



Ph.D. Educational Leadership, Research, and Policy Newsletter – Winter, 2026



PhD Educational Leadership,
Research, and Policy

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO COLORADO SPRINGS



inspiration as the year unfolds.

Welcome to the Winter 2026 edition of the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Research, and Policy newsletter! As we begin a new semester and settle into the winter season, we hope you are feeling refreshed, re-energized, and ready for the months ahead. This issue highlights the incredible accomplishments, energy, and impact of our students, alumni, and faculty across research, leadership, and service. From inspiring alumni achievements and new publications to important program milestones and upcoming dates, this newsletter reflects the strength of our learning community and the many ways our work extends beyond UCCS into schools, organizations, and communities. We hope you enjoy celebrating these successes with us and find

- **Dr. Joseph Taylor**
Faculty Director, LRP PhD Program

Important dates and reminders

- July 27, 2026 – Synthesis I and Synthesis II portfolios are due for first- and second-year doctoral students
- August 10-11, 2026 – Synthesis portfolio presentations
- August 24, 2026 – First day of classes for fall semester



Alumnus Spotlight – Dr. Derion Ibarra



Dr. Derion Ibarra, is the newest elected member of the Pueblo School District 60's school board.

Dr. Derion Ibarra is a proud UCCS alumnus who has achieved many outstanding goals in his work as an educational leader since graduation. His focus, dedication, and passion for leadership are inspirational! One of Dr. Ibarra's most recent accomplishments is being newly elected as a school board member in Pueblo School District 60. Dr. Ibarra grew up in Pueblo where he continues to support his local community as not only a school board member, but also as the principal of Trinity Lutheran School, grades K-6, and as the founder and CEO of Greatness Gym. He has also served as a classroom teacher, math curriculum designer, and professional development leader for a large Colorado charter school network.

Amazingly, Dr. Ibarra completed and defended his dissertation, *No Child Left Sedentary: Bridging the Policy Rhetoric and Practice Gap – A Landscape Study No Child Left Sedentary: Bridging the Policy Rhetoric and Practice Gap – A Meta-Analysis No Child Left Sedentary: Bridging the Policy Rhetoric and Practice Gap – A Comparative Interrupted Time Series Analysis*, and opened Greatness Gym within one year after completing doctoral coursework.

You have had a unique career path leading up to the completion of the Ph.D. program. Can you describe the highlights of your journey? I am very curious about how your diverse experiences have merged and how they are connected to your work at UCCS in the Ph.D. program.

Well, I started my career as a math teacher. Following that, I went into building-level administration as an assistant principal. I then worked for a charter organization out of Englewood, where I was a math curriculum designer as well as leading professional development. While I was doing that, I was also going to school, and my research focused on holistic student development. Building on my diverse background, I also own a gym and have worked as a personal trainer for many years. I have always been drawn to holistic, well-rounded development—physical, mental, academic, spiritual, and every other aspect of growth you can imagine.



Dr. Ibarra, founder and CEO of Greatness Gym, and friends in the gym space.

My dissertation focused on physical activity within schools and involved studying educational policy. I successfully defended it with the guidance of my chair, the amazing Dr. Taylor. After earning my Ph.D., I became the principal at Trinity Lutheran School in Pueblo, Colorado, my hometown, and at the same time, I opened a gym. It was an exciting and rewarding period.



Dr. Ibarra, principal, and staff members at Trinity Lutheran School in Pueblo, Colorado.

All of my research focused on holistic student development, with an emphasis on physical activity. The title of my dissertation was No Child Left Sedentary, and it was very interesting because it examined the history of educational policy and how resources and funding were often redirected toward core academics at the expense of extracurriculars, particularly physical activity. That led me to question whether we are truly serving students in a well-rounded way if we continue to take those opportunities away.

When you fast forward to national policy under the Every Student Succeeds Act, there was a renewed prioritization of health and physical education. My goal was to identify successful interventions, examine their effect sizes, and refer back to the meta-analysis I conducted. What's been especially interesting is my ability to apply many of those successful interventions in my school

today. As principal of Trinity Lutheran School in Pueblo, a classical Christian school, we have been able to intentionally weave faith, rigorous academics, and holistic development into everything we do.



