

COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

ALUMNI

MAGAZINE

2026

LEADING *BY* EXAMPLE

Chief Shaun Jones Champions Community Policing



In this Issue

CSU CELEBRATES AMERICA'S 250th



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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**
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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers,

The fall season is upon us. A chill is in the air, and the leaves are changing into vibrant colors. More importantly, with that comes our favorite time of year: commencement. We look forward to this season every year, when we get to meet our graduates in person, celebrate their accomplishments and officially welcome them into the alumni family. This year marks a significant milestone for our country: the 250th anniversary of the United States. In honor of this historic year, this issue embraces the idea of "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Throughout these pages, you'll find stories of Columbia Southern University alumni and faculty who symbolize the pride, sacrifice and grit it takes to pursue the American Dream.

This year's military spotlight features alumna Krystal Walker, who has served our country for more than 18 years by mentoring soldiers and training the next generation to take pride in their work. Krystal is proof that determination and drive can help you accomplish your dreams. Turn to Page 12 to read her inspiring story. Our cover story features alumnus and current student Shaun Jones, a police

chief whose mission is to make his small Virginia community a better place. He overcame extraordinary challenges while pursuing his degree, including health struggles and the loss of a family member. Shaun continued to push forward, not only for himself, but also for the department he leads. You'll find his story on Page 8.

Earning a degree does not come easy, but it is worth every late-night study session, every early morning and every sacrifice made along the way.

What obstacles have you faced while pursuing your own American Dream? Whether it was balancing work, family, military service or other responsibilities, your story matters, and it could inspire someone else to keep going.

If you have a story you'd like to share, I invite you to reach out by emailing CSU-Alumni@ColumbiaSouthern.edu, so we can find the best platform to highlight your journey and inspire others.

With appreciation,

Rachel Ross

Rachel Ross
Editor-in-Chief

Letter From the Alumni President

Dear CSU Alumni,

As president of the alumni association, it is an honor and a privilege to be part of a network of graduates who continue to achieve excellence, leadership and service around the world.

Every day, our alumni show that a Columbia Southern University education is more than a degree; it is a foundation for lifelong achievement. First responders, safety professionals, leaders, educators, healthcare providers, business executives, law enforcement officers and entrepreneurs continue making great contributions to their professions and communities.

One of the greatest joys of being alumni president is following the achievements of fellow Knights. Whether you are earning promotions, obtaining professional certifications, receiving industry awards or stepping into leadership roles, our graduates continue to reflect the quality and character of the university.

At CSU, we continue to grow as well: CSU now offers more than 200 degree programs and certificates, creating more opportunities for current and future Knights. Whether you're looking to expand your knowledge or pivot into a new career, we've got you covered.

The university has also recently developed innovative programs such as space operations, instructional design and technology and specialized concentrations for emerging industries and technologies.

Are we going to stop? Not anytime soon. As a CSU Knight, we will continue to grow and make a meaningful impact on our nation's future.

Thank you once again for allowing me to serve you, and I wish you all continued success.

Most sincerely,



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



CSU ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

*Activate your 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!**

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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.

MAKING AN IMPACT

Kelli Bentley Embraces Life's Detours



When Columbia Southern University student Kelli Bentley started college after high school, her plan was to become an architect. Then, her priorities shifted.

"Motherhood came along and I had my kids," she said. "A one-income family is hard to live on nowadays. I had to go to work."

Kelli worked different jobs over the years to help support her growing family. She has worked in an accounting office, at a nursing facility with billing responsibilities and even taught gymnastics on the side.

Ultimately, her role as a pharmacy technician would lead her to the human resources field, where she would advance into an office manager position. After working as an office manager, she worked for the Heflin (Alabama) Police Department and then the City of Anniston for 16 years in payroll and HR. From there, she went to work with Anniston (Alabama) Water Works, where she is currently the human resources manager.

"I actually started in payroll and spent years working on both the finance and HR sides, which gave me a unique perspective on how organizations operate," she said. "Over time, I found myself drawn more to the people side of the work, employee relations, development and culture, which led me fully into HR."

Despite her work experience, Kelli learned what many working adults do: She was going to need to earn her degree.

"I reached a point where experience alone wasn't enough," she explained. "It wasn't about starting over; it was about building on what I already knew, strengthening my confidence and positioning myself to make a bigger impact moving forward."

Kelli is pursuing a master's degree in human resources, building upon her bachelor's in business administration.

"After more than 20 years in the workforce, going back to school wasn't an easy decision, but it was one of the most rewarding," she stated. "Balancing a full-time career, family and coursework took discipline, but it also reminded me that growth doesn't have an expiration date. What made the experience even more meaningful was being able to immediately apply what I was learning to real-world challenges in my organization."

Kelli strives to make a positive impact on the 70 employees she manages at Anniston Water

Works. While going above and beyond, she recognized a need for additional training within the industry and took the initiative to apply for grants that now cover employee training at no cost to the employer.

