

COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

ALUMNI

MAGAZINE

2025

Driven + Determined

Brandi Gomez Ushers in a
New Generation of Career Confidence



Take Advantage of Your **10% Knight Tuition Discount**

Alumni who are ready to take their success one step further are eligible for the Knight tuition discount. With the Knight tuition discount, recipients will receive 10% off tuition toward their master's or doctoral degree. The Knight tuition discount is also available to spouses and dependents of alumni.



**COLUMBIA
SOUTHERN**
UNIVERSITY



From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers,

As Columbia Southern University's new alumni magazine editor-in-chief, it is my great pleasure to share a collection of inspiring stories from our alumni, faculty and staff. Stepping into this role allowed me to learn of the courage and determination it takes to become a CSU Knight, and I am honored to bring your achievements to light.

In fact, I understand the challenges that come with pursuing higher education later in life. I, myself, decided to return to college as an adult. I earned my Bachelor of Arts in communication, which ultimately led me to this very opportunity. It gives me great joy to hear your tales of success. The stories that reside within these pages reflect the dedication and hard work it takes to thrive; it's never too late to learn. It's never too late to grow.

Our cover story features Brandi Gomez, a wife and career-driven mom who earned her degree despite working a full-time job and balancing many other responsibilities. Through determination, she earned a master's degree and is a first-generation college graduate. She is proof that earning your degree can be done, no matter where you are in life. You

can read more about her journey on Page 10.

Our alumni spotlight, Bartholomew Reed, proves what determination can do. He rose from humble beginnings, overcame extraordinary challenges and earned three degrees while pursuing his career. Turn to Page 5 to read about his remarkable accounts of overcoming adversity.

What challenges have you faced? It is your stories, after all, that are the inspiration for this magazine. If you would like to share your story, I encourage you to connect with me by emailing CSU-Alumni@ColumbiaSouthern.edu so we can find the best platform to highlight your accomplishments.

Our stories unite us and remind us of what's possible. This issue is a testament to those who make our communities stronger—the problem-solvers, innovators and military personnel who are devoted to making the world a little brighter, one day at a time. We salute you.

With appreciation,

Rachel Ross

Rachel Ross
Editor-in-Chief

Letter From the Alumni President

Dear CSU Alumni,

It is both an honor and a privilege to serve as the president of the Columbia Southern University Alumni Association. As an alum myself, I know firsthand the dedication, perseverance and sacrifice it takes to reach the finish line—the pride that comes with being part of something larger than ourselves.

No matter where your path has taken you since graduation, whether you're advancing in your career, serving your community or exploring new horizons, I want you to know that you are part of a thriving and growing CSU family that spans the globe. Our alumni network includes thousands of members, each contributing to a legacy of leadership, service and lifelong learning.

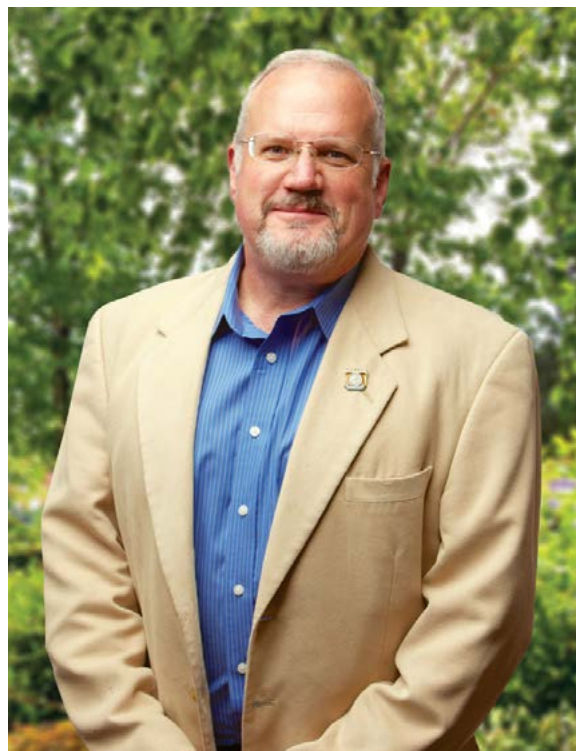
This past year, CSU has made exciting strides, offering new degree programs, enhanced student support services and increased recognition across a variety of industries. But what inspires me most is the impact you, our alumni, are making every day. From mentoring current students to leading in the workplace, you embody the values that CSU holds dear.

Our alumni community is stronger when we stay connected. That's why we're expanding our efforts to provide more opportunities to engage with you through social media, professional development webinars, alumni spotlights and regional meetups.

Activate your
CSU ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
membership today!

Alumni Association members receive invitations to exclusive alumni events, a discount from the CSU Bookstore and the opportunity to connect with fellow Knights. Connect with us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#) to stay in touch.

Visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Alumni to activate your membership today!



As we look to the future, our vision is clear: to build a vibrant and supportive alumni network that uplifts the next generation of CSU graduates. I encourage you to stay involved by updating your contact info, sharing your achievements and participating in upcoming events.

One event I'm always excited about is commencement, which is held in October. It's a perfect opportunity to reconnect, reminisce and rediscover what it means to be a CSU Knight. Grad Bash is another event I look forward to that is held on CSU's campus the day before graduation—a day that gives us the chance to celebrate the accomplishments of our newest alumni with their family and friends.

We are proud of where we've come from—and even more excited about where we're going. Thank you for representing CSU in your communities, your professions and your lives. I look forward to meeting many of you in the months ahead, hearing your stories and building a future that reflects the best of who we are.

