different groups of people really speaks to our collective belief in CC and in what we can accomplish together.

Royce:

I would agree. I think “Lift as We Climb” was really resonant for me. I think it really represents the student body very well, and the work that I do too.

Thinking a little more about the fall, what are some academic highlights you’d like to share?

President Whitaker:

There’s a lot that’s been happening, as you know, because you’re here all the time. I will lift up the ones that are really relevant to the liberal arts and how we leverage the Block Plan to enhance the liberal arts here at CC.

One of the first things that comes to mind is our Community Engaged Courses. These really reflect our sense of civic responsibility as a college. In the fall, we had at least 25 of these Community Engaged Courses, and in the spring, we have 27 of them lined up.

Similarly, while some folks are out in the community, we have faculty and staff who are really invested in research. Thus far this fiscal year, we have 16 faculty and staff who are managing 22 grants worth about \$3.4 million. So, while we are a teaching-focused institution, research also happens here.

So, we’re a place that doesn’t just transmit knowledge—we absolutely create that knowledge. And in doing so, we really cultivate a sense of confidence and pride in our students—because they get to participate in these types of immersive learning opportunities, like the Career Catalyst Program. That is an initiative that we piloted about two years ago now, where we have two faculty members from interdisciplinary backgrounds take students into the field to spend full-time at a community organization or a corporation.

And what’s unique is that these aren’t traditional field trips or observations that we see at most institutions. Because of the Block and because students are only in this class, they actually are going to work every day for two weeks. So, weeks two and three, they’re working full time helping the organization solve a real problem.

For example, in Block Two, there were students in Washington, D.C., at National Geographic, where they were helping Nat Geo figure out how to reach different audiences with their new museum. In Block Six, there'll be a group headed to Aspen, where they'll explore the art and science of convening for social change. Block Seven, they'll be in San Francisco studying the judiciary at the Hall of Justice. And Block Eight is here in Colorado, studying wildfire journalism and ecology.

And so, while I love the fact that all students, all years, all majors and minors can apply, what really excites me about the Career Catalyst Program is that it represents the intellectual core of the liberal arts through interdisciplinary learning.

Royce:

Thank you so much—that's really exciting to hear. I know fundraising and enrollment are also really important to the health of the College, and so is branding ourselves and defining our identity as Colorado College. Can you tell me a little bit more about CC's progress in these areas?

President Whitaker:

Okay, wow, you're hitting the big three all at once!

So, thinking about fundraising in particular, we have amazing momentum with our athletics giving. We got a \$1.8 million unrestricted gift, so we're very excited about that. And the athletics annual giving day was the best in history—we had 312 unique donors give \$213,000. So, it's a good opportunity for me to say 'thank you' to the folks who are investing in championship culture and elevating the student experience.

When I reflect back so far this year on enrollment, one of the things that we're really happy about is launching the Four Corners Pledge. As you know, we've had the Colorado Pledge since around 2019, and that's our family-income-based-program that decides the tuition that a family would pay. And so now we've expanded that to our neighboring states, including New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona. And as soon as we announced it, we saw an early rise in applications. So, we will definitely continue to keep our eye on how that plays out in the upcoming years.

And then you asked about branding. So, we have been embarking on a brand refresh for the past kind of 18 months or so. And so, this fall, we were very excited to unveil the products of all that work, including updated admissions materials, new visuals, and then a cohesive messaging framework designed to really

personalize our message to different audiences. And this is incredibly important as we think about brand awareness, institutional visibility, and claiming our space in higher education.

Royce:

As we think about the spring, is there anything you're particularly excited about?

President Whitaker:

Okay, so I'm somebody, as you know, who likes to do a lot of stuff at once. I like coming in and having a new challenge every day. And our spring workflow very much reflects that. And so, we have a lot of things going on, both in the long term and the short term. So, I'll give you a preview into a few of those things.

One of our priority areas right now is alumni engagement. Our alums are ambassadors for the College, and so, we're doing a lot of work to follow up on a spring 2024 alumni survey, where we asked alumni across generations how they would like to stay connected with CC. So, one of the things that we're doing that is a direct output of that data is our Tiger Travel Program—this year, we've had two trips so far. Professor Pamela Reaves in Religion led an alumni trip to Turkey. Professor Emerita Susan Ashley led a trip to Italy, and then we have five more coming up soon, from Cuba all the way to New Zealand.