Additionally, just recently, on December 2nd, I was sworn in to Pueblo District 60's Board of Education. I am the newest elected member, and I'm excited to give back to my community. While we serve a smaller student population at Trinity, I wanted to scale that impact and reach a broader audience. I'm very excited to see how that develops.

Dr. Ibarra with Kindergarten students he serves at Trinity Lutheran School during the 2025 Trinity Award and Kindergarten Celebration.

Throughout your journey you were able to synthesize so many of your different experiences and interests. I'm curious about students in the Ph.D. program now and how they might be able to plan for something similar. Can you offer advice for new and ABD students?

Choose a topic you could live inside forever. Mine was my life's passion, so even the hard days still felt meaningful. We all have the same amount of time in a day; you just have to manage it effectively and get the work done. At times, it seems overwhelming, and if you look at the big picture, it is. But I focused on what my next step would be, and once I did that, it really centered me and helped a lot. I was able to gather a group around me, my accountability partners and my support system. I really leaned on people like Dr. Taylor and my mentor. I'm not sure if you are still running the mentorship program, but I highly recommend participating in it. It was amazing.

At the same time, I got lucky because my Synthesis One project built into my Synthesis Two project. I then used all that information to

help write my dissertation. It was a fluid process. Obviously, it was not exactly the same project all the way through, but I was able to leverage all the resources and research I had done in the past to support my dissertation. I put in a ridiculous number of hours, especially for the dissertation, because my goal was to finish quickly. Once you successfully defend Synthesis Two, you go ABD, so I planned that as soon as I finished Synthesis Two, I would start working on the Ph.D. immediately. I did not take breaks, and I was able to hit all the deadlines Dr. Taylor and I had created. I graduated in the spring. It was a lot of work, but I had the



Youth participating in exercise programs at Greatness Gym.



energy. I was already in “student mode” after finishing the massive Synthesis project. I decided to use that momentum to carry me forward.

Dr. Taylor hooding Dr. Ibarra at the May 2024 graduation commencement ceremony.

Now that you've completed the Ph.D. program and you're in your careers, and you have multiple things going on with your school board work, are you still considering working on your research?

I am still actually in the process of getting my dissertation published. It is already published as a dissertation, of course, but I am breaking all three parts into separate articles. My dissertation was a three-part manuscript consisting of a landscape study, a meta-analysis, and a comparative interrupted time series analysis. I am currently breaking these three studies down, expanding them, and submitting them for publication. As much as I want to, I have not yet done as much research as I would like, but I plan to in the future once things slow down because I am a researcher at heart.

Can you share some of your favorites in Pueblo? Perhaps your favorite restaurants, events, or museums?

It's hard to pick just one favorite place because the food scene in Pueblo is truly something special, but my wife and I's favorite restaurant is D.C.'s on B Street. Beyond the incredible food, one of my favorite places in all of Pueblo is the Center for American Values, located just off the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk. Pueblo is often known as the "Home of Heroes," with a remarkable legacy of Medal of Honor recipients, and the Center is a powerful reminder of the values of service, sacrifice, and integrity that run deep in our community.



The Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo

Ultimately, Pueblo is home because of the people such as my family, my friends, and the strong sense of community that makes this city so special. Pueblo was built on hard work and grit, shaped by generations who poured their lives into places like the steel mill and carried that work ethic into every corner of the city. That culture of resilience is still alive today. I am incredibly grateful to be from Pueblo and blessed to call it home. I truly believe in this city and its people, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for us.

If anyone would like to connect, they are more than welcome to reach out. I can be contacted via email at derionibarra@gmail.com or by text at 719-214-4953. I'm always happy to answer questions or be a resource in any way I can.

Student news ... **Jessica Contreras (ABD)** is excited to have her recent article “Stereotype threat effects on deaf and hard-of-hearing college students’ mathematics performance” accepted for publication in the *Journal of Deaf Students and Deaf Education*... **Leah Matoka (ABD)**, **Stephanie Crow (ABD)**, and **Patience Amadu (ABD)** are having a wonderful year immersing themselves in learning about the Colorado Springs community in the Leadership Pikes Program where Leah is also working alongside **Dr. Hans Larsen (2019)**, UCCS alumnus, as a Graduate Assistant...

