



Commitment to Veterans

Colorado State University is committed to educating, supporting, and honoring student-veterans by helping them acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their personal and professional goals.

Finding a Connection to Others and a Sense of Community

After four deployments with the U.S. Army, packing became routine for Raleigh Heekin. This time, however, was different. Heekin joined the other weary-eyed, post-finals Colorado State students as they packed their belongings in Summit Hall, shifting their sights from the spring semester to summer jobs or adventures in far-off places.

Heekin, who served in the U.S. Army for 20 years, and his service dog, Winnie, were looking forward to moving back home after finals. His wife, Misty, and their four children aged 7-16, have remained in their house in Denver, while Heekin attends CSU.

"I enjoyed living in Summit Hall because of the sense of community and also because I felt like a platoon leader again," Heekin says. "My house is always the house extra kids hung out in, anyway. The dorm is kind of like that."

Heekin, from Littleton, Colo., enlisted in the Army at 17 and retired from military service in 2014. He first became interested in CSU when he visited campus after completing his basic training more than 22 years ago. Now, he's a year and a half away from completing his newest mission, a CSU degree in social work, and has been assisted by the Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholarship and the New Start program. He hopes to assist fellow veterans after graduation.

Sense of community

Heekin said living on campus helped him with the loneliness he felt being away from his family (whom he would visit on weekends) and also with his transition from military to college life.

Detachment, loneliness, and isolation are far too common for many returning soldiers. Heekin served in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Ukraine in the 1990s, and Iraq from 2006 to 2007. In Iraq, an IED exploded beneath the vehicle carrying Heekin, a driver, and a medic as they set out to help fellow platoon members who had been attacked. The explosion seriously injured Heekin, and killed the driver and the medic.

Raleigh Heekin and Winnie say goodbye to students they've shared a floor with for a year.

CSU Launches Women's Veteran Initiative

Colorado State University and the Adult Learner and Veteran Services center has launched the CSU Women's Veteran Initiative. The program was created for the sole purpose of engaging women student-veterans and community-building. The CSU program is modeled after and in partnership with Purdue University's Military and Family Research Institute's Focus Forward Fellowship.

The goal of the CSU WVI is to help women veterans foster relationships with peers and mentors within the community. Participants in the WVI will work on recognizing and overcoming barriers along with identifying strategies and resources to enhance their campus experience.

The program launched with ALVS leadership and CSU student-veterans, including Larissa Stone, an Army veteran and CSU junior majoring in social work, attending MFRI's in-residence program in Indianapolis in August 2016. "In the 10 years since my separation from military service, I've wanted to engage with my veteran community but have always felt



underrepresented and misrepresented. It wasn't until my time at the MFRI Focus Forward Fellowship (women's veteran conference) that I finally found the sisterhood I so desperately needed. This conference was one of the first experiences that allowed me to feel the pride of my military service," Stone said. Stone and other WVI participants will engage in focus groups and planning sessions early in the Fall '16 semester that will address the needs of CSU women veterans and analyze and develop support structures at CSU. □

Being connected to others and a sense of community can be critical for returning veterans. "If I hadn't lived in the residence hall, and lived by myself off campus, I

could have easily started down the path of isolation," Heekin says. "You lose a lot of your support system when you leave the military." □



New Start helps injured veteran attain lifelong dream of becoming police officer

A little more than seven years ago, when U.S. Marine Sgt. Joel Peters lay in a coma following a Humvee accident in East Africa, doctors weren't sure he was going to live — much less fulfill his dream of following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps by becoming a police officer. In May, the 32-year-old father of three graduated from Colorado State University with a degree in social work and was hired by the Greeley Police Department.

When his vehicle wrecked in 2009, Peters was on his way to help fellow Marines injured by a mortar explosion. He wasn't wearing the dated vehicle's seat belt because it wouldn't fit around his gear. Peters was thrown from the truck, hitting his head and injuring his rotator cuff, ribs, and back. He suffered a severe traumatic brain injury and, during his three weeks in a coma, his family was told to prepare for the worst. But he recovered.