With appreciation and CSU pride,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ralph Blessing".

Ralph Blessing
Alumni Association President
M.S. Occupational Safety and Health, Class of 2007

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These testimonials may not reflect the experience of all CSU students. Multiple factors, including prior experience, geography and degree field, affect career outcomes. CSU does not guarantee a job, promotion, salary increase, eligibility for a position, or other career growth.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

From Cabrini-Green
to Commanding IT

The Journey of Bartholomew Reed

For some, life begins in the safety of a stable home with strong role models to guide the way. For Columbia Southern University alumnus Bartholomew Reed, that was not the case.

Raised in the Cabrini-Green housing development of Chicago, Bartholomew grew up in an environment where survival often outweighed dreams. As a young boy, he imagined becoming a lawyer and even had the opportunity to attend a law program at Penn State during his sophomore year of high school. But the instability of his home life—coupled with the dangers outside his door—forced him to set that dream aside.

“That environment was tough. There was no peace. You couldn’t go certain places. There were multiple bullies, and some people tried to recruit you into gangs,” he recalled. Bartholomew made the life-changing decision to join the U.S. Navy—a choice that would carry him through two wars and 17 years of active-duty and reserve service.

“Life at home began to unravel, and I made the decision to join the military,” he said. “That journey gave me experiences that shaped my discipline, my resilience and my future.”

It was in the Navy that Bartholomew discovered a new passion: information technology. He served as an operations specialist.

“We worked with everything from communication tools to encrypted radios, and it gave me valuable insight into the power of technology.”

A natural problem-solver, he found IT to be the perfect fit. But it wasn’t until a family member encouraged him to pursue higher education that he began formal studies.

“My educational journey started after my daughter’s mother, who saw something in me, encouraged me to go back to school,” he said. “I completed my associate degree in computer science and a certificate in networking, which gave me the foundation to grow.”

Bartholomew’s road forward wasn’t without hardship. Along the way, he lost his mother to cancer and lost his sister to domestic violence. In 2019, he survived a near fatal car accident that required spinal fusion surgery, all while raising his children as a single parent.

“The road has never been easy,” he said. “But every trial, every loss and every setback became fuel.”

In 2016, while applying for IT positions, he received a call from CSU’s chief information officer.

“I didn’t get the job, but something about that interaction stuck with me,” he said. “I took it as a sign and enrolled at CSU, beginning a new chapter—one fueled by resilience,

faith and the unwavering encouragement of CSU’s staff, who soon felt like family.”

With years of IT experience under his belt, Bartholomew realized he was ready to move into leadership, but knew he needed a stronger academic foundation.

“I wanted to not only sharpen my skills but also build a future I could be proud of—for myself, my family and my community,” he said. “My journey is proof that you can rise after setbacks, as long as you stay focused and surround yourself with the right support system, like CSU.”

Since enrolling, Bartholomew has earned three degrees from CSU: a bachelor’s and master’s degree in information technology and an MBA with a concentration in project management.

“These degrees didn’t just sit on a shelf—they opened doors,”

he said. “I’ve led two previously delayed IT projects to completion, co-led our Windows 11 upgrade initiative, and received the IT Spotlight Award in May 2024.”

His achievements also include a Certificate of Appreciation from the State of Florida Agency for Health Care Administration for going above and beyond during Hurricane Michael’s impact on IT operations, making CSU’s President’s List, and earning CSU’s Certificate of Achievement for maintaining a 4.0 GPA in the fall 2024 semester.

“CSU empowered me to rise, to lead and to leave a legacy—not just for myself, but for others watching from behind,” he said.

Beyond IT, Bartholomew serves as an ordained minister. His ministry focuses on helping people overcome their struggles and discover their own potential.

“My heart beats for those silenced by trauma, abuse or life’s hardships,” he said. “I volunteer in the community, walking alongside the homeless and the hurting—not to impress, but to impact. Whether in a server room or on the streets, I see every soul as valuable. Education gave me a platform, but ministry gave me a purpose.”

Today, Bartholomew is a project lead and technical systems administrator. His message to anyone questioning whether it’s worth starting is simple:

“It’s never too late to learn, to evolve or to reach higher. Whether you’re a parent, a veteran, a working professional, or all three, CSU meets you where you are and walks with you to where you’re meant to be. Don’t let fear or timing stop you. I’m living proof that no matter where you start, determination, education and the right support can take you further than you ever imagined.” 

From Caregiver to Advocate: **Professor George Ackerman Strives to Find a Parkinson's Cure**

George Ackerman, Ph.D., is a reserve police officer, lawyer and a full-time business instructor at Columbia Southern University. He is also a passionate advocate for Parkinson's disease.

In 2020, George's mother Sharon died from Parkinson's after living with the disease for decades. After his mother's passing, George wanted to bring positive change and ultimately find a cure. With the help of his family, he started TogetherForSharon®, a website with valuable resources for those with Parkinson's or for those with a family member who has Parkinson's.

The website keeps his mother's memory alive while also helping others cope with the disease through interviews, articles, videos, news and more.

The Diagnosis

Sharon was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1998. As she, her family and thousands of others learned, Parkinson's can be difficult to diagnose due to the variations of symptoms for each person. For her, the escalation of her symptoms was sudden and unexpected. "The disease escalated quickly," he said. "I only knew the word Parkinson's, but I didn't know this disease for many years because the only sign we saw was her left arm...she had a lot of stiffness."

