



## **Auraria Campus at 50: A Shared Campus Powering Colorado's Future**

*By Colleen Walker, CEO, Auraria Higher Education Center*

Fifty years ago, on January 21, the Auraria Campus opened its doors with a bold and unconventional idea: that three distinct public institutions could share one campus in the heart of Denver to expand access to higher education and strengthen our region. Five decades later, that idea has not only endured but also become one of Colorado's most powerful engines of opportunity and economic growth.

As we mark this milestone, it is essential to acknowledge that the Auraria Campus did not begin on empty land. Long before classrooms and libraries stood here, this place was home to a vibrant neighborhood, known as Auraria, whose residents were displaced to make way for redevelopment. The Displaced Aurarians made profound sacrifices, and their history is inseparable from our own. Today, we are committed to honoring that legacy through education, storytelling, and continued partnership, ensuring that remembrance and respect remain central to who we are as a campus.

From that complex history emerged something singular.

Today, the Auraria Campus is home to the University of Colorado Denver, Metropolitan State University of Denver, and Community College of Denver. Together, these institutions educate tens of thousands of students every year, many of whom are first-generation college students, working adults, parents, and lifelong Coloradans seeking an affordable path to opportunity.

The impact of that shared mission reaches far beyond campus boundaries.

A 2024 economic impact study found that the Auraria Campus generates an estimated **\$2.7 billion annually for Colorado's economy**, supporting nearly **19,300 jobs statewide** and contributing **\$84.9 million each year in state and local tax revenue**. This economic benefit is felt throughout Denver and across the state—supporting local businesses, public services, and long-term economic resilience.

That impact is driven by more than campus operations alone. Students, faculty, staff, and visitors contribute to surrounding neighborhoods through everyday spending. More importantly, Auraria plays a critical role in workforce development by educating teachers, nurses, engineers, public servants, and entrepreneurs who are essential to Colorado's future.

Each institution contributes in distinct and meaningful ways. Across healthcare, education, technology, public service, and the trades, employers need skilled, adaptable talent. Auraria delivers that pipeline. From Community College of Denver's workforce-



aligned credentials to Metropolitan State University of Denver's career-focused degrees, to CU Denver's research and professional programs, the campus educates the people who power Denver's economy.

But Auraria's significance extends beyond economic metrics.

The shared-campus model itself has become a point of national interest. At a time when higher education faces rising costs, enrollment shifts, and increased scrutiny over public investment, Auraria offers a proven alternative. By sharing infrastructure, services, and space, while preserving each institution's identity, we reduce duplication, maximize taxpayer dollars, and keep education accessible.

That approach has drawn attention from higher education leaders and state legislators across the country, including in California, who are studying the Auraria Campus as a model for affordability, efficiency, and student success. What began as a bold local experiment 50 years ago is now informing national conversations about how public higher education can, and must, evolve.

Looking ahead, our work continues. Through the Auraria Higher Education Center, we are advancing future-focused projects, including mixed-use development and affordable housing, to support students, faculty, and staff better while strengthening surrounding neighborhoods. These efforts are grounded in the lessons of our past and the needs of the next generation.

The next 50 years will demand more collaboration, more flexibility, and more commitment to access than ever before. Auraria Campus is uniquely positioned to meet that challenge because collaboration is not an aspiration here; it is our foundation.

As we celebrate this anniversary, we honor those who came before us, the institutions and individuals who shaped this campus, and the students whose ambitions give it meaning. Auraria Campus is more than a place. It is a promise that affordability, access, and shared success can coexist.

Fifty years in, that promise is stronger than ever.