The training also helps employees navigate a promotion to a supervisor role, another area Kelli spotted that needed attention.

"That transition without any support is not fair," she said. "Some people are born with that leadership skill set, but the majority of people are not. They need a guideline of how to approach things."

Kelli joined the Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board in February 2022 and has been a leading force behind employee development and operational excellence. She holds the distinguished credential of Senior Certified Human Resource Professional through the Public Sector HR Association (PSHRA) and is also a member of Women Leading Government.

In 2026, Kelli was among four Alabama residents to be selected for the Local Gov 250, a national initiative designed to honor and advance the role of local government while acknowledging the United States 250th anniversary. The program recognizes the daily impact public servants have in their respective communities across the country. Since enrolling at CSU, she has gained invaluable leadership skills that have helped her excel in her HR role.

"I gained confidence and a sense of accomplishment by finishing something I started, even while balancing a career and other responsibilities. It pushed me to grow, stay disciplined and think differently," she said. "Professionally, I strengthened my leadership and strategic thinking skills. The program helped me better understand areas like employee relations, compensation and organizational development, and I've been able to apply what I've learned directly to my HR role. It's also increased my credibility and prepared me for greater leadership opportunities."

For anyone contemplating higher education, Kelli offers inspirational advice in one powerful sentence: "If there's one takeaway from my journey, it's that it's never too late to take the next step, you just have to be willing to start." 



A Year in Review

OCTOBER 2025
ORANGE BEACH, AL

Another year, another Grad Bash success! We had a record attendance with a total of 898 attendees. We had a blast celebrating our graduates and newest members of the CSU alumni family on the CSU campus.



FOLEY, AL

Commencement was held in the Foley Event Center where we welcomed a record number of graduates and their families to celebrate. We held two ceremonies and honored our newest alumni as they walked across the stage to accept their diploma.





JUNE 2026

ANAHEIM, CA

The alumni association hit the lanes at Splitsville Luxury Lanes in Downtown Disney for an evening of fun and fellowship.

The American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP) Safety26 Conference + Expo was a major success. The CSU team met new faces and visited with alumni.

JULY 2026

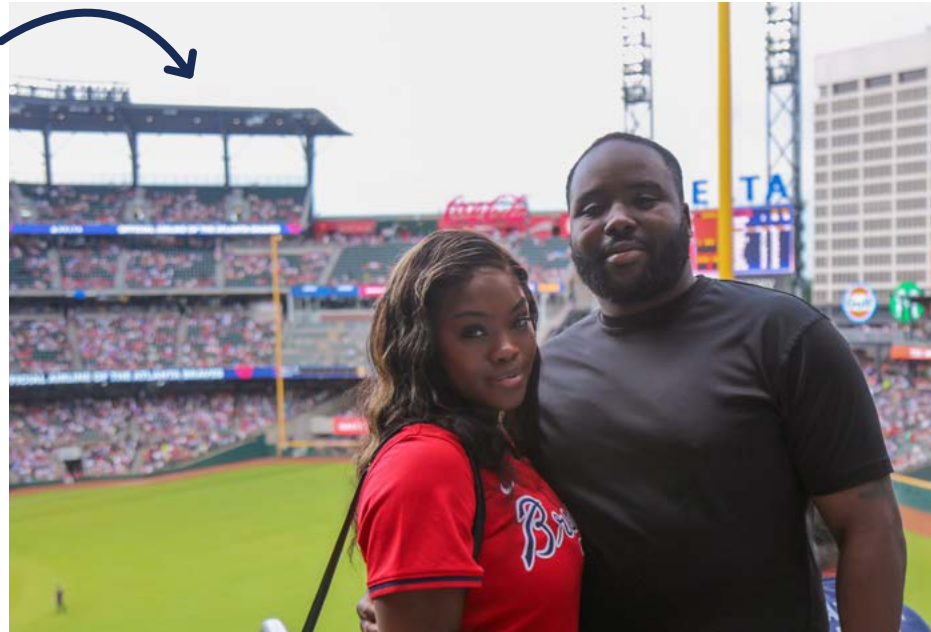
ATLANTA, GA

Our alumni crew came together at Truist Park to watch the Atlanta Braves take on the Texas Rangers, where they connected with fellow alumni and enjoyed America's favorite pastime.

AUGUST 2026

PENSACOLA, FL

CSU hosted Back to School Night at the Blue Wahoos game, where our director of loyalty and engagement, Brett Patterson, threw the first pitch. We loved connecting with fans throughout the night as they stopped by to say hello, grab a CSU fan to keep cool and sport some CSU shades while cheering on the Wahoos.



SEPTEMBER 2026

INDIANAPOLIS, IN

The CSU Alumni Association visited Indianapolis for a networking social complete with appetizers, beverages, bowling, games, giveaways and an opportunity to mingle with fellow Knights.