Sharon was independent and didn't reveal her medical issues to her son. Even though she wasn't feeling well, she never disclosed exactly what was wrong until the disease began affecting her daily activities in 2014.

Toward the end of her life, Sharon enrolled in a special trial at a university and saw numerous neurologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists. When various treatments proved unsuccessful, reality finally sank in for Sharon and her family: there is no cure for Parkinson's disease.

As the disease progressed, Sharon found that living on her own was no longer a possibility, and that's when her family realized she needed 24/7 care.



Becoming a Parkinson's Caregiver

George became his mother's caregiver and described the situation as an event that nothing can prepare you for.

"Caregiving, even as an educator, is something you cannot take a class for or even earn a degree in," he said. "I felt like I was back in law school being thrown into court or as a police officer being thrown into the street. I just didn't know what I was doing, so I made lists and tried to accomplish each thing, anything and everything. It's not an easy thing to go through."

After enrolling in the clinical trials, Sharon began having hallucinations and delusions, a possible result of drastic medication changes.

"That was the first time we heard of hallucinations and delusions. From that point on, her health just declined unlike anything we've ever heard of or seen. Even today I don't understand what happened, but that's when I became her caregiver and realized that this is worse than something I've ever dreamed of."

Since every person's symptoms differ, this can contribute to the complications of finding a cure. There are medications available in treating the disease, but they can also cause more problems to appear.

"The medications can cause side effects, so while you're trying to slow certain symptoms, like tremors, you end up speeding up others, which is also tragic," he said.

A Published Author

George has authored books describing what it's like for family members who have lost loved ones or who act as caregivers to someone with the disease.

"There's a lot of things out there that we need awareness for," he said. There are roughly 20 to 30 million people who lost a loved one due to Parkinson's, and I think that's a shame. If you brought back all the people who have lost a loved one due to Parkinson's, I feel we'd be closer to a cure because you'd have more people advocating."

Initially, George had no intention of writing a book, but that changed when he realized there are roughly 10 million people around the world with the disease. He went on a mission and interviewed 1,000 people in preparation for writing his books.

"From Iceland, England, France, Spain, Italy, Africa, you name it, I found people who are either affected, advocates or going through Parkinson's," he said. "I decided to put them in a book just so people realize that they're not alone. There are other people out there fighting toward a cure."

Devoted to Finding a Cure

Over the last few years, there has been slight progress in diagnosing Parkinson's. Early detection and early treatment

can help slow the disease's progression. However, science, fitness and exercise are the only known factors so far that truly slow the advancement.

"More and more people who are younger, even in their 20s and 30s, are getting it," he said. "It's called young-onset Parkinson's, so it's not just older people now—anyone can get it from all over the world, and we all must be in this fight together for a cure."

"Parkinson's is complicated because there are so many different issues," he said. "It causes major stomach issues and also tremors, some have internal like my mother, and some have external like Michael J. Fox."



Michael J. Fox publicly shared his Parkinson's diagnosis in 1998 and has become an advocate for the disease. George met Fox along his advocacy trail. He describes him as a hero for being so public with his diagnosis and for raising more than \$1 billion toward finding a cure.

Fox also led an international coalition of scientists in the development of biomarker tests, which are used to measure and track the progression of the disease. This discovery can lead to better treatments and possibly a cure.

When people question why he still advocates, George's answer is clear. "The only answer I have is I felt alone," he said. "My mother never met someone who had Parkinson's, which is heartbreaking. I don't want anyone to feel alone or to go through the torture that she did, as well as our family."

George's mother raised him to never give up, and he feels he should help others who are battling the disease.

"If I just reach one person in the world and ensure they know they're not alone or that they remember my mother—that she lives on—that's why I do this." 

ALUMNI EVENTS

A Year In Review

SEPTEMBER 2024

ORLANDO, FL

CSU attended the National Safety Council (NSC) Safety Congress & Expo and hosted an alumni networking social at Main Event. Alumni gathered for an evening of bowling, great food and great connection.

ORANGE BEACH, AL

CSU's annual Grad Bash and Commencement ceremonies were a huge hit. We had another record attendance at Grad Bash with 787 total attendees, as we celebrated our graduates and newest members of the CSU Alumni family.

FEBRUARY 2025

HOUSTON, TX

CSU participated in the Health and Safety Council (HASC) Tailgate Extravaganza and hosted an alumni networking social at Topgolf Webster. The event brought together local graduates for an evening of camaraderie and connection. It was a great opportunity for alumni to celebrate their CSU journey while building new relationships with fellow Knights.



SAN DIEGO, CA



JUNE 2025

SAN DIEGO, CA

At the Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) '25 Annual Conference, CSU was present with a booth and held an alumni networking social at Tavern+Bowl. Last year's CSU alumni magazine cover feature, Robert Logan, was present to receive his personal copy of the magazine.



ORLANDO, FL



ALUMNI EVENTS

ORANGE BEACH, AL



JULY 2025

ORLANDO, FL

Alumni from various degree programs came together to reconnect, share stories and make new professional connections. The event offered a fun, relaxed atmosphere with great food and friendly competition.

