

Center for Pathways to Access and Equity in Education (CPAEE)

I. Introduction

Educational access and equity are fundamental human rights. All people deserve access to high quality education that allows them to thrive and reach their full potential. Yet, educational inequities persist in the U.S. and globally based on demographic factors including race, class, and gender. Scholars proclaim that educational achievement gaps veil the real issue—educational opportunity gaps (Flores, 2007). That is, there is a lack of opportunity to access experiences that promote equity in educational attainment.

A substantial body of research indicates that educational attainment impacts civic engagement, and health and economic outcomes, to name a few. Specifically, educational attainment impacts civil and social engagement, including the development of civic skills, social communication, and community volunteering (Desjardins et al., 2006). Researchers add that increased educational attainment results in healthy lifestyles and longer lifespans (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). This is particularly the case for diverse communities that are historically underserved, including, but not limited to, FirstGen, BIPOC, rural, and low-income. Research also shows that preschool education reduces social inequalities in educational achievement (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2016). Moreover, economic outcomes related to educational attainment include higher wages, increased economic productivity, and decreased unemployment (Donaldson et al., 2023).

Educational transitions occur across a person’s lifespan and can be important entry points or gatekeepers to educational attainment. In some nations, the entry point is pre-school—in the U.S. often conceptualized as ages 3 to 2nd grade. Transitions happen across schooling from elementary to secondary schooling. Post-secondary schooling continues for some, including nontraditional enrollment across the lifespan. Moreover, there are those who strive to learn well beyond retirement, stretching their curiosity in ways they could only imagine. Educational transitions reflect the progression and development of a life-long educational journey. This may include advancing to higher grades and levels of education, participating in specialized studies, and exploring novel educational activities and modalities for learning. Educational transitions happen inside and outside of formal institutions for learning. They happen in families, communities, nature, and in one’s imagination. They are mediated by one’s cultural ways of knowing and being in the world. One can learn from an elder, a beaver, a river, a rock, a teacher, or a college professor, to name a few. Education in its broadest sense is limitless and knows no boundaries.

Challenges exist in educational transitions across the lifespan. The transition from middle to high school presents students with challenges including increasingly rigorous academic expectations, desire for independence and autonomy, ethnic and gender identity development, and peer pressure (Bethea-Hampton & Wilson-Jones, 2018). Post-secondary education may also present challenges, including an increased need for time management skills and the discipline to meet academic expectations amidst increased independence and self-accountability. For career changers, the stress of going back to school or updating career skills can lead to parenting strains, stressors related to time constraints, and increasing debt (Kirby et

al., 2010; Stergiou & Airey, 2018). Retirement can bring a new slew of challenges and opportunities related to learning, identity development, and self-care (Bordia et al., 2020).

Educational transition programs can help people surmount challenges that create obstacles to academic and life success (Sapp, 2009). Programs dedicated to educational transitions can support human development, reduce dropout rates, increase higher education attainment, contribute to preparation for diverse learning and working environments, and promote wellness (Colorado Department of Education, 2019; Donaldson et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2017). Moreover, transition programs prepare people to reach their maximum potential by identifying appropriate supports and services that advance equity and access, community engagement, and success (Jones, 2021).

U.S. and global educational landscapes are changing. U.S. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) are facing new demographic challenges with aging adults and increasingly diverse youth. The value of a college education has come into question in a post-pandemic economy that is replete with job opportunities and declining post-secondary enrollments. The research literature also points to changing views of fields, jobs, and roles that are deemed essential (Fields, 2022). As sectors of the labor market evolve, partly based on the demand for workers amidst numerous unfilled roles, higher education institutions must accommodate this pivot by evaluating their value propositions, creating innovative opportunities, and diversifying pathways and points of access for formal education. It is essential to reconceptualize pathways for access and equity across educational transitions. What does educational equity and access look like in birth, in pre-school, in early years, in adolescence, in adulthood, in retirement? How has equity and access changed? Where are we now? Where are we going? What is our dream and how do we make it come true? It is more vital than ever to create pathways to access and equity across educational transitions in the U.S. and globally. Such pathways begin from birth to pre-school, continue to early years and adolescence, advance in post-secondary and career, and continue to thrive in retirement and beyond.