MOBILE, AL

The CSU Alumni Association headed to Dave & Buster's in Mobile, Alabama, for an evening of games and giveaways. Attendees connected with fellow Knights, caught up with old friends and made new connections within the CSU alumni community.



LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Chief Shaun Jones Champions Community Policing

Police Chief Shaun Jones began his college journey in 1995. He took classes here and there, but his heart just wasn't in it. That's when he decided to put college on hold and pursue a career in law enforcement.

Shaun knew early on that he wanted to become a police officer. He comes from a long line of law enforcement, with several family members who serve or have served in the profession.

"When I was 14 years old, I was a police explorer. Instead of playing sports, I got to ride along with the police department on weekends," he said. "I did that until I was 18 years old."

At the age of 21, Shaun finally had the opportunity to join the police academy, but before he started his law enforcement journey, he promised his mother he would finish college, a promise he aimed to keep.

"As I got older and moved into leadership roles, I realized how important finishing my degree was, not just for my career, but for my personal goals too," said Shaun. "I also wanted to set an example for my kids and my officers, to show that you're never too old to chase your dreams and finish what you started."

Shaun met the Columbia Southern University team at the National Sheriffs' Association conference. After hearing success stories from friends who graduated from CSU and learning about the university's accreditation, he knew he was in the right place to finish his degree.

"What really pushed me to enroll, though, was a conversation with my good friend and mentor, Chief Travis Christian of the Petersburg, Virginia, Police Department," he said. "He shared his experience at CSU with me, how they support working professionals, help you stay on track and make it possible to earn your degree while balancing a demanding career."

Rising Above Challenges

After years of service with the Spotsylvania County Sheriff's Office, Shaun applied for the assistant police chief position with the Middleburg (Virginia) Police Department and was chosen for the role on Dec. 3, 2020. A few days later, on Dec. 7, his father passed away from cancer. While his father was sick, Shaun would help him get to and from chemotherapy. A year after his father passed away, Shaun was diagnosed with lymphoma.

"I just lost my dad, and I'm doing chemo myself," he said. "One of the most important things I've learned when I was going through chemo is things may be bad for you, but there's somebody out there who has it worse than you, and you've just got to keep moving forward."

Despite conquering his own health battles and juggling a demanding work schedule, Shaun upheld the promise to his mother that he would earn his diploma.

"It's very intimidating to go back to school," Shaun said. "I'm an old cat now. There are late

Continued on next page.

**"Going back to school at this age,
hopefully it's an inspiration for others.
It's never too late."**



ON THE COVER





"When I was 14 years old, I was a police explorer. Instead of playing sports, I got to ride along with the police department on weekends."

Continued from previous page.

nights. You're working 10 or 12 hours and you're trying to get your thoughts together on your ride home, and then you're up to 2 o'clock in the morning, and then you have to get up and do it all over again."

Well-Deserved Recognition

While there was no guarantee of becoming police chief, Shaun embraced his role as assistant police chief wholeheartedly.

"I think of it as a long-term interview," he said. "I call it 'the interview of my life,' because I never thought I was going to be a chief of police."

But fate had other plans. In May 2023, Shaun officially became police chief of the Middleburg Police Department.

"As a chief of police, having a degree is often expected; many agencies require one before you can even be considered for the position," he explained. "I was fortunate to achieve this role based on my professional training and leadership experience, but earning my degree has elevated me to another level. It demonstrates my commitment to continual growth and has inspired me to keep going."

Shaun completed his bachelor's degree in criminal justice administration at CSU in 2025 and decided to re-enroll to pursue a master's degree in organizational leadership.

"Earning this degree is proof of that commitment, and it's something I'm really proud of," he stated. "Finishing my degree at 47 has also given me the chance to motivate my younger officers and peers from other agencies. I want them to see that education really does matter, no matter where you are in your career...It's never too late to invest in yourself."

Setting the Standard

Shaun strongly believes in the power of higher education, something he instills in his officers and his children.

"As a police chief and as a leader, my goal is to make my officers better than me," he explained. "If I'm trying to stress to my officers the importance of going back to school, I've got to lead by example. I've got to show my officers that you can work full-time and go back to school at the same time. Believe it or not, those younger cops are looking at you. They see your work ethic. They see your dedication. They see that you're going back to school. Be that example for that younger officer. Also, do it for yourself."

The support from his family and colleagues was, and still is, the catalyst that helps Shaun power through his roles as police chief and student.

"The things that kept me going is the support of my family, my wife, my kids, my friends," he said. "We get very

busy, and my staff will say, 'all right, chief, you need to go home so you can get that assignment done.' So, I have a very strong support system and I'm very thankful for that."

Paying it Forward

Shaun gives back through his service as police chief and through community policing, a law enforcement strategy centered on trust, problem-solving and partnerships between police and their communities.