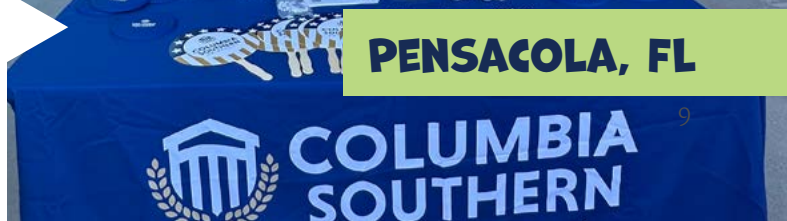
AUGUST 2025

PENSACOLA, FL

CSU hosted an epic 'Back to School Night' at the Blue Wahoos game, where our director of loyalty and engagement, Brett Patterson, threw the first pitch. Many fans stopped by to say hello and grab some CSU swag.



PENSACOLA, FL



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a bright blue blazer over a white top and black wide-leg trousers, stands in a modern, brightly lit hallway. She has her hands in her pockets and is smiling at the camera. The hallway features a patterned carpet and modern architectural details.

**"This degree isn't
just a milestone—it's
a message of possibility."**

Driven + Determined

Brandi Gomez Ushers in a New Generation of Career Confidence

Most nights, after tucking her young children into bed, the day wasn't over for alumna Brandi Gomez—she still had a couple of hours of studying and homework to complete, despite working a full-time job.

A 33-year-old mother of two and the wife of a police sergeant and U.S. Marine reservist, Brandi is no stranger to the challenges of balancing multiple responsibilities.

"To put it simply: I'm just a human trying to build a good life for myself and my family," she said. "I'm a working parent and military spouse, juggling many roles in addition to holding down the fort at home—just like so many others out there."

Brandi is an incident communications manager with Navy Federal Credit Union in Pensacola, Florida, an organization she's been with for six years. She always knew she wanted to return to school and earn her master's degree.

"I felt it was important to gain real-world experience first," she said. "After earning my undergraduate degree, I spent a decade building my career, and I'm grateful I waited—those years in the workplace gave me valuable context that deepened my learning."

Brandi witnessed friends and coworkers balance full-time jobs while working toward their degrees, and that gave her the confidence that she could do it too.

"What really made it feel close to home was my husband starting his bachelor's degree about a year before I did," she said. "Watching his journey gave me a front-row seat to what CSU had to offer. On top of that, my employer, Navy Federal Credit Union, has a partnership with CSU that includes a tuition discount, which made the decision even easier."

Educational assistance is one of the many benefits available to Navy Federal team members. By taking advantage of this employer perk, Brandi is setting a positive example for her children and has become the first in her family to pursue graduate school.

"As a first-generation college graduate—earning both my bachelor's and now my master's degree—this achievement is deeply personal," she said. "It feels like I'm breaking generational barriers and creating a legacy for my children. I want them, and other women like me, to know that they can do anything they set their minds to. This degree isn't just a milestone—it's a message of possibility."

Prior to her current role at the credit union, Brandi supported the Navy Federal Serves program, which

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ON THE COVER

Continued from previous page.

sparked her interest in human resources. Happily, CSU's course layout aligned with her development goals.

"All the courses for that specific degree were really interesting to me," she said. "Instead of going the path for a master's in communications or organizational leadership, I wanted to do something different, something more applicable to any role that I go into in the future."

CSU's online structure and flexibility afforded her the opportunity to pursue her degree despite navigating the role of wife, mom and coworker.

"I needed a program that could fit into my life, not the other way around," she said. "What really stood out to me was how accessible everything felt. The online learning format was thoughtfully designed, and the support I received—from registration all the way through to graduation—was consistent and encouraging. It truly felt like CSU was built for people like me."

Brandi has a background in crisis communication and particularly enjoyed the training and development course of the program.

"Getting to take that course and really thinking about how organizations set their workforce up for success...I could see myself getting into some sort of realm within learning and development, coaching or something of that nature," she said.

Despite challenges and setbacks, she credits CSU professors for working with her when life became overwhelming while trying to complete assignments.

"There was a particularly challenging time during my graduate program when my husband was away for over a month at a military training school, and I was battling a severe case of pneumonia," she said. "It became incredibly difficult to keep up with assignments. But when I reached out to my instructors to explain what was happening,

I was met with nothing but understanding and grace. I genuinely feel like I would not have made it this far if it weren't for their understanding that we all have lives outside of school. That kind of compassion made all the difference."

Brandi feels that obtaining her master's degree in human resources will open new doors and possibilities. She also feels her degree will give her more confidence in the future.

"Earning my master's degree has significantly broadened my professional horizons," she said. "With a background in communications and extensive experience working alongside human resources, this degree has allowed me to deepen my expertise in key HR areas such as training and development, research methods, measurement and crisis communication. These courses have enriched my understanding of the strategies and functions that contribute to thriving workplace environments."

"The greatest benefit I gained from earning my master's degree was confidence," she said. "I hadn't realized how much the absence of that formal education had been affecting the way I showed up in the workplace. Completing this program gave me a renewed sense of self-assurance—not just in my knowledge, but in my voice and presence as a professional."

Submitting the last assignment for any student is exciting, and Brandi describes how it felt to hit the submit button to complete the program.

"I think the best word I can use is surreal," she said. "Having spent two years in the program with many late nights and balancing work, motherhood, military life and all the things, being able to click the button for the last time and know that it was my last assignment—I felt like there was just a weight lifted off my shoulders."

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**"...we all have
lives outside
of school."**



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She plans to attend CSU's 2025 Commencement Ceremony in October. When she walks across the stage to receive her diploma, she will proudly carry with her all the hard work and sacrifice it took to achieve higher education.

"On a personal level, the experience was incredibly empowering," she said. "I earned this degree on my own while balancing the demands of being a working parent, and that accomplishment means the world to me. It's not just a milestone for my career—it's a step toward creating a better future for myself and my family."

