

Armando Valdez shares insights about CSU Pueblo in a Q&A

Armando Valdez, a lifetime resident of Southern Colorado with a long career in academics, was named on Nov. 30 as the sole finalist for the CSU Pueblo presidency. After a legislatively mandated waiting period of two weeks, the Board of Governors of the CSU System will consider formalizing the appointment at a special meeting on Dec. 15.

Valdez recently served as chair of the Board of Governors and resigned that position to apply for the job of CSU Pueblo president. The Board named Valdez sole finalist after a nationwide search failed to identify a candidate with unified Board support. Valdez will finish out the 2.5 years remaining on the term of outgoing President Timothy Mottet, who earlier announced his intention to resign on Dec. 31, 2023. At the term's end, the Board and Valdez will assess whether and how to move forward.

In his new role, Valdez will lead a University with about 3,700 students and more than 800 employees.

Valdez was born and raised on a farm and ranch near Capulin, in the San Luis Valley of Southern Colorado. He is a partner in Valdez Land & Livestock, which raises cattle, sheep, hay, and small grains. Valdez earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and an MBA at Colorado State University. He served as a faculty member and leader at Front Range Community College. Valdez then worked for 15 years as an assistant professor of management in the School of Business at Adams State University in Alamosa. There, he was founding director of the Health Care Administration program and helped develop the Agribusiness program. For the past two years, Valdez has been Colorado director of USDA Rural Development, which works to improve the economy and quality of life in rural communities. He has also helped lead many community organizations in Southern Colorado.

After the Board of Governors' announcement, Valdez sat down for a Q&A with Coleman Cornelius, executive editor of *STATE*, the magazine of the CSU System, to share his insights about CSU Pueblo and its future.

Find the news release about Valdez [here](#); it provides links to his CV and additional information about the search.

You've been a member of the Board of Governors of the CSU System for five years, serving as both vice chair and chair. How has your time on the governing board prepared you for your new position as president at CSU Pueblo?

It's a unique scenario to have a former board member who has the experience and expertise to move into a position like this. As a board member, I've helped govern the System and have overseen its three universities from a very high level, while still getting significant amounts of detailed information about what's happening with each campus. I've been an advocate and a supporter of the improvements CSU Pueblo has undertaken and have voted for funding proposals to serve students as well as Pueblo, Southern Colorado, the whole state, and beyond, really working toward that vision of being the People's University of the Southwest. I have not been involved on the operational side yet, but I'm coming in a little higher on the learning curve, having familiarity with activities, initiatives, and investments on campus. I'm from Southern Colorado, so I'm passionate about the work of CSU Pueblo.

CSU Pueblo is a regional comprehensive university. Could you explain what that means?

I think it's as the name implies: The University serves students and the broad community of a particular region – the Pueblo region, the Southern Colorado region, extending into the San Luis Valley, and northern New Mexico. The comprehensive piece addresses the spectrum of programs and curricula available, from the traditional liberal arts to business, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, as well as skilled professional areas, such as nursing. Teaching and learning are the primary focus at CSU Pueblo. For students – often first-generation college students who seek to improve their lives and the lives of their families – we provide a high-impact, high-touch environment. Faculty research and scholarship are undertaken at CSU Pueblo, but not to the extent of a research university such as CSU, where it is part of the core mission. Economic development and community engagement are important aspects of the mission for CSU Pueblo as a regional comprehensive university. There is multilayered service to the community, providing programs and events that help strengthen and draw the community together.

Why is that mission particularly important from your perspective, as someone who has built his life and career in Southern Colorado?

The access to education we provide for students, like the land-grant mission of CSU in Fort Collins, opens doors to opportunity, life enhancement, and lifelong learning. Our graduates augment the business community and economy throughout the region – as does the University itself, as an important regional employer. And the University builds culture throughout our community, in part because it brings different, diverse sets of perspectives into the area.

CSU Pueblo has a 50 percent diverse enrollment, with a substantial percentage of Hispanic students. For this reason, it is federally designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, which makes it eligible for federal grants to support student success. Why is that designation important for CSU Pueblo, and how does it serve students?

I worked as a faculty member for a large portion of my career at a Hispanic-Serving Institution – at Adams State University in Alamosa – so I've seen how the designation tremendously benefits students. First, as an HSI goes through the process of identifying and applying for federal grants to build programs that support student success, it must constantly evaluate, "Where are we strong in serving students, and where are we deficient?" This prompts us to closely track factors that contribute to academic success and make programmatic decisions based on data. This benefits not only Hispanic students, but all students.

As you mentioned, about 50 percent of our student population at CSU Pueblo comes from diverse backgrounds, mainly Latino. At the same time, the population in Pueblo is about 50 percent Hispanic, and the Hispanic population is a critical part of growth and diversification across the United States. So, the success of our Hispanic students helps drive overall success within our student population and, more broadly, our society and economy.

The designation also signifies for students that, "Hey, this is a spot where we can learn and gain opportunity." Like many students of color, Hispanic students often come from communities that are underrepresented in higher education and from under-resourced or limited-resource families, so it may be a bigger lift for them to attend college and graduate. The HSI designation is just one sign that we understand, invite, and are inclusive of all our students and the full spectrum of diversity they represent. One of the very attractive aspects of Colorado State University Pueblo is our diverse student population.

The head count at CSU Pueblo stands a bit below 4,000 students. Does the University need to increase enrollment for its financial stability?

A key goal at CSU Pueblo is to get to 4,000 students and to work beyond that. Tuition is a primary revenue stream for our institutions of higher education. It is an important factor that helps us fund all the programs and all the curricula that benefit students and the community.

What do you see as CSU Pueblo's key attributes that will help attract additional students?

