

**TUITION BENEFIT ISSUES—
ACADEMIC FUTURES PROPOSAL**

Submitted by CU Boulder Staff Council
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Introduction

CU Boulder Staff Council members involved in the presentation of this white paper hear from constituents often. Staff members have perennially and regularly voiced concerns regarding the tuition benefit. The call for Academic Futures *white papers* provides a fortuitous opportunity for significant improvement of the currently underused tuition benefit. Our belief is that while the University of Colorado touts a strong benefit package as an incentive to potential staff, the tuition benefit is restrictive and in some cases prohibitive. We believe that there is opportunity in the University's academic future to close the gap of social inequality related to employee tuition benefit, further supporting the University's dedication to research and scholarship, as well as its strategic imperatives.

Our Proposal

Equitable Staff Enrollment

Proposal:

- Degree-seeking staff enroll at the same time as their student counterparts.
- Non-Degree seeking staff enroll prior to start date alongside their non-degree seeking student counterparts.

Current Status:

- Staff are forced to enroll on the day classes commence and may only enroll in "open space." If a class they are interested in is already full, they need to either wait for a space to open up, or can try to "beg" the instructor of record to grant them special access. If unsuccessful in either of those efforts, staff access to the tuition benefit is forfeited entirely. Relying on "open space" is problematic in many cases where staff cannot get into certain desired and/or necessary classes. For degree-seeking students, this can make it so that they cannot ultimately complete their degree program.

Removal of Registration Restrictions

Proposal:

- Remove the *wait for the first day of class* registration policy for staff.
- More simplified processes for non-degree and degree seeking staff in reference to the tuition benefit waiver.
- A process for review or reconsideration when a supervisor denies or refuses to sign-off on the employees request to utilize tuition benefit.

Current Status:

- Staff is currently required to submit the Tuition Benefit Eligibility Form each semester they are enrolled. This often causes staff to feel frustrated and requires an additional step in an already difficult registration process. Furthermore, some employees are required to have their supervisor sign-off on the form, which provides little recourse if they say “no.”

Reciprocity at Peer Institutions and other avenues of Employee Professional Development:

Current Status:

- Staff are unable to use their employee tuition benefit at any other community college or Colorado university. If they are unable to get into a degree program at CU, they are effectively locked out from using this benefit in any meaningful professional development capacity
- Courses in Continuing Education, MBA programs, MOOC¹, and online UC Colorado Springs courses are all ineligible for the employee tuition benefit.

Proposal:

- Reciprocity at local community colleges and public state universities to align with peer institutions.
- Make ALL CU system online courses available to staff as a benefit.
- Eliminate restrictions around specific degree programs, colleges, and courses—9 credits apply to all courses regardless of funding source (For Example, LEEDs School of Business offers 20% off, but your 9 credits will not apply there. This proposal would seek to allow those 9 credits for those classes.)

Current Barriers Preventing Employee Utilization of Tuition Benefit

CU Boulder Staff Council has received and catalogued testimonial (See Attachment A) accounts of a variety of barriers that prevent use of tuition benefit. These include, but are not limited to:

- Tuition benefit is not entirely free. The additional fees staff incur can add up quickly. One author can assert nearly \$1,000 of fees not covered under tuition benefit for one semester.
- Programs and classes that could be of great interest or that could benefit the employee’s professional development are not always covered. Currently, courses offered at other

¹ See <https://www.colorado.edu/coloradan/2017/12/01/mooc>

state institutions (e.g.; CSU or those offered within the Colorado Community Colleges system) are excluded. The same is true for UC Springs Online Courses, the MBA program at LEEDs School of Business, and Continuing Education are also areas not covered under the benefit.

- In many cases classes that staff wish to enroll in are already at full capacity by the time employees are allowed to register—employees are not allowed to register until the first day of class commences. Many staff feel anxious and overwhelmed and restricted by the one-day registration window. This also causes an issue of compression, delaying staff degree completion.
- Some staff that apply for the benefit are not eligible for acceptance into degree programs and are thereby eliminated from consideration.
- Departmental supervisors and managers may be unenthusiastic in their support for permitting staff to participate. The lack of support can even extend to informing staff that they are not allowed use the benefit.
- Enthusiasm for the program wanes when comparing it to peer institutions.
- For staff who successfully use the benefit, repeated use requires beginning from square one with the required paperwork each semester.
- A challenging maze of process and paperwork. We acknowledge the efforts on behalf of the Bursar and Employee Services to define deadlines and the required steps, in addition to offering informational sessions. Still, the process is daunting and differs from campus to campus, including deadlines for submitting the tuition benefit waiver.
- Any staff member who has a dependent using the benefit is excluded from simultaneously using the benefit.
- If two staff members are in the same family and both are employed at CU, each individual is limited to using their own benefit; the benefits cannot be pooled.
- Interest in using the benefit withers in consideration of the tax liability incurred.