"Community policing is something that's very important to me and is something I'm very passionate about," said Shaun. "As a small town, we come up with different things to engage our community. Since we're in a small town, I came up with this thing called 'One Town, One Team, and One Community,' and that's everyone working together to do what's best for our community."

Shaun has implemented several programs designed to engage the citizens of Middleburg, including after-school programs with local children, organizing food drives, interactions with senior citizens and more. He also strives to give back to the community that supported him throughout the loss of his father and his own health battles. In addition, he hopes to use his decades of experience in law enforcement to teach criminal justice.

"I've been in this field for 27 years, so I have both that experience as a patrol officer, also a jail officer, and then I have the experience as a leader of an agency as well. I want to give back to the criminal justice field that's given back so much to me."

Shaun has also been recognized for his dedication to the field by winning several awards over the years, including Officer of the Year (twice), the Meritorious Service Medal, awards from the NAACP, local Sunday school unions and the Fraternal Order of Police. In addition, he won the Unsung Heroes Award, presented by the Virginia Attorney General's Office.

Shaun is a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, and the Small and Rural Law Enforcement Executives Association, where he serves on the board of governors.

"I believe it's never too late to go back to school and pursue your dreams," he said. "Even when the journey takes longer than expected, it's worth it. Stay positive, stay focused and don't give up. Remember to pay it forward: those who invested in and encouraged you made a difference in your life—do the same for someone else and help them accomplish their goals." 

MILITARY SPOTLIGHT

FROM TEENAGE MOTHER
TO MASTER SERGEANT

Krystal Walker *Defies* the Odds

Krystal Walker became a mother at age 16. Growing up in a low-income area of Los Angeles, she was familiar with the realities of financial hardship, a single-parent household and the dangers that existed within her community. But it wasn't until she became pregnant that others began predicting what her future would look like.

"When I became pregnant, I started hearing things like, 'you're going to be another statistic' and 'you're not going to be anything,'" she said. "Those words, for me, sat there...but I've always believed that where you start doesn't have to define where you finish."

Krystal wanted to finish high school, but with no one to watch her son, she was forced to drop out in the 10th grade.

"I tried to work at restaurants...it just wasn't enough," she explained. "I didn't want my son growing up in the same circumstances I did. I grew up in a single-parent household, we relied on welfare, and there were realities of the streets around me that I didn't want to become his normal. I wanted something different for him."

Eventually, she made a choice that would set in motion a brighter future for herself and her young son: She would join the Army.

"I didn't want to get on government services, so I made the decision at 17 to join the Army," she said. "My mom was trying to force me to get on welfare, which is something I did not want to do. I just didn't want to be a product of that."

The Army recruiter she met that day changed the trajectory of her life, replacing an uncertain future with a new sense of purpose. After taking the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test (ASVAB), it was clear that Krystal was on her way to a promising military career.

"I took the ASVAB and scored really high," she said. "That same recruiter took me to get my GED, and while I was there, the teacher asked me why I was there because of how well I scored."

He also gave her realistic expectations about the military, which was something that helped prepare her for service.

"The recruiter was very positive and didn't hold anything back," said Krystal. "He said 'you will deploy...you might not come back.' For him to be so honest, it was what I needed...I needed that realistic expectation."

Krystal deployed three times within the first five years of her military career, once to Iraq and twice to Afghanistan. Her initial plan was to enlist for four years, earn a degree and transition to a civilian career.

Along the way, Krystal found a passion for mentoring soldiers, and her four-year plan turned into 18 years of service.

"I absolutely love developing our future leaders," she stated. "Earlier in my military career, I didn't have a mentor, so I had to figure it out. But now that I'm in this space to be able to pour myself into others, I love that because you get to see them grow."

Krystal is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., which allows her to stay actively involved in her community.

"We do a lot of community events," she said. "I never want to forget where I come from, and my way to do that is to pour back into the community that I'm a part of, regardless of where I'm stationed."

Today, Krystal is the mother of three and has risen through the ranks to master sergeant. In her current role as a senior enlisted developer, she helps shape the education and professional development of the Army's Adjutant General Corps noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

Her responsibilities extend beyond observing instruction. She evaluates existing curriculum, analyzes feedback and performance data, identifies gaps in training, and works with instructors, subject-matter experts and other stakeholders to develop and revise instructional content.

"Our responsibility is to make sure the curriculum keeps pace with the Army," Krystal explained. "We're looking at what is being taught, how effectively it is being taught and whether it still meets the needs of today's NCOs. We use classroom observations, surveys, feedback and other data to identify gaps and determine where changes are needed."

With retirement from the Army on the horizon, she intends to use the degrees she's earned at Columbia Southern University to prepare for a civilian career.

After receiving her bachelor's degree, she decided to enroll in the Master of Education program in curriculum and instruction, aiming for a career path that aligned with her passion for teaching.