But for people like me who can't take that amount of time off of work, we also have much shorter Alumni Block Breaks. I recently just returned from the Alumni Block Break to Portland, where we did a wine tour facilitated by Professor of Education Mike Taber, which was really nice.

For our alums who really want to support our current students, we have TigerLink, which is our kind of alumni-student mentoring program. And we've matched about 100 student pairs so far. So, we'll continue to see how that plays out.

And then we also have, our Career Center hosts Career Nights. So, in the fall, we had a Business Careers Night as well as a Science Careers night. And then upcoming this spring, we'll have a Media/Communications night, as well as a Social Impact/Nonprofit night. And then we'll have an alumni panel of visual artists as well. So, those are all super exciting.

And then we continue to just welcome our alums back to campus every fall for Homecoming and Reunions. And this year we had over 1,080 alums come back. And so, we'll get feedback and continue to bolster those programs so that we can welcome our Tigers back home.

So, that's on the long term. In the short term, we're doing something I particularly think is exciting, though most people don't, which is strategic planning. A couple of years ago, some of my colleagues gave me a sash that says, 'Strategic Planning Queen,' and I've very much embraced that. And in 2024 and 2025, we created divisional strategic plans, which will now feed up into an institutional strategic plan that we will launch in this coming academic year. That work has been informed by many years of input and feedback from our campus community and our alumni base—and is currently being bolstered by an institutional review.

We launched an institutional review late in the fall semester to really see how we are allocating our resources, including talent, space, technology, and budget, and ensuring that we're allocating those resources in mission-aligned ways. So, we're working with an external firm who can objectively assess those things. They are currently in the data collection phase, and that includes document analysis, as well as surveys, focus group interviews, all the things we usually do for data collection. They will analyze that data later this spring, and then sometime around late May, early June, we'll get a final report and recommendations. So, I'm excited about that.

But finally, for folks who want a little more 'azzle dazzle,' one of the bigger initiatives we have is enhancing our science facilities. We really do want to recognize that about 40% of our students are majoring in a science-related discipline, and they frankly deserve upgraded facilities where they can have high quality educational experiences. Part of the plan is to also create flexible classrooms and workplaces that we can update over time to meet our evolving needs. And of course, our science faculty are doing incredible research, and they deserve the lab space to do the research befitting of our Research College designation.

So, this is a massive philanthropic effort. And we need the support of our full community to make sure that we are graduating students who can tackle tomorrow's problems—and, frankly, remedy some of the harm that we've caused, whether it's in the environment, in the healthcare system, housing, and everything. So, I invite everyone to contribute what they can because all contributions help shape our shared future.

Royce:

Wow, that's all so fantastic to hear. I actually had the opportunity to participate in our alumni match program through the Career Center and was able to attend our Government Careers Night last spring, and I can testify to how impactful they have been.

And I really want to zoom out now and think more about the broader landscape facing higher education. We're seeing key demographic changes that are impacting fundraising and philanthropic efforts. How is CC preparing for these changes?

President Whitaker:

Yeah, that's a great question—and probably the question I and other presidents get most often this year. These are headwinds that all colleges and universities in the U.S. are facing.

That said, per your question, we do need to be proactive around these things. And when we think about enrollment, we have to consider the birth dearth. You know, the fact that there's just fewer babies being born, which means there's fewer students going to college eventually. We also have the demographic shift where the population density of college-aged students is shifting from states really in the Northeast to spread out around the country.

And then in general, you know, the media has been promoting a narrative where people are questioning the value of higher education in general, but the liberal arts in particular. And so, new problems require new practices. We are now partnering intentionally with a variety of community-based organizations, such as Peak Education here locally and College Horizons more nationally.

We are also making sure that we leverage our new admissions materials to recruit from areas where perhaps we haven't intentionally recruited before. And that's also how we're using the Four Corners Pledge, which in addition to a recruitment mechanism here in Southwest, it's also a cost transparency mechanism, which feeds into the concern about the ROI of going to college these days.

We are connecting our prospective and concurrent admitted students with regional alumni or alumni in their cities as well. And then something else that's happening that's unique for me as a president is that when I'm traveling, I meet with high school counselors. And I do so so I can answer questions they have, sure, but a lot of the time it's about explaining the liberal arts and correcting any misconceptions they may have. So, there's a lot of things happening on that front in terms of enrollment efforts.

You also mentioned fundraising. Fundraising in general is just down across the country and in all sectors, but it of course is down in higher ed as well. When there's economic concern or strain, people are really cautious and careful about their spending. We also have research nationally that Gen Z and millennials are looking to give more for immediate impact causes like food banks, which is a bit of a shift from prior generations who were interested in legacy building. So, our

Advancement team is doing a fabulous job aligning donors' values and interests with very much the things that are going on here at CC, the needs that we have.

