

# Customer Success Story

## Colorado State University

United States | Higher Education | Blackthorn Events | Blackthorn Payments

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### Part One

## About Colorado State University (CSU)

[Colorado State University \(CSU\)](#) serves a broad and deeply engaged community of donors, alumni, and friends. Events play a pivotal role in strengthening those relationships – whether it's a small donor gathering, a college-specific celebration, or a large-scale tailgate that draws 4,000+ registrants.

Within University Advancement, the team partners with colleges and units across campus to deliver experiences that reinforce connection and support philanthropy. Their event portfolio spans hundreds of programs each year, touching nearly every corner of the institution. With such a wide footprint and audiences ranging from first-time alumni participants to long-standing major donors, consistency, visibility, and collaboration became increasingly essential.

As event volume continued to grow, CSU recognized the need for a unified approach: one that honored the individuality of each college or unit while giving event managers a shared framework for delivering a seamless, branded experience at any scale.

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### Part Two

## The Challenge

Before [Blackthorn](#), CSU relied on a homegrown event registration tool built on top of its legacy advancement CRM. While the system had supported them for years, it could no longer keep pace with modern engagement and user interface expectations, or with the increasing volume and complexity of Advancement events.

Event managers operated across fragmented tools: registration was handled in one system, email was managed in another, and event-day check-in was conducted through paper rosters that students or staff would later reconcile by hand. Templates could be overwritten unintentionally,

governance varied from team to team, and even simple last-minute changes often triggered an “all-hands” scramble to update communications.

The manual workload added up quickly. Printing lists, manually tracking attendance, and reconciling disparate spreadsheets stretched teams thin and made accurate reporting difficult.

As CSU described it, *“We went from spreadsheets and silos to a single system of record – it’s transformative for donor engagement.”*

Callie Anderson, Engagement Specialist, summarized the shift more personally, *“It just felt more manual – paper lists, separate emails, and a lot of after-the-fact clean-up. Blackthorn made the whole process easier end-to-end.”*

CSU’s move to Salesforce created the perfect moment for change. The Advancement team needed a managed, CRM-native, unified approach that could eliminate the patchwork of workarounds and bring clarity to the donor journey. Blackthorn became the catalyst for turning scattered processes into a cohesive and scalable event strategy.

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### Part Three

## Why CSU Chose Blackthorn Events: The Cadillac of Event Management

As CSU prepared for an 18-month CRM transformation, the University Advancement team faced a once-in-a-generation opportunity. They were moving *“everything, everywhere, all at once”* into Salesforce: CRM, Marketing Cloud, event management, payments, and more. With such a sweeping shift, choosing the right Salesforce-native events platform became essential.

Across multiple implementation proposals, Blackthorn consistently stood out. Vendors and consultants independently recommended it, and CSU’s internal evaluation confirmed why. Blackthorn offered the modern, polished registrant experience CSU wanted for its community, backed by the power and flexibility expected of a true native Salesforce solution.

As Kylan Marsh, Managing Director of Innovation, Technology, Education and Analytics, put it, *“Blackthorn was the Cadillac – others were years behind, especially on the front end.”*

Several factors made the decision clear:

- Native Salesforce deployment delivered real-time data without manual reconciliation.

- Customizable event forms and workflows made it easy to tailor experiences for donors, alumni, friends, and campus partners.
- A sleek, intuitive registration interface reinforced the elevated experience CSU wanted every attendee to feel.
- A future-ready roadmap enabled CSU to expand its capabilities, including texting, kiosk mode, check-in, and attendee coding.

Implementation occurred in parallel with CSU's full Salesforce rollout—an ambitious timeline. Blackthorn's support team stepped in quickly to clarify configuration questions and support CSU through the full transition - and beyond.

Casey Thomas, Marketing Communications Strategist, University Advancement Engagement, noted how critical that partnership has been, *"The back-and-forth dialogue is one of the best parts—support is responsive, and we can self-educate quickly with documentation and videos."*

CSU's team also benefits from regular peer exchanges and participation in product advisory conversations, giving them early visibility into new features and the opportunity to influence the roadmap.