DU has the capacity, intellectual resources, and human capital to be the nucleus of access and equity in educational transitions across the lifespan—in the Rocky Mountain Region and beyond. However, these efforts are dispersed and not connected across schools, colleges, and units. MCE has nationally and internationally renowned scholars with research and practice expertise in areas of critical data and policy; culturally responsive evaluation; educational transitions across the P-20; education and health equity; and preparation of diverse professionals in education and health fields. MCE's vision is to be a global leader in innovative and effective approaches for promoting learning throughout the lifespan. MCE promotes educational change and equity through education, mental health, and information services and systems. UCOL builds innovative partnerships that serve the public good by providing alternative educational pathways that provide access to learner populations that might not otherwise engage with the University. This includes non-credit technology boot camps, a partnership with World Trade Center providing business skills for migrant communities through the Center for Professional Development, and a partnership with Prodigy Coffee House for apprentices to attend UCOL Frontline Manager Leadership program. MCE, GSPP, GSSW, CAHSS, CRSHE, and the Knoebel Institute for Healthy Aging advance equity through wellness initiatives. CAHSS faculty engage in research, scholarship, and teaching that explores and fosters educational equity. IRISE supports educational equity through various initiatives including Visiting Community Scholars, Post-Docs, and the RAGE Podcast. CCESL addresses big challenges through connected, community-engaged, equity-focused initiatives.

The Ideas to Impact grants and DU's 4D experience may be catalysts to build interdisciplinary connections across DU units. The Ideas to Impact grants create opportunities for collaboration through funding and support. DU's 4D provides a common language and roadmap to success. DU community members lead purpose-driven lives dedicated to the public good. DU has an opportunity to expand its public good impact with historically marginalized communities by eliminating barriers, challenging systemic inequities, and developing equitable solutions. DU is known for using innovative strategies to solve complex social challenges facing our country and the world, attracting students, staff, and faculty with strong character, a commitment to the public good, and a desire to advance their intellectual growth. MCE, UCOL, and DU are shining examples of the 4D, as exemplified by life-long learning opportunities; workforce development; DEIJ programmatic efforts; recruitment and retention of diverse students, staff, and faculty; community-engaged research and scholarship; and mutually beneficial community partnerships.

II. Proposal for a Center

The *Center for Pathways to Access and Equity in Education* (CPAEE) will explore and enrich educational transitions across the lifespan from early childhood education to retirement through a focus on 4 developmental pathways.

- Birth to Pre-school
- Early Years to Adolescence
- Post-secondary & Career
- Post-career, Retirement, & Beyond

CPAEE will lead advancements in the pathways through the following initiatives:

- € **Academic Preparation:** Develop courses, micro-credentials, curricular concentrations, and education major/minor, with an emphasis on educational equity and access in and across the pathways.
- € **Diversifying the Workforce:** Expand BIPOC representation in education and health professions (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, school leaders, school psychologists, librarians, counselors, social workers, researchers) in the pathways through innovative, inclusive, and culturally responsive strategies, models, and programs.
- € **Wellness:** Design and implement culturally responsive models that promote wellness across the pathways, including, but not limited to, prenatal care; early childhood thriving; positive identity development; cultural knowledge and pride; physical, mental, and spiritual health; healing historical trauma; self and community care; financial literacy; and life care.
- € **Best Practice in Local and Global Contexts:** Examine, synthesize, and disseminate best practice in educational access and equity along the pathways in local and global contexts including community forums and case studies of statewide, regional, urban, rural, suburban, and international exemplars.
- € **Research & Policy:** Develop and test community-engaged, critical research, policy, and evaluation frameworks and models that challenge inequality and foster educational access

and equity across the pathways. Critical and community-engaged research centers inquiry in communities and examines the role of power and social position within phenomena (O'Brien, et al., 2022). This includes using statistical data and quantitative inquiry to unveil oppressive practices and propose community-engaged and justice-oriented solutions.