And to be clear, this is not about keeping the lights on, right? It's not about paying the bills. Our fundraising efforts are very much about ensuring access and opportunity for all students, regardless of their background, because we are committed to maintaining diversity of thought, diversity of experience, all the diversities that we have. And so, we do rely on philanthropic support for financial aid, for endowed professorships, for immersive learning opportunities like Career Catalyst. So, we are being proactive on that front as well.

Royce:

Thank you so much for all of your work in that area. It's really exciting to hear. I know there's also a policy side to higher education, which has been especially unpredictable this year. And personally, I don't feel like students always see that work. Can you tell me a little bit more about the advocacy work you're involved in and how CC is preparing to navigate these unprecedented times?

President Whitaker:

Sure, this is a really uncertain regulatory environment, and this is a time where I talk a lot about leaning into collaboration with other institutions, and not competition. For example, earlier in the spring 2025, we joined with about two dozen other small colleges to create the Small Colleges Coalition. Our initial goal was to advocate against the proposed endowment excise tax, which would have been a really difficult financial situation for CC. Fortunately, we were carved out in part because of our lobbying efforts in D.C. But now, some of the presidents in that group will continue to convene to explore other ways we can coordinate across small colleges to really amplify the message around the value of the liberal arts in particular. So, that's work that will be ongoing for, you know, the foreseeable future.

Early in the fall semester, I participated in a D.C. fly-in program with the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce/EDC. About 90 of us flew to D.C. and hung out together for two to three days where we really had conversations around the regional economy and workforce needs. I was able to meet with Mayor Mike Johnston, as well as Senator John Hickenlooper and Senator Michael Bennet. Our mayor, Mayor Yemi Mobolade, actually came to Inauguration. And he's always really connected to what's going on here at CC.

We, in around late November, welcomed a delegation of Colorado legislators, including two U.S. representatives, a state senator, and the Executive Director of

the Colorado Department of Higher Education to campus. And that was also a great conversation around how private institutions like CC are financed. And it also gave us an opportunity to advocate for our share of state funds for Colorado students as well. So, these are all pieces in the kind of higher ed advocacy landscape that I'm sure will continue to thrive moving forward.

Royce:

Okay, I just have one more question for you. And it sounds like the political landscape in relation to higher education is changing constantly. Political polarization is on the rise; AI is impacting every field. How does a liberal arts education stay relevant during this time? What makes it so worth the investment?

President Whitaker:

So, this is my favorite question, and you have crossed over into my area of expertise. I will do my best to be brief and not, you know, give you a three-and-a-half-hour class session answer. But one of the things that I often say is that here at the liberal arts, we teach students *how* to think, not *what* to think. And a lot of presidents are saying that now, but you know, I want to underscore that the Block Plan very much helps us emphasize the how over the what. AI can help us access information. It cannot tell us how to engage with the information. That is what we teach here at CC.

We teach skills that other institutions can't, because students are focused on too many things at once. So, we enhance things like sustained attention, alternating attention, through our interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum, we're really asking students to do the difficult cognitive labor of synthesis, analysis, evaluation.

And then I also think about the fact that you all do this type of work with folks you may have met three days ago, and you do it incredibly well. But those people you met three days ago often have very different perspectives and worldviews than you might have. So, embedded in those hours that we spend together in the classroom and out and about as a learning community is an emphasis on what we in psychology call cognitive dissonance: being able to manage information that's different from your own, that leads to cognitive flexibility. Being open to different ways of thinking.

And what's beautiful about the liberal arts, especially here at CC, is we do all of this within a framework of humanity. Whether it's in the classroom, on the stage, or in the community, we very much put people first, and that is the goal of a liberal arts education, is to graduate people who will do better for our society and our democracy. And that's what we do well at Colorado College.

Royce:

I think that really resonates with me and my experience at CC, especially as I get ready to graduate in May. Whether it be my block abroad in Paris or the internship I got in D.C. because of the Career Center, people remark again and again on my ability to contextualize quantitative issues within the broader context of humanity. And so, I really appreciate my CC education because of that. And it's been really nice to hear about all of these insights and the future of CC.

President Whitaker:

I really appreciate you taking the time. You're super busy, and so this dialogue has been great. And, yeah, I love sharing updates with CC students, so thank you again.