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Division of Natural Sciences provides inclusive space for underrepresented students

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The CUBE has an office space in GOLD Bioscience room A2B60. The main room has tables for studying, a fridge and storage for students to bring their belongings. (Sarah Taylor/CU Independent)

The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder is the largest on campus, overseeing three divisions and 60 programs for nearly 15,000 undergraduate students. In a pool that size, finding spaces for common interests can be tricky.

As one way to foster community among science students in the college, the Division of Natural Sciences launched the Center for Undergraduate Belonging and Engagement in Science (CUBE) in Sept. 2024.

On its website, CUBE aims to “cultivate belonging, promote equity and address barriers experienced by first-generation students, transfer students and those historically excluded in science.” The CUBE provides peer mentorship, supports the first-year program Science Bound and creates networking avenues for the natural sciences.

Matthew Tellez, an Integrative Physiology senior and member of the behavioral neuroendocrinology research lab on campus, is one of the founding mentors of the CUBE.

“The best part of it is that we see people who have similar passions and aspirations, and we got to put it all in one melting pot,” Tellez said.

As a first-generation student from Colombia who aspires to be a dentist, underrepresentation in science was a big deterrent going into college. CU Boulder is a predominantly white institution. Tellez also noted that many STEM fields and institutions have origins of scientific racism, an ideology that uses baseless methods and evidence to support a racial hierarchy.

He applied for the mentorship because he remembered how rare and inspiring it was to see individuals who came from a similar upbringing as him in dentistry. He hoped to offer that same support for undergraduate mentees.

This fall semester, he paired with two mentees and stays in touch with previous mentees. He meets with them upon their request and acts as a liaison for meeting professors and joining labs that they show interest in.

“A mentor relationship never ends,” Tellez said. “It could be 10 years down the line, and I’m still talking to my mentees because we’ve honestly created an amazing connection and bond with each other.”

Syd Kendrick, a first-year student double-majoring in Ecology/Evolutionary Biology and Astrophysics, found the CUBE last semester after their Phage Genomics lecture in the GOLD Bioscience building. With Kendrick’s heavy workload and growing curiosities, they knew that mentorship was a need.

They filled out a form to connect with a peer mentor. Kendrick recalled being “impressed” with how thorough the form was, asking questions about their interests and what they wanted from the mentorship. After that, they fell into a routine of Friday meetings at the CUBE with their assigned mentor Mel Fouque, a mathematics and business senior.

“It’s good to talk to somebody older than you about what you’re doing in the science industry, just to see if you’re, like, not insane,” Kendrick said. “They’re also really good with help for research opportunities, grad school talk and cover letters.”

They also think inclusivity is “absolutely everything” in science. As someone who identifies as queer, transgender and neurodivergent, Kendrick said that they are surrounded by students and minority groups that feel “not smart enough” to take part in the sciences.

“I really dislike that [discouraging] talk, because I think everything is science, I think everybody’s a scientist,” Kendrick said. “Having a place where you can be inclusive in the sciences allows for more effective reasoning ... It also just makes science a more friendly industry to be in.”

The College of Arts and Sciences faculty brainstormed the concept of the CUBE in 2022, pulling inspiration for the Campos Student Center in the College of Engineering & Applied Science. That was Stephanie Colunga Montoya’s first year as the director of student access and engagement for Natural Sciences.

Student feedback from surveys urged the need for a student center. Montoya helped implement the CUBE at the beginning of 2024, following a college-wide reorganization that created three divisions with designated deans and budgets.

“Students really want community,” Montoya said. “We know that that’s high impact practice, as far as student success goes.”

Within the last year, cultural programs on campus have been threatened. In September, the Bilinguals United for Education and New Opportunities (BUENO) Center for Multilingual Education was notified that they would be losing \$3 million of federal funding that ran foundational programs. Soon after, the Center for Asian Studies got a \$537,000 cut.

The Department of Education cut funding because it found that cultural and international programs like BUENO and CAS were unaligned with the Trump administration’s values and priorities. In contrast, the Department continues to support underrepresented students in sciences, according to the fiscal year 2026 budget summary. It still provides funding to historically Black science institutions and grants like the Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program.

Montoya said that the CUBE does not receive public funding and is largely financed by the Division budget. They also previously received an impact grant from Leadership Support and Programming. The program launched right after CU’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion website shut down after President Donald Trump’s executive order terminating DEI initiatives.

In early stages of the CUBE’s conception, Montoya recalled workshoping the name thoroughly. One idea quickly dismissed was “Center for Undergraduate Belonging and Equity,” partially because of attacks against DEI, but mostly because it was an inaccurate representation of what they served.

“For me, for example, equity is really pushing around policy and structure, and we’re not doing that quite yet,” Montoya said. “This office is really student centered ... Engagement is absolutely what we want, especially as a new office.”

She estimated that they see 50 students per week in the office, mostly to study, meet with their peer mentors or attend events planned a few times per month.

To visit the CUBE, go to GOLD Bioscience room A2B60. The location is central to many undergraduate natural science classes and labs.

“I had a class right [near the CUBE office], freshman year. Wow, I would walk by this room all the time,” Tellez recounted. “I would never even imagine or fathom what this room would mean to me in the future.”

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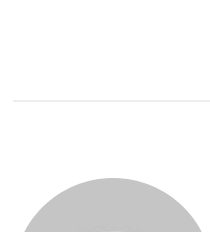
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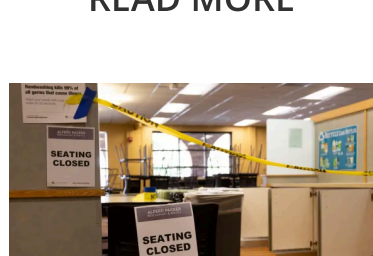
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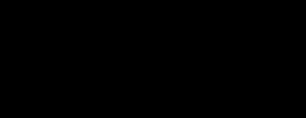
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