Krystal is a substitute teacher in her free time, allowing her to decide what grade she'd like to teach, with ROTC and kindergarten as possible avenues to explore. Whichever route she decides, she is now equipped with the tools needed to be successful for life after the military.

"As an active-duty soldier with 18 years of service, pursuing my degree was about more than career advancement; it was about preparing for life after the uniform," she said. "This program has deepened my understanding of curriculum design, classroom management and instructional leadership, all of which

Prepare for Your Next Professional Move

8 Ways Career Services Can Help

Career Services is a department at many colleges and universities that helps students and alumni prepare for success after graduation. Rather than simply helping you search for jobs, Career Services staff can help students and alumni identify career goals, build professional skills and confidently navigate career decisions.

#1 CAREER COACHING

One of the most beneficial aspects of working with CSU Career Services is the opportunity to speak with a career coach. You may have years of work experience but aren't sure how to relate it to the position you are seeking. At Columbia Southern University, career coaches are available for one-on-one appointments to guide you through career transitions, leadership development and more.

#2 CAREER EXPLORATION BY DEGREE PROGRAM

Not everyone returns to college with a fully defined career plan. You're not alone if you've earned your degree but are still comparing potential paths for your future career. Some students discover new interests during their academic journey, while others decide to pursue leadership positions or transition into a different industry altogether.

#3 LABOR MARKET RESEARCH & JOB EVALUATION

Labor market research helps you learn which jobs are on the rise and which ones are in decline. This can help you narrow down your choices and make an educated decision about a specific industry or career path.

#4 JOB SEARCH STRATEGIES

Finding opportunities involves more than browsing online job boards. Working with Career Services coaches can help you conduct a focused job search by identifying where to find job postings and understanding best practices for applying.

#5 RESUME & PROFESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE REVIEW

Written communications with hiring managers can make or break a candidate. Career coaches can review cover letters, thank-you emails, networking messages, resumes and other professional

correspondence before they're sent to potential employers, and they can even help you with your LinkedIn profile.

#6 INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Job interviews can be intimidating, especially if you haven't interviewed in several years. Career Services can help you prepare by offering practice interviews, constructive feedback and strategies for answering common interview questions.

#7 MILITARY & VETERAN RESOURCES

Job searching for active-duty military and veterans can be significantly different from the job search in civilian life. It's understandable if you need help explaining your military responsibilities and skills to civilian employers. Career Services coaches at CSU—and university staff specifically hired to assist military students—can help you make the transition to civilian employment.

#8 NETWORKING ADVICE

Professional connections can open doors to new opportunities throughout your career. Networking isn't just about finding your next job; it's about building relationships that can support your long-term career growth. Whether you're expanding an existing network, changing industries or reconnecting with former colleagues, Career Services can offer strategies for building meaningful professional relationships.

CONTACT US!

To contact Career Services,
call 877-297-6192
or email CareerServices@ColumbiaSouthern.edu

Meet Your Certified Professional Career Coaches

Two members of CSU's Department of Career Services have earned the distinguished Certified Professional Career Coach (CPCC) credential, a nationally recognized certification that demonstrates excellence in career coaching and student support.



HALEY UNDERWOOD

Haley Underwood, career development coach and employer relations specialist, successfully completed a rigorous yearlong professional training program culminating in a demanding 12-hour certification examination, which she passed with high marks. The CPCC credential reflects Haley's commitment to advancing her coaching expertise and strengthening partnerships with employers to support CSU students and alumni in achieving their career goals.

Did you know that the career services team is available to help students and alumni with resume review, mock interviews and career search strategies? Email CareerServices@ColumbiaSouthern.edu to talk to a career coach today.



MATT BRUST

Matt Brust, career development coach and student engagement specialist, also completed the comprehensive CPCC certification process over the same timeframe and passed the challenging certification examination with high marks. His dedication to professional development enhances the career services team's ability to connect students with valuable resources, career insights and opportunities through both direct coaching and digital engagement.

Continued from page 15.

have helped me become a stronger mentor and leader within the Army."

"Now, as I look ahead to retirement and my next chapter as a future educator, I feel confident that I'm walking into the classroom with the tools I need to make a difference. My degree has not only empowered me professionally; it has reaffirmed my passion for serving others, whether in boots or behind a desk."

Like many active-duty military members pursuing higher education, Krystal found that juggling college while serving wasn't easy, but with determination and a strong family support system, she earned her master's degree in 2025, graduating with a 4.0 GPA.

"Balancing graduate school while serving as a first sergeant, leading a company of drill sergeants responsible for the overall training of up to 240 trainees, working 12-to-16-hour days, managing family life and staying committed to my goals wasn't easy, but it was worth it," she said. "My path wasn't traditional, but it's a reminder that discipline, faith and determination can carry you through anything."