Brandi exemplifies the determination it takes to pursue a degree while juggling adult responsibilities and being active in many social and professional groups throughout her career. She's proven it can be done—especially with the support of her family, friends, colleagues and employer.

She also has advice for anyone looking to consider higher education.

"I've always believed that education is one of the few things in life that no one can ever take away from you. That belief has guided me throughout my journey, and it's the same advice I'd give to anyone who's on the fence about going back to school. It's not always easy, and the timing may never feel perfect—but the growth, confidence and sense of accomplishment you gain are more than worth it. If you're thinking about it, take the leap. You're more capable than you realize." 



Notable Knights

ERIC MCCOY

The Huntington Beach Fire Department in California has appointed Eric McCoy as the new fire chief. He worked briefly for the Fountain Valley Fire Department before returning to Huntington Beach in 2006 as a firefighter and paramedic. "It's such an honor and a blessing to be able to take this spot," he said. "I'm really excited to lead the men and women of the fire department and continue to serve the community that I grew up in. It's a dream for sure." McCoy received a master's degree in organizational leadership from CSU.

STEVEN NORDHAUS

U.S. Air Force General Steven Nordhaus has been appointed the 30th chief of the National Guard Bureau. In his new role, he spoke about the work the bureau is doing in the aftermath of the hurricanes. "Our guardsmen are working tirelessly to respond to Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton," he said. "They are saving families in devastated communities. They are clearing roads and establishing distribution sites so our fellow Americans can regain access to life-saving food and water." Nordhaus received a master's degree in organizational leadership from CSU.

JACLYN COLLIER

Agtegra Cooperative in Aberdeen, South Dakota, has named Jaclyn Collier vice president of environmental, health and safety (EHS). She will be responsible for leading all aspects of Agtegra's EHS programs and brings over a decade of experience to the role. Collier holds certifications as a certified safety professional and occupational health and safety technologist. She earned a bachelor's and master's degree in occupational safety and health from CSU.

DANELLE MUSIL

Danelle Musil is currently forming a first-of-its-kind peer support group and an overall wellness program at the Lorain County Sheriff's Office in Ohio for correctional officers. "It's becoming more evident the tough job that correctional officers have," she said. "Whether it's tips to reduce stress and anxiety, I bring to them focus on wellness. Not only mental, but also physical, emotional, community, everything." She is a 2013 CSU graduate.

JOHN PATRICK PHILLIPS

John Patrick Phillips of Tulsa, Oklahoma, has been included in Marquis Who's Who. Phillips has built an impressive career in occupational safety and health for nearly two decades and currently serves as the senior director of safety at Herc Rentals Inc. He served in the United States Army for 15 years and the National Guard, including roles as a military police officer, platoon sergeant and a noncommissioned officer in charge of operations, with multiple deployments. He holds a bachelor's degree in occupational safety and health from CSU.

MILITARY SPOTLIGHT

**FROM COMBAT
TO COMMUNITY**
Army Veteran
Jason Nazarenko's
Mission Continues



Columbia Southern University alumnus Jason Nazarenko joined the Army in 1996 to seek a better life for himself and his family. Young and newly married, Jason waited until his firstborn arrived to join. When his daughter was just 2 weeks old, Jason began a military career that would encompass an impressive 23-year journey.

"We just wanted something different," he said. "We're from a very small town, and I just wanted something to ensure that we had a good future."

Jason was initially a cook in the Army and even won the Cook of the Year Award for the 101st division. After serving eight years, he decided he wanted to explore other avenues in his military career. He learned about the Army's flight program and applied.

"I put in an application, took some tests, scored high enough on them and then I was able to go to flight school," he said. "I became a pilot, and I did that for a couple of years."

After a two-year stint as a pilot in the Army, Jason decided to take his pilot skills to another level. He applied for special operations, and after successfully completing the assessment, he rose through the ranks to become a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. He later served for nearly a decade with the elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, also known as the Night Stalkers, completing numerous deployments in support of special operations missions.

Jason started school at CSU to pursue an MBA while serving to ensure he had a career after his service was concluded. Despite being overseas throughout most of his coursework, he found ways to study and complete his assignments.

"I was in the Army at the time I started my educational journey and many of my classes were completed while I was deployed overseas," he said. "I knew I needed to do

something to set myself up for success after my career in the military, and this degree was part of my plan."

CSU turned out to be the perfect fit for Jason, providing the flexibility and support he needed to continue his education while managing the challenges of multiple military deployments.

"I found CSU during my search for a school and program that was military friendly," he said. "I would be able to navigate inside and outside of the continental United States while serving. I spent many hours working on schoolwork overseas in a combat zone with an MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat) box as my seat or my laptop sitting on the back of a Humvee where I could have a little peace and quiet to concentrate."

Giving Back

After retiring from the military in October 2019, Jason became heavily involved in his community. He wanted to give back to his hometown of Cotter, Arkansas, and this is when his MBA degree proved beneficial.

"This degree set the groundwork for me to make incredible impacts on my community and the confidence to do it right," he said. "It was because of that knowledge that I had, project management knowledge and business management knowledge, that was able to help me along that path."

When he moved back to Cotter, the area was in worse shape than when he left. He became president of the Cotter-Gassville Chamber of Commerce and began working with the mayor, renovating dilapidated and historical buildings to breathe life back into the small town.

He and his wife purchased **Potter Block**, a historical home built in 1921. The home sat nestled in a quaint area of Cotter and needed major repairs. However, they saw



Photo inset: Jason in uniform; Jason and his wife.

