$80 Million Gift to Small Mountain College Maximizes Impact

Paul M. Rady School of Computer Science and Engineering Expands Access to Top-Tier Computer Degrees

November 26, 2018  Gunnison, CO – The Paul M. Rady School of Computer Science and Engineering, created with an $80 million gift from Denver oil and gas entrepreneur Paul Rady, represents an unconventional and uniquely promising solution to help tackle the dramatic and persistent shortage of computer science and engineering professionals in the U.S. — a gap between workforce demand and capacity that is growing more and more pronounced each year.

What makes this School unique is that it is a joint effort of Western Colorado University and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU). In an enterprising partnership, college students who would not otherwise have the opportunity to attend CU’s College of Engineering and Applied Science – one of the top-ranked engineering programs in the country – will be able to earn a prestigious CU degree while studying all four years on Western’s campus in Gunnison, a university known for student focus and teaching excellence.

The launch of the Rady School is unusual for another reason: While the vast majority of multi-million-dollar donations to U.S. universities in recent decades have gone to exclusive institutions that serve only a few elite students, this gift was purposefully given, instead, to a small, liberal arts university nestled in the Colorado mountains, where donor Paul Rady felt he could have the biggest and broadest impact on individual students as well as on the U.S. economy.

“Paul Rady wisely realized that the best way to increase the number of highly trained computer science and engineering graduates is to invest in a smaller, regional public university that has both a history of academic excellence and the physical capacity for enrollment growth,” says Greg Salsbury, President of Western Colorado University, home of the new Paul M. Rady School. “That makes Western Colorado University the ideal place for the new school.”

Best-selling Canadian author and public speaker, Malcolm Gladwell, has long argued that donors can have the biggest impact by supporting lesser-known universities that are not already among the richest organizations in the world. Harvard’s 2018 endowment, for example, is $39.2 billion, Yale’s tallies $29.4 billion, and Stanford’s totals $26.5 billion. While these and similar high-profile national universities have
historically garnered the lion’s share of multi-million-dollar donations, Gladwell has pointed out, they serve a small, exclusive clientele and consequently have limited impact on the U.S. workforce.

The decision to launch the Rady School on the campus of Western Colorado University in Gunnison was based on Western’s long-standing reputation for academic excellence, its capacity for rapid growth, and, of course, a willingness to enter a groundbreaking partnership with CU’s College of Engineering and Applied Science. Ultimately, Western’s President Salsbury believes that this approach offers a cost-effective way expand the nation’s highly-skilled workforce, both in numbers and in geography.

The need is staggering. In 2016, for example, roughly 3 million more STEM-related job openings were posted online nationwide than the number of available professionals who could potentially fill them, according to a recent study by the New American Economy Research Fund.

Code.org, a nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to computer science, noted that last year there were 10 times more open computing jobs than graduates in the field – some 540,000 open computing jobs. In 2016, the Obama administration projected that this number would nearly triple by 2020 to some 1.4 million openings.

The growing demand for high-tech professionals is driven by a broad and expanding need for computer specializations in software engineering, artificial intelligence, big data applications, and the Internet of Things.

If America is to remain a leader in the emerging computing-based economy, government, business, and academia must expand partnerships that strategically address the demand for high-tech workers in computer science and engineering. That involves looking beyond the few wealthy, elite institutions to build innovative enterprises with regional public universities that offer academic excellence while expanding access to a broader, more diverse student population.

President Salsbury hopes that future-focused business leaders will follow Rady’s lead to have a profound impact on the future by funding leading-edge programs that broaden access to technological degrees. “It’s through this kind of innovative, future-oriented public-private partnership that the U.S. will be able to continue to sustain its global leadership in the coming years,” says Salsbury.

[For additional background and supporting images: western.edu/engineering_future]

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