Krystal has received several recognitions while serving her country, including the Horatio Gates Bronze Medal for leadership and excellence in the Adjutant General Corps, the Colonel Manning Achievement Medal for outstanding performance in human resources, and the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal for her commitment to serving the community.

"Pursuing my degree was about proving to myself, and showing my children, that resilience, purpose and hard work can rewrite any narrative," she said. "I wanted more than just a job; I wanted a career rooted in impact, leadership and education. This degree symbolizes every obstacle I've overcome and every future door I'm determined to walk through." 

IN GOD WE TRUST



A LIFETIME OF SERVICE AND EXCELLENCE

Professor Daniel Gaumont Honored

Columbia Southern University professor Daniel Gaumont's career in the fire service has led him down an impressive path spanning more than 55 years.

Daniel has been a CSU fire administration professor for 13 years. A former fire chief, Daniel also served his country in the United States Air Force, where he spent more than 20 years as a military fire protection specialist/superintendent. He is a retired senior fire protection specialist with Commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC), as well as a retiree from the Department of War and the U.S. Navy Fire and Emergency Services. "I noticed the town's fire truck and I exploded with excitement," he recalled. "The fire service bug had bitten, and I knew from that day forward that my career goals were to become a full-time firefighter."

That same year, Daniel's father started his own firefighting career, allowing a young Daniel to visit the fire station when his father was on duty.

"The rest is history, and for the past 55-plus years I have been living my life's dream every day," he said.

When Daniel started college in 1974, one of his college professors inspired him to teach.

"Very early in my career I was mentored by a gentleman by the name of Richard Rand, a retired U.S. Naval officer," said Daniel. "He told me I had special talents and that it

was incumbent upon me to pay my education forward."

Daniel is passionate about teaching fire administration at CSU, and his goal is to help students succeed in their careers through his expertise and leadership experience.

"I want them to understand that what we are teaching our students can and does happen in the real world," he said. "To be a leader in today's fire service, you have to look out for your people, and that, as a leader, you must incorporate the principle of 'do as I say and do as I do'. I impress on every one of my students from the basic firefighter to the fire chief they must live that concept daily."

In May 2026, Daniel was presented with the U.S. Navy Fire and Emergency Services 2026 Lifetime Achievement Award for his dedication to fire service excellence.

"This recognition is a very humbling experience," he said. "I see the award as a team award because without the support of my wife and family, the professional firefighters I have served with and for, and the team here at Columbia Southern University, this award would not have been possible."

Over the course of his career, Daniel has been awarded the International Association of Fire Chiefs' Benjamin Franklin Departmental Leadership Award in 2000 and again in 2008. He was also selected as the first New York State Career Fire Chief of the Year in 2004. He received the U.S. Air Force

Meritorious Service Award (twice), the U.S. Air Force Commendation Award (three times) and the U.S. Air Force Good Conduct Medal (six times).

He is a graduate of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program and the Massachusetts Fire Academy's Chief Fire Officer Program, where he was one of the first 15 individuals to be awarded Chief Fire Officer Designee by the Commission on Professional Credentialing in 2000, which he's won nine times.

Daniel and his wife of 35 years, Shannon, live in Texas with their daughter, Heidi, and her family. They also have a son, Daniel P., and six grandchildren in total. He holds an associate degree in fire science, a bachelor's degree in fire safety and a Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University.

Most recently, Daniel was recognized as the 2026 Faculty of the Year by CSU's College of Safety and Emergency Services. "Selection for this prestigious award affirms my commitment to supporting the university by enriching each student's education and deepening their subject-matter knowledge," he stated. "[Students'] success in the classroom equips them to apply what they have learned in their daily lives and professions, strengthening their personal growth, advancing their purpose, and extending the transformative impact of education in their lives and their organization." 



2026 Outstanding Professionals

DANNY SIMPSON

Columbia Southern University's College of Safety and Emergency Services faculty recently awarded its annual Outstanding Safety Professional of the Year Award to Danny Simpson. Simpson, the director of health and safety at a national construction firm, is a veteran and resident of Iowa, Louisiana.

"I feel tremendously honored, thankful and blessed to have won this award," he said. "I have always wanted to make a positive impact on as many people as possible in my career and winning this award is recognition of those efforts."

He is also a member of the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, the American Society of Safety Professionals and the National Society of Leadership and Success.

SHERMAR EASTER

Arkansas native Shermar Easter was selected as the 2026 Outstanding EMS Professional of the Year.

Easter works for LifeNet EMS, a non-profit company headquartered in Texarkana, Texas, where he oversees recruitment efforts across multiple divisions and helps build the workforce of EMS.

"I had seen the challenges our industry faces firsthand—staffing shortages, burnout, retention—and I wanted the knowledge and tools to actually be part of the solution," he explained.