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potential in the home and decided to tackle the necessary renovations to start a vacation rental company.

"We got very involved within the realm of the Chamber of Commerce," he said. "We have really renovated the town. We've had a huge resurgence here, and Cotter has really flourished because of it."

The renovations inspired others in the community to start businesses and invest. As a result, Cotter went from an eyesore to a prosperous charming town.

Through fundraising, the town raised more than \$250,000 overnight, allowing for significant projects to be completed.

"That was sparking other people to start businesses and get things going in town, so it really just lifted everything up," he said. "I tribute that back to the experience of my degree as well as the networking I did throughout that."

From Black Hawk Helicopter Pilot to House of Representatives

After retiring from the Army, Jason was a senior pilot for an air ambulance company. However, a new career would take precedence.

"I have used my education to start and continue to run a successful small business," he said. "I have also used many of the tools I gained from the journey in the current role that I am in, state representative for District 4 in the Arkansas House of Representatives."

He credits CSU for giving him the tools to be successful after the military and to better his community.

"I made friends that I still have today, and those connections have been integral to my success as a business owner," he said.

Jason also works part time with his local hospital in business development.

"I've started working with them in a business development space, so it's a really good fit," he said. "It's a part-time position, so while I'm in Little Rock when we're in session, I can step away from this job. When I'm back, I'm able to be out here talking with the clinics and visiting with folks, making sure everybody's getting what they need in those spaces."

Securing a seat with the House of Representatives gave Jason the extra fuel to better his community even further. He currently serves on the House Education Committee and the House Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs Committee for the 95th General Assembly.

"I never had any interest in politics," he said. "I never would've imagined in a million years that I'd be in politics. You are a politician, you are a legislator, but I just look at it as being an advocate helping the community, helping folks in need."

Jason spent his career serving his country. Today, he is passionate about serving his community and does so with grace and integrity. His accolades include achieving the rank of Eagle Scout and being awarded the Bronze Star, two Meritorious Service Medals and two Air Medals. 

Evaluating a Job Offer: Important Factors to Consider

You did it! You've aced the interview and received your official offer letter. Now that you're deciding your next move, it's important to consider...

Salary

While salary shouldn't be the only kind of compensation to consider in an offer, it's a top factor for many potential new hires. There are a few ways to evaluate the compensation package of an offer. First, determine your financial needs by adding up your financial obligations. Include things like your rent, utilities, car payments, and student loan payments. Compare the compensation package to your monthly budget to find out if it's enough to cover your costs.

Market Value

Another important element to consider as you learn how to evaluate a job offer is determining the fair market value of the position. Use external resources, like [Salary.com](https://www.salary.com), to find out what others in a similar position with similar experience are earning. Finally, it can be helpful to evaluate how the company handles bonuses, raises, or cost-of-living increases.

Benefits

Benefits can increase the value of a compensation package. Make sure you're checking what benefits are available when evaluating a job offer. A few key elements to consider are health insurance, retirement funding, profit share, tuition reimbursement and paid time off. Some benefits may even make up for a lower-than-expected salary.

In addition to these benefits, you'll also want to find out how many vacation days and holidays you get each year. Inquire how the company handles time off requests and whether your PTO days roll over to the next

year or if you're expected to use them in the same year.

Job Responsibilities

This is where you'll want to consider the specific tasks and responsibilities in your new position. Your job duties can help you determine if you have the necessary skills for the role and if those duties align with your career goals. Consider opportunities for upward mobility, including how the company handles promotions.

Work Environment

Evaluating the work environment, including company culture and morale, can be a great way to find out if it's right for you. You can learn a lot about a potential employer's work environment by talking with current employees. Find out what people like and dislike about the company so you can decide if it's a good fit for you.

Still Unsure?

Even after evaluating a job offer, you may still be unsure if it's right for you. Maintain open communication with the employer to gather any additional information you may need to make your decision. Depending on the company, you may have room for negotiation. If the company is unable to increase its compensation, it may be able to offer you additional benefits to make up for the difference.

One-on-one career counseling—like the career services available to Columbia Southern University students—may also help you make a decision.

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT

To learn more about these resources, or to schedule a resume review session, call 877-297-6192 or email CareerServices@ColumbiaSouthern.edu.



Vanessa Arias



Leah Fitzpatrick



Chesha Gartmon



Marisol Rodriguez

2025 Scholarship Recipients

OMEGA NU LAMBDA

Columbia Southern University's Department of Career Services is proud to award the Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship to its latest recipients. Omega Nu Lambda (ONL), a national collegiate honor society, was founded to foster community, provide encouragement and acknowledge the academic success of online students. In order to obtain the scholarship, students must maintain a 3.2 GPA, be in good academic standing and actively participate with CSU Career Services. The Omega Nu Lambda assists in the cost of one future CSU course and recognizes the accomplishments of Omega Nu Lambda student members. "I believe that learning is not a destination, but a lifelong pursuit," said Chesha Gartmon. "ONL aligns strongly with my core values—academic excellence, community, resilience and continuous growth—and supports the long-term goals I've set for my career in human resources and organizational leadership."

To learn more about the Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship, visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships.

PIERRE CAMPBELL

2025 Robert. G. Mayes
Memorial Scholarship Winner



U.S. Army Service Member Awarded Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship

Columbia Southern University recently awarded Pierre Campbell of King George, Virginia, the 2025 Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship. Pierre works as a project manager with the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) and is an active-duty Army service member.

