Five questions for Ed Mills[1]

While “professional shopper” doesn’t begin to fully reflect the scope of Ed Mills’ job, he’s not above using the term in casual conversation to describe what he does for a living. The real answer is more complex and can elicit polite nods and vacant looks.

As CU’s chief procurement officer, Mills oversees purchasing, contracting, strategic sourcing, travel, expenses, data analytics and technology for the university, which he likens to operating a handful of small cities.

“Each (campus and system administration) needs supplies, services and support to function,” he said. “My team makes sure those things are there, on time and at scale, in support of each one’s mission.”

If this sounds like a big job, it is – and it involves big numbers: More than $1 billion moves through CU’s Procurement Service Center (PSC) each year. That represents thousands of contracts, purchase orders and invoices. For Mills, who began his career decades ago in Washington, D.C., with the Department of Defense, it’s the meaning behind the money that matters.

“Every one of those dollars is tied to CU’s mission of world-class education, research and health care,” he said. “That’s what makes the work meaningful and every transaction important.”
[2]

For this CU Connections interview, Mills shared his thoughts on what constitutes good procurement, how CU works to strengthen Colorado businesses and the next frontier in his field.

1. How would you describe your approach to your job as chief procurement officer and the impact it has on the university?

Early in my career, I was a procurement customer, and I remember sitting in meetings thinking, “Why is the answer always no?” That experience taught me that good procurement is about listening, adapting and still finding a way to deliver, and it shaped how I operate today.

I want my team to be problem solvers, not gatekeepers. We always try to show what “yes” looks like. Not too long ago, we were evaluating a policy exception request from one of the campuses. If we followed the policy standard, we’d have to deny the request. But we took time to dig deeper and understand the root of the issue, and we were able to find a creative solution. It also sparked a conversation about a longer-term strategy with high payoff potential. These types of wins feel good!

Another win for the university this year was CU Boulder Athletics finalizing a 10-year pouring rights agreement with Pepsi that eliminates single-use plastics[3]. That one demonstrates the power of partnership. Boulder Athletics had a bold vision, and we were able to support it with a unique approach to competition and contracting. The result was a better deal for CU, a first-of-its-kind sustainability win for Athletics, and a blueprint for others to follow. Shortly after we announced the deal, I was on a call with a colleague at another university and he said, “You beat us to it!” That’s a good feeling and a testament to CU’s leadership in this area. We’re proud to have played a part, but the real credit goes to our campus partners who set the vision, invited us in and never let go of the idea that it could be done.

2. How does the PSC help departments across the CU system get the most value for their expenditures?

Value looks different depending on who’s asking. For some, it’s getting a contract signed fast. For others, it’s saving money or finding a supplier who really understands their needs. Sometimes it’s maximizing our economic impact locally or reducing our environmental footprint. Often, it’s all of the above.

We aim for cost savings, efficiency, speed and quality at scale, but we also know every department has its own pressures and priorities. The best days are when a department tells me, “That was easy.” That’s what we’re after: getting them what they need quickly and reliably so they can focus on their mission.

A good example is how we moved Amazon spending from P-Cards into the CU Marketplace. It took a lot of groundwork with Amazon and some big change management on our side, but it paid off. Now people have convenience, with better pricing, stronger spend controls, less reconciliation work and better alignment with CU's impact goals. It is a win for the university and for the people who no longer wrestle with receipts at the end of the month.

3. What steps does CU take to do business with Colorado companies?

We're a Colorado institution, and we know our spending can strengthen local communities. In fact, it's core to our mission. A few years ago, we launched what we now call our Impact Spending program, making sure we're intentional about who we do business with and how those dollars flow through the state.

With support from the Board of Regents and our campuses, we've expanded outreach to local businesses, created mentor-protégé programs, and given departments more latitude to choose Colorado suppliers. It's a win for the university and a win for the communities we serve. Our campus partners have been very supportive of these initiatives, and all have created or branched out from our Impact Spending program.

4. What projects or initiatives within procurement are you most excited about and why?

We've been on a transformation journey for a few years now by upgrading systems and helping our team focus on the work that adds real value. We're working toward a world where we don't have to chase things through email. Last year, we delivered a major overhaul of the requisition process, and it's been a real game changer for us and our customers. We're making good progress, but there's more to do.