The University of Denver's CPAEE will dramatically reimagine pathways to access and equity in education across the lifespan. CPAEE is designed to foster collaboration across DU schools, colleges, and units resulting in transformative change in education and wellness inside and outside of DU. We seek funding to build strategic connections within and beyond DU. The pathway initiatives will be developed using a phased approach. In Phase 1, a steering committee of interdisciplinary DU faculty and community partners will be established. In Phase 2, interdisciplinary teams will be selected to participate in Collective Impact Cohorts to develop goals and an action plan for each pathway. In phase 3, teams will implement and evaluate the action plan. In phase 4, teams will research the impact of their initiatives and disseminate their findings using traditional forms of academic scholarship and public scholarship. In phase 5, the teams will secure funding to maintain the initiatives and build sustainability mechanisms. Once the process is complete, the new teams will be selected to continuously improve practices and processes and engage in new actions that advance pathway initiatives. CPAEE will result in the following outcomes:

1. assess current pathways curricular offerings, design education minor/major, create curricular offerings integrating DEIJ and educational access and equity in pathways—resulting in increased enrollment;
2. increase number of BIPOC educators and health professionals as evidenced by admissions and degree/course completion data;
3. design and test culturally responsive measures of educational equity and wellness (e.g., validated scale and administered questionnaires)
4. convene community forums on the educational access and equity pathways and synthesize and disseminate findings;
5. launch an interactive, open access clearing house of educational access and equity pathways research and exemplars using traditional modes of scholarship and public scholarship;
6. develop, research, and disseminate community-engaged, critical research and policy models, frameworks, and scholarship; and
7. secure external funding to support and sustain initiatives.

III. Advancing DEIJ & Public Good

In Chancellor Haefner's statement on DEI, he states that "we must continue to strive for an inclusive community that embraces all its members, provides equality of opportunity for all and actively encourages all voices to be heard." CPAEE is created to provide opportunities for all through a focus on equitable education and wellness. Moreover, CPAEE aligns with DU's DEI action plan. Specifically, the focus on professional preparation aligns with Impact Area 3:

Invest in and provide training for students, staff, and faculty. CPAEE also aligns with Impact Area 5: Launch university-wide programming to explore a more equitable future as this initiative is focused on a university-wide collaboration to build a more equitable community, nation, and world. CPAEE advances research and knowledge through the exploration, development, implementation, and evaluation of models, programs, and practices that advance pathways to education access and equity. Moreover, this collaboration impacts historically marginalized communities through a focus on research and practice that is explicitly focused on advancing their educational attainment and well-being. This collaboration impacts the recruitment and retention of BIPOC DU students and professionals through the development of DU programs designed to prepare BIPOC professionals to lead in their respective fields. Last, a focus on education access and equity is a public good that can span urban, rural, and suburban communities; local, national, and international contexts; and human development across the lifespan.

IV. External Funding Sources

The creation of CPAEE, and its interdisciplinary design, require a \$10M financial commitment over five years to design, launch, and succeed in this endeavor. With the current state of educational access and equity, we believe that major donors will be interested in partnering with us on re-imagining education access and equity pathways. We believe that an interdisciplinary endeavor of this magnitude will provide opportunities to engage foundations and individual donors who invest in collaborative processes to advance educational access and equity. There are numerous funding opportunities aligned to CPAEE, including:

Foundations

National

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s [Evidence for Action: Innovative Research to Advance Racial Equity](#)
- [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) whose priorities include thriving children, working families, and equitable communities
- [William T. Grant Foundation](#) who has several grant opportunities including an institutional challenge grant that “encourages research institutions to build sustained research-practice partnerships with public agencies...to reduce inequality in youth outcomes” and research grants on reducing inequality.
- [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) which has grant opportunities related to new designs to advance learning, pathways to postsecondary success, and equitable systems.
- [Spencer Foundation](#) supports racial equity research, small-and-large scale research, and research practice partnerships.
- [Hewlett Foundation](#) supports educators, schools, and communities turn schools into places that empower and equip every student for a lifetime of learning, and to expand access to open educational resources.
- [Emerson Collective](#) centers their work on education with the understanding that the challenges we face as a society are deeply interconnected.