Today, CSU credits the collaborative partnership—and Blackthorn's responsiveness—as a key part of their successful adoption.

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#### Part Four

## Use Cases & Results: How CSU Leverages Blackthorn Events

With Blackthorn, CSU has transformed the entire arc of its event operations—from the first registration click to the final stewardship touchpoint. What once required manual work, paper processes, and cross-system coordination now happens seamlessly within Salesforce, giving Advancement teams the clarity and agility they need to support donors, alumni, and partners across campus.

### A Consistent, Intuitive Experience for Donors, Alumni & Friends

Today, every CSU Advancement Event—from a small alumni gathering to a 4,000+ fan tailgate—shares a unified, branded registration experience. Attendees immediately recognize the flow, no matter which college or unit is hosting. On the backend, event managers build from shared templates and governance patterns, ensuring creativity can flourish without jeopardizing data

integrity or core structure. Teams feel more empowered, with many managers now building and managing their own events while relying on Advancement for strategy rather than troubleshooting.

#### **Data-Driven Engagement for Advancement Teams**

With Blackthorn, CSU finally has real-time insight into donor, alumni, and guest participation. Event managers and development officers no longer chase spreadsheets or wait for manual updates—they can see exactly who registered, who attended, and how those engagements ladder into CSU's broader strategies. Fundraisers also gain clear visibility into when members of their portfolios or potential prospects are attending events, enabling more timely, informed, and personalized follow-up.

This visibility has reshaped how CSU understands and nurtures its relationships. As Casey Thomas shared, *"Blackthorn gives gift officers snapshots of who has registered and attended, who's in their portfolio, and their giving capacity. Gift officers have more insight into which events they should personally attend to move their relationships forward."*

#### **Mobile Check-In & Real-Time Attendance**

Blackthorn's check-in app replaced paper rosters entirely, eliminating hours of post-event data entry and reducing reliance on student labor. CSU now saves roughly three hours per event, and student workers (who were previously bogged down with manual work) contribute to higher-value tasks—building events, assisting with VIP flows, learning on-site operations, and gaining real-world experience they can apply beyond campus.

#### **Rapid, Unified Communications**

Last-minute weather changes or venue adjustments no longer require manual updates across multiple systems. Event managers can now communicate from the same platform they use to run registration, often in minutes. And, with Blackthorn Messaging/SMS on the horizon, CSU is eager to introduce automated VIP arrival alerts that notify development officers or leadership the moment a key guest checks in.

#### **Modernizing Presidential & High-Profile Events**

Some of CSU's most exclusive gatherings have seen an immediate benefit. As the team shared, *"Our presidential donor events are finally tracked in Salesforce, giving us clarity we never had before."*

By moving these engagements into Salesforce, CSU now connects attendance and follow-up with portfolio strategy, strengthening stewardship and supporting more personalized outreach.

#### **Empowerment Through Governance & Guardrails**

Consistency has not come at the cost of flexibility. CSU implemented guardrails to protect core templates—while still enabling broader self-service. The result: fewer rebuilds, cleaner data, and more event managers confidently operating on their own.

### Payments Designed for Advancement Needs

For paid, non-gift events, CSU now runs payments directly through Blackthorn Payments. Gift revenue remains routed through CSU's existing gift-processing pathway, preserving clean accounting separation with no ambiguity for internal teams. CSU can iterate quickly—testing new flows, enabling features, and collaborating with Blackthorn when deeper enhancements are needed.

Casey Thomas summarized the impact best, *"It gives you features you didn't even know you needed—and removes the manual work you thought was unavoidable."*

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#### Part Five

## The Impact

Since implementing Blackthorn Events, CSU has reshaped both the attendee and staff experience. What once required fragmented tools, manual processes, and workarounds now happens in a single Salesforce environment—changing the speed, scale, and quality of how Advancement delivers events.