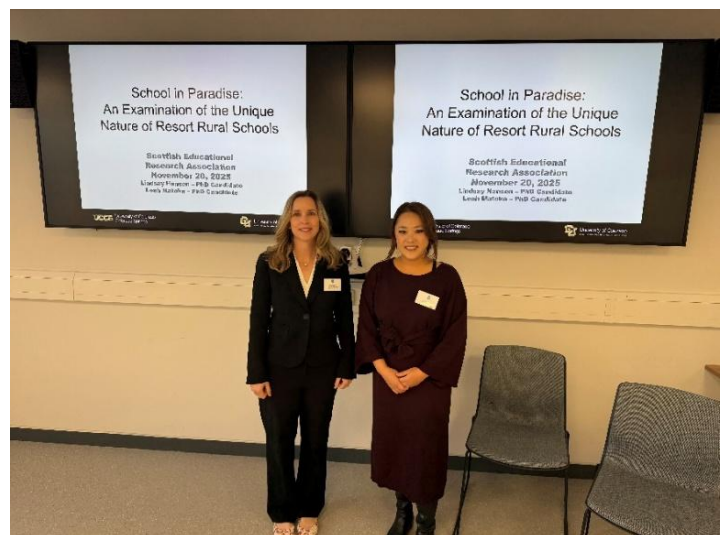
Evelyn Adams (ABD) and **Kriselda Craven (ABD)** published their research completed in their doctoral lab in the journal *Theory and Practice in Rural Education* in October. Their work is titled "Rural perspectives: How rural school and district leaders view the present and future of American education."

Amy Akerman (ABD) co-authored an article published in *The Journal of Physician Assistant Education*, "Forecasting the future: The relationship between pre-matriculant Casper scores and student professionalism infractions during physician assistant school."



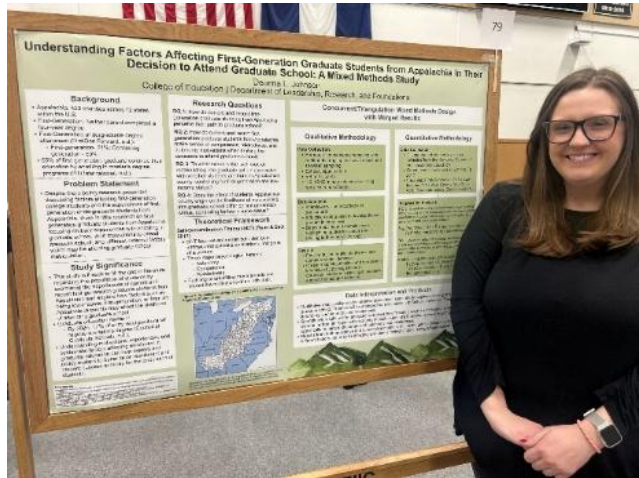
Patience Amadu, Stephanie Crow, Hans Larsen, and Leah Matoka (left to right)

Leah Matoka (ABD) and **Lindsay Hansen (ABD)** presented their research as part of their doctoral lab, *School in paradise: An examination of the unique nature of resort rural schools*, in Scotland at the SERA conference in November...



Lindsay Hansen and Leah Matoka (left to right in both photos)

Thank you to **Jennifer Poe (2nd year)** for her outstanding leadership during the Mountain Lion Research Day! Here are some great photos from the event of Jennifer and several other students, **Nikki Myers (2nd year)**, **Deanna Johnson (2nd year)**, and **Sloan Gonzales (2nd year)** sharing their research!



Deanna Johnson sharing her poster presentation.



Nikki Myers, Deanna Johnson, and Jennifer Poe (left to right)



Nikki Myers, Sloan Gonzales, and Deanna Johnson (left to right)

Jennifer Poe (2nd year) also started a new position this year at UCCS. Jennifer is now the Director of Faculty Affairs. She has recently published a paper alongside Jessi Smith and Emily Skop, "Cultivating faculty-driven reform of the promotion to full professor structures to reward and regard the scholarship of engagement" in the *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*...