- Ascendium [Foundation](#) is working to change postsecondary and workforce training systems so that low-income learners have the same opportunities for academic and career success.
- Lumina Foundation focuses on helping to design and build an equitable, accessible, responsive, and accountable post-high school education system for all.
- Foundations Represented in the Presidents’ Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy (Ford Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Kresge)

Colorado

- [Gates Family Foundation](#), a Denver-based organization offering grants related to innovative learning environments, school system innovation, and conditions for sustained innovation
- [Gary Community Ventures](#) partners with our community to reshape the arc of opportunity for Colorado kids and families.
- [Buell Foundation](#) directly supports the healthy development of very young children between the ages of zero and five
- [Daniels Foundation](#) which prioritizes early childhood education, K-12 education, youth development, and aging
- [El Pomar](#) which has the following focus areas: arts and culture; civic and community; education; health and human services
- Community Foundation grants and DAF donations – Rose, Denver, Boulder and rural
- Next50 initiative supports efforts to ensure older adults have everything they need to thrive

Federal Agencies

- [National Science Foundation’s](#) grants on advancing racial and gender equity in STEM,
- United States Department of Education including the [Institute of Education Sciences](#) which funds a wide range of areas in education research and training
- [National Institutes of Health](#) which funds numerous areas related to racial equity, structural racism, and novel approaches to reducing disparities

State Agencies

- [Colorado Department of Education](#) which funds efforts related to adult education, health and wellness, early literacy, postsecondary and workforce readiness
- [Colorado Department of Higher Education](#) which has grants to increase access to higher education

Individuals

- Carrie Morgridge/Morgridge Family Foundation
- Lauri Hughes
- Nancy Gallavan
- Heather Dugdale

V. Sustainability

This project is sustainable in that it will result in new and expanded academic programs and community partner collaborations, tuition funding to diversify BIPOC professionals, and support to advance sponsored research. Additionally, CPAEE core leaders will come from MCE and other DU units. This initiative will require a \$10 million dollar investment of \$2 million per year for five years. Funding will include the following:

- 2 course releases and stipend for a director (MCE or another DU unit) to oversee implementation and development of CPAEE
- 2 courses releases and stipend for a faculty research director (MCE or another DU unit) to oversee research initiatives and GRAs
- 2 staff members: communications, grants support
- 1 post-doc advance research and practice initiatives and collaborate in the development of the vision, mission, and goals of the Center
- 4 GRAs to support pathways
- annual retreat at the DU James C. Kennedy Mountain Campus for faculty and staff engaged in education and health equity research and programming
- affiliated faculty/staff stipends to support the development, implementation, and evaluation CPAEE pathways and initiatives
- Project coordinator
- Community forums
- Stipends for interdisciplinary team members

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Team Members

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Dr. Elaine Belansky, Director Center for Rural School Health & Education & MCE Research Professor

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Academic Schools/Units Involved in the Development of Project

Team leads and members facilitated three sessions with MCE and DU faculty and staff from 9 DU schools, colleges, and units. The leads collected notes and identified common themes to

identify the pathways and areas of foci. This proposal was developed based on feedback from faculty and staff from the following DU schools, colleges, and units: MCE (Roncoroni, Schmidt, Anderson, Hafenstein, Stewart, Chao, Michalec, Tabron, Leonard, Belansky); University College (McGuire, Larson, Cragg, Rogers); CAHSS (Adamo, Stanton, Byron, Leahy; Feitz); GSSW (Scott, Mitchell); Sturm College of Law (Wiersema); Josef Korbel School of International Studies (Galemba); Natural Sciences and Mathematics (Arias); University Libraries (Farrell, Beuz, Trucks, Solis). These faculty and staff have strong expertise in the areas of:

- professional preparation of BIPOC educators (MCE; ECHO-DU; GSSW, GSPP; CAHSS);
- workforce and career development (UCOL, Daniels College of Business, Career and Professional Development);
- mental health in marginalized communities (CRSHE, IRISE, GSPP, MCE, GSSW);
- lifespan emphasis (UCOL, Knoebel Institute for Healthy Aging; GSPP, GSSW);
- STEM in education (MCE, NSM, Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science; E-STEM; CAHSS Emergent Digital Practices);
- Critical, culturally responsive research methods (MCE, GSSW, GSPP)
- community engagement (MCE, IRISE, Latinx Center, IRISE, CCESL);
- school-to-prison pipeline (GSPP, GSSW, Sturm College of Law); and
- global education (Korbel, MCE)

Appendix A: References

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