"Integrity has been the foundation of my 16-year career in the U.S. Army," he said. "I have served with honor in multiple deployments, including Afghanistan, Korea, Liberia, Central African Republic and Kuwait, where I was entrusted with leading soldiers, managing operations and making critical decisions under pressure."

In addition to his role as a project manager and active-duty status, he is also the founder of the soon-to-be-launched Black Tree Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to mentoring younger generations for future success.

"My goal is to make a lasting impact on education, financial literacy and Black empowerment," he said.

"This is more than just a nonprofit; it's a movement to create generational change. By equipping individuals with the knowledge, resources and opportunities they need to succeed, we're investing in a future where financial stability, educational success and cultural pride are within reach for everyone."

Pierre earned a bachelor's degree in business administration at CSU. With this scholarship, he plans to pursue an MBA with a concentration in project management.

"My MBA will [strengthen] my ability to analyze complex business operations, manage large-scale projects and develop data-driven solutions—skills that have been and will be invaluable in my current role at the Pentagon, where I work for the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) under the Department of Defense. The program's emphasis on leadership, financial management and organizational strategy will directly contribute to my ability to oversee critical operations and ensure mission success."

Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship

Established in loving memory of Dr. Robert G. Mayes, Columbia Southern University founder, this 60-credit hour scholarship is awarded annually to a CSU alumnus who is pursuing their master's degree.

To learn more about this scholarship and others, visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships.



*Pictured L to R:
Dr. Bonny Kehm, dean,
College of Nursing and
Health Sciences;
Sherri Twitty, director
of corporate outreach;
Dr. Nancy Bellucci,
academic program
director.*

Columbia Southern University Nursing Programs Earn Accreditation Milestone

Columbia Southern University recently celebrated the pre-accreditation candidacy of its nursing programs by the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (NLN CNEA). All of the university's programs, launched in December 2024, are on track to meet the national accreditation standards.

- RN to Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- RN to Master of Science in Nursing Education
- RN to Master of Science in Nursing Informatics
- RN to Master of Science in Nursing Leadership and Administration of Health Care Systems
- Master of Science in Nursing Education
- Master of Science in Nursing Informatics
- Master of Science in Nursing Leadership and Administration of Health Care Systems

This status is granted for up to three years from CSU's conferral date, June 18, 2025. During this time, CSU's nursing program leaders will continue preparing for and completing the full accreditation process. This is the required first step for all new nursing programs.

"Receiving the CNEA pre-accreditation milestone is a significant step that affirms CSU's commitment to

excellence in nursing education and continuous program improvement," said Nancy Bellucci, academic program director in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. "It reflects the hard work and dedication of our faculty and staff to meet rigorous national standards. I see this as a strong foundation for building trust with students, partners and future accreditors."

Any student who graduates from a program that holds pre-accreditation candidacy is considered to have graduated from an accredited program.

"Receiving NLN CNEA pre-accreditation is a proud milestone for Columbia Southern University. It celebrates the dedication of our faculty, the passion of our students, and our shared commitment to advancing excellence in nursing education," said Dr. Bonny Kehm, dean and assistant provost.

The Columbia Southern University bachelor's and master's degree programs in nursing hold pre-accreditation status from the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (NLN CNEA), located at 2600 Virginia Ave. NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC 20037; phone 202-909-2487. Holding pre-accreditation status does not guarantee that initial accreditation by NLN CNEA will be received.

Outstanding Graduates from CSU Vietnam



Ông LÊ MẠNH HÙNG
TGD Tập đoàn Dầu khí VN



Ông VŨ THẾ PHIẾT
TGD Tổng Cty Cảng hàng không VN



Ông ĐÌNH QUANG TUYẾN
Phó Chủ tịch UBND tỉnh Bắc Kạn

Columbia Southern University and CSU Vietnam extend a hearty congratulations to the following outstanding alumni.

LE MANH HUNG

Le Manh Hung, who became chairman of the board of members of PetroVietnam in January 2024, has been instrumental in guiding the company's strategic direction, including its recent rebranding and its focus on sustainable energy and modernizing its operations. He was previously the group's CEO and president and has worked to modernize the state-owned oil and gas energy supplier, including establishing cleaner energy sources and sustainability initiatives. He is a 2018 alumnus.

VU THE PHIET

Vu The Phiet is the former CEO and general director of Airports Corporation of Vietnam. In 2024, he was elected chairman of the company, which operates 22 airports in Vietnam. He has been a prominent figure in the aviation business since 1995. He is a 2017 graduate.

DINH QUANG TUYEN

Dinh Quang Tuyen was recently named deputy secretary of the Bac Kan Provincial Party Committee. He has held important positions in

the locality such as deputy director of the Department of Transport, deputy director of the Department of Planning and Investment and chairman of the People's Committee of Bac Kan City. He graduated in 2019.

PHAM DUC AN

He became the chairman of the board of directors of the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Agribank) in 2020 and chairman of Vietnam Banks Association (VNBA) from 2020-2024. He has more than 25 years of experience in the banking sector, holding key positions in different banks in the Vietnam market. As of 2024, he has elected to be deputy secretary and chairman of the People's Committee of Quang Ninh Province. He is a 2005 graduate of CSU.

NGUYEN VAN HOP

He was named as chairman of the board of the Southern Power Corporation, a subsidiary of Vietnam Electricity. The company recently signed an agreement with HDF Energy to jointly explore the development of green hydrogen

power projects. He retired in 2022. He is a 2005 graduate.