The Problem

Less than 4% of CU Boulder employees use their employee tuition benefit. Numerous studies and white papers have concluded that the low-enrollment is due to prominent barriers and that “although it looks like a good benefit on paper, in reality, very few can actually use it.”²

This low-enrollment for staff negatively affects the University and tarnishes CU’s reputation of having “great tuition benefits” in the following ways:

CU Boulder is an impressive place, certainly an employer and community in which to take pride. However, many employees (28% of Staff Survey respondents in fall 2012) indicated that the benefit as currently structured is not accessible or easy to use. Easy and transparent access to this benefit will help employees take pride in the university, be part of the educational mission, and improve access to the very education that CU employees work so hard to provide for our students

CU Boulder employees have a substantial impact on in-state reputation. Based on a recent staff survey, a significant number of respondents indicated that tuition benefits are a high priority but at the same time a source of frustration. An important part of improving our in-state reputation is to have employees who are satisfied and positive about CU Boulder. The 2012 survey also indicated that 64% of University staff and 60% of classified staff would like to use the benefit in the future.

One of the first things people ask staff after learning they work at the university is whether they get to take classes there. This benefit has such a poor reputation among staff that the common answer is “no” and the follow-up is how difficult it is to actually use. This negatively affects staff engagement for CU and makes recruitment from the local community even harder.

Staff Engagement and Morale Decline

Lack of ability to use the tuition benefit causes frustration which in turn reduces engagement. Many employees accepted a position at CU Boulder under the assumption they would receive great benefits.

The inaccessibility of the tuition benefit appears somewhat deceptive.

The field of engagement includes concepts such as satisfaction, commitment and empowerment. For our purposes, we define engagement as “a pronounced state of enthusiasm characterized by effort, pride, and enthusiasm which fosters a mutually committed relationship between employees and organizations resulting in the enduring pursuit of organizational and personal goals.”³

² UCSC Work Climate Survey - Spring 2017

³ <https://www.colorado.edu/faculty-staff-engagement/faq>

Recent studies empirically prove that a robust tuition benefit offers both professional development and engagement to the individuals using it; and also aids the institution granting it in reducing training dollars and improving retention. Consider a recent study from the Journal of Student Financial Aid indicating that for every \$1.00 invested in staff, a value of \$1.29 is returned.⁴

Tuition Benefit Does Not Meet CU Boulder 2030 Plan

Empirical evidence abounds that organizations accrue advantages by creating an engaged workforce in active pursuit of self-improvement. It is worth noting how an enriched tuition benefit aligns with the three Strategic Imperatives put forth by Chancellor DiStefano. An improved tuition benefit clearly aligns with the first Imperative, ‘Shape Tomorrow’s Leaders.’ The authors note repeated instances of employees moving into positions of greater responsibility and leadership after the completion of academic coursework. The benefits of higher education need no emphasizing to the readers of this white paper.

The University can enhance its reputation in every group of stakeholders with an improved tuition benefit and support the second Strategic Imperative, ‘Be the Top University for Innovation’. Presently the university’s benefit is merely consistent with many other institutions—in order to be truly innovative it is time to step forward and lead.

Finally, an improved tuition benefit augments the third Imperative, ‘Positively Impact Humanity’. The university has a long and proud history of positive contributions. Engaging staff to participate more in that arena can happen with greater frequency by encouraging them to further their education.

Conclusion

The Employee Tuition Benefit in its current form is difficult to use, has restrictions on popular classes and programs, and fails to provide a necessary avenue for staff professional development. It is crucial to view the employee tuition benefit as a mutual benefit for both the employee and the University where both parties have a lot to gain by staff regularly using this benefit and further connecting with the rest of the University. As staff are able to take advantage of the University’s courses and programs not only do they become more engaged with CU Boulder, but it increases staff retention, productivity, and alignment with the University’s mission.

Education and opportunity for professional growth should be one of our biggest assets. As we strive to become the top University for innovation, it is imperative that we make this benefit widely available and accessible for all staff and ensure that our workforce remains connected to this core mission. Providing socially equitable enrollment, removing registration

⁴ <https://publications.nasfaa.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1618&context=jsfa>

restrictions, and providing reciprocity at peer-institutions will strengthen the connection that staff have with the University, and will ensure that CU employees will become lifelong students, furthering their work and the success of the University.

See generally: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/PR-02-2015-0050#.WlpVUmaiKb4.email>;
<http://www.hrs.colostate.edu/benefits/study-privilege.html>

ATTACHMENT A

Employee Testimonials Related to Restraints of Utilizing Tuition Benefit

Going on 5 years I have used the tuition benefit. I have found it confusing in that the different campuses have different due dates. Working at on campus and attending class in another means I receive updates for the wrong campus regarding the benefit and creates panic when I think I missed a deadline. Being unable to register for classes until the start of the semester also posing a challenge and adds undue stress. When I started my degree, there were many classes to choose from but as I got towards the end, if the class I needed to take was full it could mean I would have to postpone my graduation date. It also means we must scramble to get books usually resulting in higher prices. There should be some sort of special employee process or understanding to the professors to enable us to reach out and get an exception if the class is full so we are ready to go when classes start. Employees using the benefit are set up to struggle the first few weeks due to the policy of day of registration. If what I have heard is true, there really is not many of us using the benefit so I'd really like to know what impact it would have to let employees register like a normal student. We get accepted, pay the fees, and attend classes like a normal student... let us register like one. Offering employees a benefit yet placing restrictions on it is no real benefit...especially when it precludes somebody from using it.