The next frontier that excites me now is the potential for AI to accelerate and expand our process improvements. We are AI Ready now and are moving toward being AI Forward. We've already started putting AI into practice and have our sights on projects where it could make a big difference. One with growing momentum is AI-enabled contracting. Done right, this could give faculty and staff back more of their time, reducing email threads and freeing them to focus on the work they came to CU to do.

5. What's one thing you'd like the CU community to know about the work you and your team do in procurement?

Procurement is one of those behind-the-scenes functions that touches everything, but people may only notice it when something goes wrong. We cover a very broad landscape, and we'd love to know more about your corner of the university. We're here to support you, and it's a privilege to be part of this community and to play even a small role in its success.

What I'd love the CU community to know is that there's a team of dedicated professionals working hard every day to keep the wheels turning. And they deeply care about your mission. I have never worked with a group so committed and engaged, and it is a privilege to be part of what they do.

For more information about CU's Procurement Services Center, visit cu.edu/psc[4].
[5]

The way you say 'thanks' matters at work [6]

Hidden visual problems can signal often undertreated traumatic brain injuries [7]

Reminder: Complete email survey to help shape CU's next Strategic Plan [8]

Faculty Council recently heard an update on the development of CU's Strategic Plan 2.0, which will succeed the existing five-year Strategic Plan at the end of this academic year.

During its Nov. 20 meeting, held remotely, the council engaged in conversation with Strategic Planning Co-Chairs Lynn Vidler, provost at UCCS, and Chad Marturano, vice president and chief financial officer for the CU system.

"We are committed to hearing from faculty and partnering with you on this," Marturano said. "This (Strategic Plan) will only be as good as the feedback we get from folks."

He and Vidler encouraged faculty and all members of the CU community to respond to the email survey that was distributed Nov. 19. The survey asks all faculty, staff and students to voice their thoughts on the future direction of the university.

To take the survey:
Use the unique URL sent to you via email, with the subject line "Share Your Voice on CU's Future," to respond. This link is unique to you and can't be shared. Plan to spend just six minutes to complete.
As added encouragement to respond, the campus with the highest completion rate across faculty, staff and students will win a $1,000 donation to the campus food pantry.

"This survey is designed to gather perspectives on university priorities, performance and opportunities for improvement," President Todd Saliman said in his email launching the effort. "The insights you provide will help shape our next Strategic Plan as we work to continue delivering for our community."

As part of the Strategic Plan's engagement and listening phase, Marturano and Vidler are attending governance group leadership meetings throughout the 2025-26 academic year. The conversations with faculty, staff and students will be essential in shaping a strategic direction that reflects the values and aspirations of the entire community.

Marturano noted that the next plan might replicate some elements of the current five-year plan, while others will be new.

"The duration of the plan might be different," he said. "The world is very different than it was in 2021. So we're being mindful of how we could think about components of this plan that are evergreen. … We (also) want to be nimble and able to course correct along the way."

A draft plan is due to President Todd Saliman by June 2026. The final Strategic Plan 2.0 will be presented to the Board of Regents in summer 2026. CU's inaugural 2021-26 Strategic Plan remains the university's guiding document through June 2026.

Learn more about the strategic planning process.[9]

Helen and Arthur E. Johnson Beth-El College of Nursing and Health Sciences launches Grand Rounds Series [10]

How a CU Denver professor is pioneering a deeper understanding of AI-based cybersecurity threats [11]

Federal update: ED office and operations changes, more[12]

From Nov. 21, this update from CU Federal Relations and Counsel includes information on ED Office and Operations Changes, DOW Research Tech Priorities, and DHS/USCIS NPRM on Public Charge Rule.

Click here to read the post.[13]

Also from Nov. 21, this monthly update from CU Federal Relations includes information on the Shutdown and FY26 Appropriations, UCCS AFROTC Detachment, Rep. Crank COMBAT Center Visit, Rep. Neguse MENV Symposium Visit, Dark and Quiet Skies Act, LASP Presentation in D.C., CU Comments on SEVIS, and Recent Capitol Hill Visits.

Click here to read the post.[14]

For the latest communications and federal memos, please visit the CU System Federal Updates and Actions[15] page.

Tsuji named dean of CU Anschutz Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical[16]

Recently retired, Seidl shaped teacher prep programs [17]

Regent Emeritus Bosley inducted into CU Athletic Hall of Fame Legacy Wing[18]

Where did house cats come from? Ancient DNA shakes up their origin story [19]

Research links certain Colorado neighborhoods to higher risk for child pedestrians [20]

Weekly Wisdom | CU Denver Chancellor Kenneth Christensen[21]

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