LE HONG HA

Le Hong Ha is currently the CEO of Vietnam Airlines and has held that position since 2021. The company has achieved several milestones under his leadership, including launching the Million Miler program that offers exclusive benefits to honor premium members. He graduated in 2007.

TRAN HUU LINH

Tran Huu Linh is the director general of the Department of Market Surveillance under the Ministry of Industry and Trade for Vietnam. He graduated in 2013.

PHAM THI LOAN

Pham Thi Loan is the CEO and chairwoman of the board of directors for Viet A Group, a company that handles architectural activities and related technical consulting. She was a delegate to the 12th National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2007–11) and president of the Businesswoman Association in Hanoi (2008–13). She graduated from CSU in 2006.



Ông PHẠM ĐỨC AN
Chủ tịch HĐQT AgriBank



Ông NGUYỄN VĂN HỢP
Chủ tịch HĐQT Tổng Cty Điện lực Miền nam



Ông LÊ HỒNG HÀ
Tổng GD Vietnam Airlines



Ông TRẦN HỮU LINH
Tổng Cục trưởng Tổng cục QLTT, Bộ Công Tl



Bà PHẠM THỊ LOAN
Chủ tịch HĐQT-TGD Tập đoàn Việt Á



Ông NGUYỄN MẠNH LƯƠNG
Phó Chủ tịch Công ty BH Manulife



Ông ĐỖ VĂN LONG
CEO Tập đoàn Blockchain Việt Nam



Ông TRẦN THẾ VINH
TGD Công ty Cổ phần Tập đoàn Tima



Ông TRẦN ĐOÀN THẾ DUY
Tổng Giám Đốc Vietravel



Bà MAI TRANG THANH
Chủ tịch tập đoàn Honeywell Thailand

NGUYEN MANH LUONG

Nguyen Manh Luong is an agency vice president with Manulife Insurance Company. He has been with the company for more than 20 years.

DO VAN LONG

Do Van Long is the CEO and chairman of Vietnam Blockchain Corporation (VBC). He was honored to be one of the top 10 individuals and organizations supporting startups at the Innovation & Entrepreneurship Award (I-Star 2022) for achievements in supporting the digital transformation process for enterprises in Vietnam. He is a 2020 graduate.

TRAN THE VINH

In 2018, he became the CEO of Tima Group, an online peer-to-peer lending marketplace and financial consulting company in Vietnam. Prior to Tima, he worked as vice director of retail banking with Ocean Bank for six years. He is a 2017 graduate of CSU.

TRAN DOAN THE DUY

He is the current CEO and deputy chairman of Vietravel Tourism Joint Stock Company. He has worked with Vietravel since 1999 and is a 2010 graduate.

MAI TRANG THANH

She is the president of Honeywell Thailand, where she has been enhancing operation management and business and growth strategies. She served as the first president of Honeywell Vietnam in 2011 and has been working to improve the company and grow her personal mark since. She graduated in 2010.

TRAN VIET ANH

Tran Viet Anh is the CEO of SAM Holdings Corporation and the chairman at Sacom-Tuyen Lam Joint Stock Company JSC. He is also the chairman at Phu Tho Tourist Service JSC. In addition, per the Wall Street Journal, he holds positions as director at Cuchi Commercial & Industrial Developing Investment JSC, director at Dam Sen Water Park Corp., director at Sacom Land JSC, general director at Sacom Wire & Cable Single Member LLC, director at National Securities JSC, and director at Nam Long Apartment Development Co. He graduated in 2020.

NONG VUONG PHI

Nong Vuong Phi is the founder and CEO of Phi & P, a human resource training and consulting company. She is also a member of the SMHR Global Human Resources Association (USA). She is a public speaker, trainer and advisor for

many seminars and HR-related events. She graduated in 2011.

DUONG MINH HOA

Duong Minh Hoa is the general director of Duong Minh International Freight Forwarding Joint Stock Company and Hung Thinh Phat Plastic Factory. He also is a lawyer in the Ho Chi Minh City Bar Association. Duong Minh Logistics Company is a 4PL logistics service provider in Vietnam, helping hundreds of farmers export food to China. He graduated in 2020.

NGUYEN VAN THONG

Nguyen Van Thong is a professional golfer and advocate for Vietnamese golf. He became a member of the national golf team and competed at the 2001 and 2005 SEA Games and the 2006 Asian Games. He also won the national championship in 2006 and 2011 and won a gold medal at the 2014 National Sports Festival. He has won many other titles since. Thong is a 2016 graduate.

NGO TRI THINH

In May 2025, he was re-elected for another term as secretary of the TKV Electricity Corporation's Party Committee (Vinacomin Joint Stock Company). The company is a Vietnamese mining and energy company that is a significant supplier of coal and electricity in Vietnam. He graduated in 2020.



Ông TRẦN VIỆT ANH
Tổng Giám Đốc SAM Holdings



Bà NÔNG VƯƠNG PHI
Người sáng lập và điều hành của Phi&P



Ông DƯƠNG MINH HÒA
CEO Công ty Dương Minh Logistics



Ông NGUYỄN VĂN THỐNG
Giám đốc sân Golf Thủ Đức



Ông NGÔ TRÍ THỊNH
Bí thư Đảng ủy, TGD Tổng công ty Điện lực - TKV



ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Alumni

Vicki Barnes *Community Involvement Scholarship*

In recognition of
Vicki Barnes, who loved
CSU and made incredible
contributions during her
27 years of service with
the university.

Learn more about this
scholarship and other resources
that may be available at
ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships.



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