

The Vital Role of Land-Grant Universities

By Joe Blake and Tony Frank
Posted 2/11/2010 on denverpost.com



Colorado State University Administration Building—1900s

The Gold Rush of the 19th century brought a flood of Easterners to Colorado, hoping to take advantage of the perceived economic opportunities unfolding in the American West. They built farms and worked the land, but many struggled for survival—unprepared for the bitter challenges of drought, insect infestations, and hard Colorado soil.

In 1879, people at the state's new land-grant college in Fort Collins became so concerned about the situation that the school's president, Elijah Evan Edwards, took all five of the college's students and several of its board members, closed the campus, and set off during a winter blizzard to Del Norte, to help educate the homesteaders on how to successfully live off the Colorado land.

It was the one of the first times that Colorado State University put its land-grant mission into action to serve the critical needs of Colorado. Through its educational mission, research program, and outreach agencies—Extension, the Colorado State Forest Service, Agricultural Experiment Stations, and the Colorado Water Institute—CSU has continued to mobilize and focus its resources to address state needs, whether rushing emergency food supplies to communities devastated by the Dust Bowl, combating pine beetle infestation in our state's forests, or developing new programs to meet the needs of an evolving workforce.

On Feb. 11, 2010, we'll honor this history and CSU's role in serving our state when we celebrate the university's 140th anniversary. On this day in 1870, Territorial Governor Edward McCook signed the legislation establishing Colorado's land-grant campus in Fort Collins. The unique service mission of CSU and other land-grant universities — so dramatically evidenced in that emergency visit to Del Norte in 1879 — is part of what has made these institutions such a critical part of our nation's higher education system and the fabric of our democracy.

This mission emerged one year into the Civil War, when the United States was facing its worst time in American history, gripped by economic struggles, class divisions, political and religious turmoil, and the growing divide among the states over slavery.

With no shortage of leadership challenges facing Congress, a new U.S. Representative from Vermont, Justin Morrill, proposed a radical idea: government land-grants to support public education for the working classes.

Morrill believed the best way to confront the complex challenges facing this still-new nation was to have a steady supply of educated women and men who could rise up with confidence to meet them.

He saw that the old, European model—in which education was largely the province of the upper classes—wouldn't work for long in a democratic society.

It was a revolutionary concept at the time — one that has been described by historians as the single most original contribution of American higher education. And it was an idea that found a staunch advocate in President Abraham Lincoln, who signed the bill into law.

Eight years after Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, and six years before Colorado became a state, CSU was authorized to carry out this land-grant mission for Colorado.

While land-grant schools like CSU have shifted over the last 140 years from a predominant emphasis on agriculture and mechanical arts to a more broad-based curriculum, the role of the land-grant university as an engine of opportunity, economic advancement, and social responsibility has remained unchanged.

With a growing reputation as one of the nation's leading research universities and more than 180,000 alumni of the Fort Collins campus, CSU today is the modern realization of Morrill's vision of American colleges that would address societal needs, conduct up-to-the-minute research, and provide high-quality education to people from all walks of life.

The CSU campuses and their graduates are economic drivers that account for more than \$4.1 billion in statewide household income in Colorado. Private-sector start-up businesses that have grown directly out of CSU research now employ more than 2,500 Coloradans, most notably in the fields of clean and renewable energy and infectious disease.

But CSU's most enduring legacy is its graduates - more than 200,000 from all three CSU campuses - who have used their education to transform our world — as teachers, doctors, scientists, political leaders, artists, businesspeople, lawyers, parents, and community volunteers.



Colorado State University structure honoring Sir. Isaac Newton

This legacy is embodied by people like members of the Monfort family, who will be presented this year with our first-ever Founders Day Medal for their generations of service to our state and university. And it's sustained by all those who understand that sustained economic prosperity is fueled by a strong system of public higher education.

As we confront the complex challenges of our own age and the ongoing need for a highly skilled, educated workforce, land-grant universities like CSU will continue to play a vital role — providing research, outreach, and the opportunity for an affordable and quality education to all our citizens.

Joe Blake is chancellor of Colorado State University System. Tony Frank is president of Colorado State University.