I think we want to leverage diversity, the quality of our academic programs, and the professional relationships that develop here. I hope students don't see dividers when they come here, that we are a welcoming and receptive environment for an increasingly diverse population. CSU Pueblo and Southern Colorado are gateways to so much opportunity, and we can help students develop reciprocal connections that provide a very exciting University environment.

CSU Pueblo also has a high percentage of first-generation college students – more than 40 percent. Why is that significant, and how does it relate to the University's mission as a regional comprehensive university?

My parents were first-generation college students. So, for my entire life, I've been the beneficiary of their opportunity to pursue higher education. When you look at a first-generation student, it's not just the student you're looking at; it's also their family. Education – and how it leads to opportunity – has always been a focal point of my life. Accessibility to learning is the starting point, and having a high percentage of first-generation students demonstrates that CSU Pueblo is an important access point. We are educating students who are becoming informed citizens, who are prepared for careers that are important to the region. They have higher lifetime earning potential and more lifelong opportunities. They contribute to our Southern Colorado business climate, economy, and culture, and this has benefits both here and well beyond our region.

Now, not every person needs to go to college to succeed. There are trade and entrepreneurial paths that also greatly benefit the success of our communities. However, if a person has the desire to go to college, we want to welcome them to CSU Pueblo and support their ambitions. And we'll allocate every resource to develop and expand their talents. It's our passion that higher education is an investment in opportunity for everyone.

Those of us who work at CSU Pueblo want to make sure our students and their families understand things like financial aid and how curriculum pathways are set up – that our University is inviting and provides practical and meaningful information as students matriculate. We want to make sure our programs are intentionally designed to help students succeed in their academics and graduate with their degrees. Being from a farm, I'll offer this analogy: How do you get water to flow from a pump? You've got to prime it – put water in to get more water out. We must invest in our first-generation students so that they become productive citizens and their talents flow on to create economic opportunities, community opportunities, and cultural advancement.

Of course, CSU Pueblo is part of the Colorado State University System. What do you think CSU Pueblo brings to the System?

As a System whose institutions receive funding from the state, our priority is serving Colorado; each of the universities in the System has a critical role. CSU in Fort Collins is our flagship, a land-grant institution with a mission of teaching, research, and engagement; it has grown into a top-tier research university whose discoveries have international impact. CSU Global is our online university, and its virtual learning environment is tailored for working adults who wish to advance in their careers; its format helps to extend the educational access mission of the entire System. At CSU Pueblo, we are the Hispanic-Serving Institution of our System, and we are a premier place for first-generation students and students with diverse backgrounds who seek that welcoming, high-touch, high-impact environment as a path to career opportunities in our region and beyond.

What is the relationship between CSU Pueblo and the large rural community of Southern Colorado?

Being a resident in rural Southern Colorado – having been raised on a farm and ranch and now being an active agricultural producer here myself – I have a passion for seeing rural communities thrive. There are pockets in our rural areas that are fading because they lack economic opportunities, a trained labor force, and face housing and other challenges. So how does CSU Pueblo really take an assertive role in reaching out and partnering with these rural communities as a resource for their success? We want to be actively engaged as a key community partner for Pueblo, for rural Southern Colorado, for all of Colorado. We can help find those viable, sustainable pathways for economic and community development, infrastructure, housing enrichment, and cultural engagement. There are a number of ways I think CSU Pueblo can serve rural populations.

Speaking of partnerships, CSU Pueblo has worked to build partnerships with area community colleges. In general terms, could you explain the purpose of those agreements and whether the efforts will continue?

We have several two-year colleges in our region that offer students important knowledge, training, skills development, certificates, and associate degrees. Many of the efforts at CSU Pueblo have been focused on seamless transfer agreements, so students who seek additional learning can easily come into CSU Pueblo to complete bachelor's degrees with the jump start they've had at community colleges. We're an important part of a connecting chain that prepares graduates to serve our communities on an economic level and to be good citizens in the life of our communities, so our entire society prospers. But community colleges are not just feeders to the University. I think we can explore opportunities for resource sharing and collaborative focus areas, so we are creating win-win partnerships that benefit our students, school districts, industry, and community.

Why is this new role as president at CSU Pueblo meaningful to you, as someone whose family is so rooted in Southern Colorado?

It is deeply personal. I'm a resident of Southern Colorado. I love Southern Colorado. I have deep family connections that go back generations here. I'm a strong advocate, wanting to see Southern Colorado succeed. I'm passionate about empowering individuals to attain new opportunities. For our first-generation students, this might be their first opportunity to advance and for their families to advance. What are they going to be able to contribute? I come from a faculty background, from an academic background. So, I love hearing about the curriculum, love hearing all the excitement that's there. We can really help students who need some support and guidance so they can go out and be

amazing individuals with new opportunities. I was one of those individuals. My wife was one of those individuals. How do we provide opportunities for another generation of students?

What can colleagues expect with your leadership style?

I'm excited to get on campus and be able to engage with the campus community and the broader community beyond campus. I think it's important to support the team on campus, the faculty, staff, the administration, honoring and respecting all their efforts. I'm not the type of individual who wants to come in and say, "We've got to do it my way." I believe in empowerment, and I want people to contribute their ideas and innovations. I want the best ideas that serve students and the community and that elevate, push, and propel CSU Pueblo forward. I'm going to build a culture that invites constructive dissent, so even if we don't agree, we find ways to come to a consensus and push forward our mission toward a vision of what we want to achieve with and for Pueblo.

The Board of Governors of the CSU System will hold a special meeting from 9:30-10 a.m. Friday, Dec. 15, in the Occhiato Student Center at CSU Pueblo to formalize the appointment of Armando Valdez. A meet-and-greet reception will take place in the student center from 10:30-11:30 a.m.