The Advancement team now operates in a unified system, reducing manual work, strengthening data accuracy, and giving every event manager the tools to build experiences confidently and consistently.

Staff highlight faster event setup, cleaner workflows, and the confidence that comes from governed self-service. With guardrails and consistent branding baked into templates, event managers across colleges and units can create their own events without risking data integrity or design drift. The result is broader adoption, fewer rebuilds, and more time spent on strategy rather than troubleshooting.

For attendees—whether at a 10-person stewardship luncheon or a 4,000+ person tailgate—the experience is smoother and more intuitive. Registration pages feel familiar and polished, communications flow from a single source of truth, and real-time check-in ensures immediate visibility for gift officers and leadership.

CSU's team calls out time savings, streamlined operations, and support that listens & responds quickly as some of the biggest wins with Blackthorn. The shift has been significant: faster execution, fewer manual steps, and the ability to handle even the highest-volume events without breaking processes or overextending staff.

And the journey isn't slowing down. CSU plans to expand into Blackthorn Messaging to enable real-time SMS for updates, reminders, and VIP alerts, further elevating event-day coordination.

Together, these improvements have not only made events easier to run but also more impactful, fueling stronger engagement among donors, alumni, and friends of CSU.

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#### Part Six

## Growing Together

CSU's Advancement team continues to expand its use of Blackthorn, uncovering new capabilities as its strategy evolves. The next wave of enhancements includes Blackthorn Messaging/SMS, enabling real-time nudges, day-of updates, and VIP arrival alerts that instantly notify development officers when key guests check in. Features such as Kiosk Mode, Table Manager, and Required Sessions are also on the roadmap as CSU catches up on recent upgrades and broadens adoption of Blackthorn across campus.

Each addition brings CSU closer to its goal of consolidating event data in one place—strengthening reporting, sharpening invitation strategy, and improving follow-up across Advancement.

As Callie Anderson shared, *“We’re always discovering new ways to use it. Now that we have our footing, we can focus on VIP journeys and the polished touches that elevate the experience.”*

CSU isn't just adopting new tools—they're helping shape them. By serving on product advisory groups, participating in demos, and participating in ongoing feedback loops, the team regularly contributes insights into the realities of higher-ed engagement.

From exploring tracks and attendee coding to preparing for kiosk check-in and enhanced accessibility tools, CSU sees Blackthorn as a partner they can grow with—not just a system they use.

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#### Part Seven

## Realizing ROI

For CSU, ROI isn't defined by a single metric—it shows up across the entire lifecycle of event planning and engagement. The shift to a unified, Salesforce-native platform has resulted in reduced hours



per event, fewer handoffs, accelerated communication during last-minute changes, and created a noticeably smoother experience for donors, alumni, and campus partners.

Attendance statuses now flow directly into CSU's engagement index and inform the CASE alumni engagement metric, providing the university with a clearer, more consistent view of who is connecting—and how those relationships deepen over time. With data captured cleanly and instantly, event engagement no longer lives in spreadsheets or isolated systems; it becomes part of a larger story about stewardship, participation, and long-term affinity.

Kylan Marsh summed up the operational impact, *“Support is dedicated, the product keeps evolving with our feedback, and we can move faster because everything lives together in Salesforce.”*

Event managers have greater autonomy, building and managing their own events within governed templates that ensure accuracy and consistency. Leadership and development officers now benefit from real-time insight into attendance patterns and donor behavior, strengthening follow-up and sharpening portfolio strategy.

As CSU reflected on the broader value, *“Looking forward, success will be measured not just in smoother workflows, but in deeper engagement and stronger outcomes—for our team, our institution, and the community we serve.”*

**Blackthorn has helped CSU move from managing events to strategically leveraging them—strengthening relationships, informing advancement strategy, and enabling the university to scale meaningful engagement across every corner of campus.**