Notable Knights

STEVEN BARGER

The town of Holden Beach, North Carolina, has selected Steven Barger as its new police chief. He is a member of the Brunswick County Board of Education and currently represents District 4 on the board. He is also a lieutenant with the Village of Bald Head Island, serving as a firefighter and paramedic. He holds a master's degree in fire executive leadership.

CARRIE EDWARDS-CLEMONS

Carrie Edwards-Clemons has been appointed as fire chief with the Lansing (Michigan) Fire Department. She previously held the interim fire chief position before being permanently selected for the role. She has 25 years of experience in public and private leadership with an extensive background in leading emergency response teams. She holds an MBA with a concentration in public administration from CSU.

MATT CLARK

Matt Clark has been chosen as the North Dakota state fire marshal. He is a seasoned fire service leader and most recently served as fire chief of the Williston Fire Department for nearly five years. As fire marshal, he will oversee fire code enforcement, inspections, investigations and public education efforts, while working closely with local fire departments, state agencies and elected officials to enhance fire safety and community resilience throughout North Dakota. He earned an MBA from CSU.

MARY RIOS

Mary Rios has been included in Marquis Who's Who. She currently serves as a project safety advisor and owners' representative on contract with Microsoft Datacenters. She is a safety professional with credentials from the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, including the Certified Safety Professional®, Graduate Safety Practitioner®, Occupational Hygiene and Safety Technician® and Construction Health and Safety Technician®. She earned a bachelor's degree in occupational safety and health from CSU.

SEAN ROED

Sean Roed has been selected for the 2026 Bush Fellowship, a leadership program. He has more than 30 years of experience in emergency medical services (EMS) leadership and has developed innovative rural healthcare models, including community paramedicine programs and integrated mobile ICU systems. Roed earned a bachelor's degree in EMS and a master's degree in emergency services management from CSU. He is currently enrolled in CSU's Doctor of Emergency Management. Roed was also selected as CSU's 2023 Outstanding EMS Professional of the Year.



Thinking of Going Back to School? Choose From 200+ Program Offerings

Columbia Southern University has recently added more than 20 new programs to its catalog, creating more opportunities for new students and alumni to further their education. The latest additions include several new degree programs, certificates, concentrations and accelerated programs.

CSU now offers more than 200 degree programs and certificates to students. The newest programs include a Doctor of Nursing Education, Master of Business Administration with a concentration in engineering management, master's in cybersecurity, and more.

OMEGA NU LAMBDA Scholarship Recipients

Congratulations to the 2026 Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship 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 hold a 3.2 GPA, be in good academic standing and actively participate with CSU's Department of Career Services. The scholarship assists in the cost of one future CSU course and recognizes the accomplishments of ONL student members.

"Becoming a member of Omega Nu Lambda has been both an honor and a source of motivation as I continue pursuing my academic and professional goals," said Phillip Stover, a 2026 scholarship recipient. "As a professional firefighter paramedic, former United States Marine, husband and father, balancing the responsibilities of all of these roles has required significant commitment and discipline."

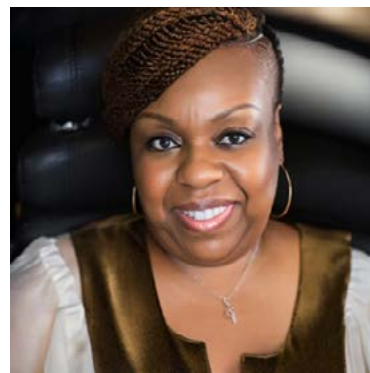
Additional winners include Michelle Aldaz, De'Wanda Simmons, Jimitta Gross and Courtney Caldwell.



Michelle Aldaz



Courtney Caldwell



De'Wanda Simmons



Phillip Stover



Jimitta Gross

Transportation Director Orville Watson Drives Safety Home

Columbia Southern University recently awarded Orville Watson of Kissimmee, Florida, the 2026 Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship. Watson is the transportation director for the school district of Osceola County, where he oversees the safe transportation of more than 24,000 students daily.

"Our department includes over 650 dedicated employees, and I view my role as both a responsibility and an opportunity to serve," said Watson. "Ensuring that every child arrives at school and returns home safely is one of the most meaningful ways I contribute to the well-being of our community. For many families, transportation is the first and last district service they experience each day, and I take pride in leading a team that supports students' access to education."

Serving the community goes beyond the school district for Watson, as he is actively involved in supporting families in need and mentoring young and upcoming leaders.

"I serve on the leadership team at my community house of worship, where we support families through food assistance, counseling and a variety of outreach programs," he explained. "This work allows me to connect directly with individuals facing real challenges and to help provide stability, compassion and practical support."

Watson is involved with the local Boy Scout group, where he mentors young people to help build character, leadership skills and a sense of responsibility.

"Investing in youth—whether through transportation, community support or scouting—is one of the most



impactful ways I can help strengthen the future of our community."