Nikki Myers sharing her poster presentation.

Amy Akerman (ABD) was named a Physician Assistant Education Association/American Association of Physician Associates (PAEA/AAPA) 2025-26 Research Fellow, which began on November 1....



Amy Akerman (third from left) presenting her research at the PAEA Education Forum.

Michelle Kephart (ABD) became a Fellow with the Health Policy Research Scholars Program This is a national leadership program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, training scholars to be leaders in building a Culture of Health...



Michelle Kephart

Swagata Banerjee (2nd year) and **Julia Brochey (2nd year)**, have come together to create a campuswide intercultural dance workshop in observance of International Dance Day on April 29, 2026. This workshop, featuring Odissi Dance, Flamenco Dance, and Ballet Folklórico is designed to educate, inspire, and encourage community connections through performing arts while offering participants of all ages an opportunity to engage in movement and cultural learning. Banerjee and Brochey, current PhD students, are longtime professional performing artists, educators, and arts advocates who continue to be inspired by traditional artforms and artistic and academic growth. They are thrilled to fuse their experiences to serve the UCCS community and beyond. Watch for further information coming soon!



Swagata Banerjee and Julia Brochey (left to right)



Julia Brochey and Swagata Banerjee (left to right)

Amy Akerman (2nd year) presented her research to President Saliman and Chancellor Sobanet this fall.



President Saliman, Amy Akerman, and Chancellor Sobanet (left to right)

If we missed any updates from you, please let us know and we will be sure to include those in the Summer Newsletter!



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Faculty news ... **Dr. Hana Kang** recently published a paper in *Research Papers in Education* on how students' self-management influences mathematics learning outcomes during school transitions. **Dr. Robert Mitchell** was interviewed and quoted in the August 10th edition of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette. He provided information about new trends impacting rural schools throughout the United States. **Dr. Elizabeth Domangue** had the opportunity to capture the story of Adam Hartman and George Welsh of Cañon City Schools for AASA, The School Superintendents Association's School Administrator. Their journey together is a powerful reminder of leadership, succession, and legacy done well. Did you know that **Dr. Patty Witkowski** was awarded (along with PI, Dr. Susan Taylor and co-PI, Dr. Amanda Allee '15) the TRiO Student Support Services grant. Dr. Sean Dean '21 has been hired as the Grant's Director, which is funded for five years.



Commencement – December 2025

Three outstanding students from the Educational Leadership, Research, & Policy Ph.D. Program graduated this December at the UCCS commencement. Congratulations to Dr. Brittany Galaydick, Dr. Bridget Guerrero, and Dr. Kristi McCann for their exceptional work on their dissertations and for graduating with their doctoral degrees! This is a remarkable accomplishment, and we wish you the best on your continued professional journeys!



*The graduates celebrating with their
Dissertation Chairs after the ceremony
Dr. Morris, Dr. Witkowski, and Dr.
Mitchell (left to right, front row)
Brittany Galaydick, Bridget Guerrero, and
Kristi McCann (left to right, back row)*



Dr. Brittany Galaydick, Dr. Bridget Guerrero, and Dr. Kristi McCann (left to right)



Dr. Bridget Guerrero

Dissertation Title: Leading for Change: A Phenomenological Study of Social Entrepreneurs' Leadership in Balancing Social Mission and Business Sustainability



Dr. Kristi McCann

Dissertation Title: From Familiar Classrooms to First Jobs: Connecting Pre-service Backgrounds to UTEACH STEM Educator Employment Preferences



Dr. Brittany Galaydick

Dissertation Title: From Traditional to Tailored: A Mixed Methods Examination of Colorado's K-12 Graduation Menu of Options (MOO) (3 Paper Dissertation)

PhD Social Gathering – Fall 2025

Students across cohorts and several professors gathered at the Cogstone Brewing Company this fall just as the new school year began. It was great connecting with old and new faces! We especially enjoyed welcoming the 1st year students!