My experience with starting my masters using the tuition benefit was much more complicated than the benefit website describes. I applied to the ITP-PMP program on 6/14/17. On 6/27/17, I was told that my initial paperwork for admission to the program was "favorably reviewed." I was then asked to apply for formal admission to the university. The part time requirement really threw a wrench in things. I started asking if I could apply as a part time student for the ITP program. I had to receive an exemption from the program Director after I submitted an alternative schedule that stretched the program from 2 years to 3 years. This required they start a petition process on 7/17/17. This was approved on 8/8/17. I submitted the Faculty/Staff tuition form on 7/24/17 and didn't hear back from Employee Services until 8/10/17. I then was asked to "term activate". I was then asked to put down a \$200 confirmation deposit, which I was told by the Registrar's office that they could waive it but first I had to go to Admissions and get the confirmation form, then submit it to the Registrar's office. However, the Registrar's office could not put the waiver on my account until I was in the system as a student, so it was a Catch 22. I ended up just giving them the \$200 to move things along. It took a while but I finally saw I had a

“student” section in my.cu.edu on 8/18/17. I waited till the first day of classes (8/28/17) and then went to register for my classes in my.cu.edu. I found the two classes I wanted to register for but when I went to finish the little wizard, I received a SQL error. I opened a case with both OIT and CU Systems. After a few days, I could finish the registration. Turns out I had a duplicate OPRID that was preventing me from completing my registration. I ended up getting my \$200 back in a check that was mailed to me. A bill posted to my.cu.edu on 9/5/17 showing the tuition I owed. On 9/12/17, the credits appeared on my account offsetting the tuition I owed.

I am currently enrolled in the School Counseling program at UC Denver. I appreciate that employees of the CU campuses receive a tuition waiver benefit, but it is really hard to utilize when employees cannot register for classes until the first day of class. I find this extremely difficult especially for my program because the classes fill up quickly. The other option would be to speak with the professor and ask them if they can hold a spot for me in their class which is an awkward conversation.

The other thing that is frustrating is having to pay the student fees for the RTD pass. I wish there was a way that as employees we would not have to pay that fee since we already receive an RTD pass as an employee.

I am a university staff member trying to finish my undergraduate degree. I am about 12 credit hours away from graduation and I am trying to finish the remaining classes. Unfortunately my financial situation dictates that the only way I can afford to take classes is via the staff tuition waiver. I would like to enroll in the Northern Renaissance history course for Spring 2018. However the limitations of the waiver stipulate that I cannot enroll until the first day of classes. I was wondering if there is any mechanism by which I could reserve a seat in your course. Please let me know if you are willing to do this. Thank you for taking the time to consider my predicament.

I am a current employee at CU Boulder, and have been employed here for over 3 years. I am enrolled in online courses, attending CSU-Global. I am not able to utilize the tuition benefit here at CU and make it work to my advantage due to limitations/restrictions on the benefit. Not to mention, only being able to register the start of classes instead of before. While it is a wonderful opportunity, I wish I was able to take part and utilize it.

At CSU-Global my classes are 8 weeks long, at an accelerated pace, to achieve the degree in a more timely fashion. This program works great due to being designed around the working adult. I work full time, take classes, and have children in sports. My time is limited and chaotic. I would take full advantage of a tuition benefit if it could be utilized at campuses outside of CU, and partnered with other schools. Being state entities, it would be great to see this offered across the board.

Saving time and money is something of interest to everyone. I would definitely take advantage of the tuition benefit if it were geared more towards a working adult, within a network of schools

and not just CU. Planning admittance also is a big part of this and waiting until classes start to register is not something I am interested in doing because if I am not able to be in the course for some reason, my schedule is delayed. At that point, it makes the benefit a moot point.

My biggest issue with the tuition benefit program is the option of courses that are available. I think Continuing Education should be eligible for the program, even if it means we have to pay an additional “evening program” fee or something like that. Since most of us utilizing the program are professional staff, it is difficult to find courses that work within a traditional work schedule. Evening classes would be ideal, but those are not currently eligible. I’d be willing to pay a fee in order to take evening classes.

The process itself is also cumbersome, but this seems to be something that is being addressed and getting better. I do think staff should be able to register before the first day of classes -- perhaps after all students have had the chance to register, or a week before or something like that. I have been in the situation several times where I want to take a class, try to register on the first day, and can’t because it’s full. By the time I get everything sorted out, I am often already behind – usually by a week or more, which makes it very challenging and frustrating to “catch up.” Essentially, I feel like the current process, when attempting to use the tuition benefit, does not set us up for success, and especially makes it difficult to pursue the courses needed for a degree. I think it’s a great program if you’d just like to take a course here or there for fun or continued learning, or it doesn’t matter what you take, but for those of us trying to pursue a degree, it’s almost easier to forego the program in order to accomplish what we need to.

*Identifying information of employee testimonials has been removed to preserve anonymity and remain on file with the authors. This is not a complete list of all comments received on this subject.