Watson earned a bachelor's degree in occupational safety and health from CSU in 2012 and is currently pursuing a master's degree from CSU in organizational leadership.

"I have a deep desire to enhance the services we provide to our community and to position our department as one of the best student transportation operations in the industry,"

he explained. "My leadership experience and skill set have taken me far, but reaching the next level requires advanced knowledge in organizational leadership, strategic thinking and change management. I believe that earning a master's degree in organizational leadership from CSU will be a tremendous asset in achieving these goals."

Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship

Established in memory of Dr. Robert G. Mayes, CSU founder, this 60-credit-hour scholarship is awarded annually to an alumnus who is pursuing their master's degree. To learn more about this scholarship and others, visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships.

Become a Learning Partner & Receive Exclusive Benefits

With more than 5,000 Learning Partners across the nation, Columbia Southern University has already provided training and education to thousands. Learning Partners have exclusive benefits at CSU. Not only are these benefits available to our partners' employees but they are also available to employees' spouses and children.



CAREERQUEST



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GET STARTED TODAY.



TURNING DISASTER INTO DIRECTION

Seni Masango Prepares South Africa for the Next Flood

Sibongiseni “Seni” Masango lives in the coastal town of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, located in South Africa. He is also one of Columbia Southern University’s many international alumni. With a career in emergency management services, Seni decided to further his education and earn a master’s degree in emergency services management from CSU.

“What made me pursue the degree was my observation of what is now happening when it comes to emergencies and disasters in South Africa,” he said. “Previously, we had floods once every 10 years...I needed to understand how the country, the business and I can prepare better and further understand whether our infrastructure is well designed for the challenging situation we are currently facing. These experiences highlighted the critical importance of disaster preparedness, risk management and having an effective contingency plan to ensure business continuity and resilience during emergencies.”

Seni is a health, safety, environment and quality (HSEQ) manager with Vivo Energy, a leading petroleum company with a focus on retail fuels and renewable energy. Some of his

most important responsibilities are ensuring safety, risk management and mitigations, and that emergency equipment is always ready and available.

“The refinery where I work is situated within the community in the Durban South Basin,” said Seni. “As part of our risk management and emergency preparedness, we need to consider our nearby community. This degree helped me understand what to expect from communities and how to engage with them meaningfully. Above all, it built my confidence to engage comfortably with stakeholders and to understand that our risk assessment must include our neighboring community.”

South Africa has experienced several major floods, with the 1987 flood among the deadliest. It was the 2019 flood that solidified Seni’s decision to pursue his master’s degree. After researching online universities that offered risk assessment in the curriculum, Seni found CSU, which offered a program that aligned closely with the knowledge and skills he was seeking to develop.

“In 2019, there was another flood that shook the country, and that was when I considered earning a

degree that focuses on emergency management,” he explained. “I then looked at the local universities but could not find the one that covers what I was looking for. I then looked abroad and found CSU.”

Earning a degree online while living abroad presents its own set of challenges. But Seni understood the sacrifices he would make to earn his diploma.

“Being in South Africa was a challenge. The classes that took place at 6 p.m. in the U.S. were midnight locally, so I had to wake up or not sleep,” he stated. “I learned that success comes with some difficulties and success doesn’t come easy.”

Seni traveled to the United States in October 2025 to receive his master’s degree in emergency services management, graduating with a 4.0 GPA.

“I cannot list everyone who helped me during my studies and in the preparation of my travel to the U.S. and getting organized for the graduation, but everyone was keen and advised me where to book accommodations, how to get the graduation gown ordered, and even when I got there, I felt at home,” he said.





Celebrating Our Global Community

2025–2026 INTERNATIONAL
GRADUATES BY COUNTRY

MEXICO & CANADA

SOUTH AMERICA

Anguilla,
Antigua and
Barbuda, The
Bahamas,
Belize, Brazil,
Cayman Islands,
Colombia,
Dominica,
Dominican
Republic,
Jamaica, Trinidad
and Tobago,
Turks and Caicos
Islands and
Venezuela

EUROPE & EURASIA

Bosnia and
Herzegovina,
Germany,
Netherlands,
Portugal,
Romania, Turkey,
Ukraine and
United Kingdom

SUB- SAHARAN AFRICA

Democratic
Republic of the
Congo, Djibouti,
Eritrea, Ghana,
Nigeria, Sierra
Leone, Sudan
and Zimbabwe

MIDDLE EAST & NORTHERN AFRICA

Israel, Lebanon,
Libya, Saudi
Arabia, and
United Arab
Emirates

SOUTH & CENTRAL ASIA

India, Nepal,
Pakistan and Sri
Lanka

EAST ASIA & THE PACIFIC

Australia, Fiji,
New Zealand,
Palau, Philippines
and Vietnam



ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Alumni

Vicki Barnes *Community Involvement Scholarship*

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

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