And yet, as recently as two years ago, he still believed what he'd been told at Camp Pendleton: that his traumatic brain injury would prohibit him from ever becoming a police officer. So he planned to work



with parolees in a counseling role.

Peters and his wife, Darcy, also a former Marine, now live in Timnath. He attributes much of his successful comeback to the New Start for Student Veterans program in CSU's Center for Community Partnerships, a program he was referred to while a student at Front Range Community College.

The program, based in the Department of Occupational Therapy, is funded through the generosity of CSU alumnus and military veteran Dennis Repp and other donors, as well as backing from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. It supports CSU student-veterans by providing services in areas such as memory, concentration, and/or physical challenges; stress management; academic skills; peer mentoring; recreation; and campus/community resources.

"After I was injured, I couldn't form a complete sentence," Peters says. "But in my first meeting with my counselor, Erica, she said, 'You seem fine to me. Why can't you do what you want to do?' If it wasn't for CSU and finding those resources, personally and professionally, I don't know where I'd be. If there were no CSU, I wouldn't be in the place I am today,

physically and psychologically."

After an internship with the Boulder County Sheriff's Department, Peters was hired by the Greeley Police Department as a public safety technician, a job in which he mostly answers phones and fills out reports.

After he graduates from Red Rocks Community College Law Enforcement Academy in December, Peters will return to Greeley for the police department's five-week in-service academy, followed by three months of field training, after which he will get his badge and become a bona-fide police officer.

Peters believes that his CSU education will serve him well in his new position and, ultimately, in his dream job as a field training officer. "Social work and law enforcement are intertwined," he says. "The basis of social work is empowering people to solve problems and achieve goals. In law enforcement, the circumstances can be more severe, but it's similar. And you're not just responsible for the life of the victim, but the suspect. You need to understand that there's usually more to the story."

Ultimately, Peters sees value in the adversity that he's overcome. "I think a lot of it is patience and learning," he says. "Every life experience I've had is about growing and maturing. Everything that looks like an obstacle can be an opportunity. I was put here on this earth for a reason, and I was kept here on this earth for a reason." □

Outdoor expeditions offer respite and leadership opportunity for Marine veteran

Nathan Perrault has seen enough death to last a dozen lifetimes. A former Marine corporal, he lost several buddies in battle while serving in the infantry in Afghanistan. Then, after coming to CSU to study in the Warner College of Natural Resources, he lost good friend and fellow CSU student, Corey Stewart, in a climbing accident in Rocky Mountain National Park in 2013.

It's difficult for him to contain his emotions when he talks about the incidents.

"Losing Corey really affected me," Perrault says. "A similar thing happened to me in Afghanistan; I lost a good friend who was right next to me. That's why I like getting out in nature whenever I can. That's my getaway from regular life."

That's when it struck him: If he felt a sense of calm while climbing a 14er or scaling an ice wall, wouldn't other veterans reap the same benefit?



Calling Perrault an avid outdoorsman would be an understatement as tall as a Colorado 14er. He rock climbs. He ice

climbs. He whitewater rafts. He hikes. He summits very tall mountains. He mountain bikes.

"Spending time in the outdoors was a big part of our family life," says the Maryland native. "I had never heard of Fort Collins when I first moved out here, but I love it. I dove headfirst into ice climbing, rock climbing, and mountaineering, and I get outdoors whenever I have the chance."

Colorado's mountains not only provided a great test of his outdoor skills, they offered a respite from haunting memories of experiences in Afghanistan. That's when it struck him: If he felt a sense of calm

Persistence guides Marine veteran to accounting degree

Rick Dixon's road to academic success has led through many challenges. But he has walked it with persistence.

Dixon, an enrolled member of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, was born in Chicago and was more inclined toward sports than academics growing up. After a short stint in college and a few jobs, he decided the right path for him was the Marine Corps. Dixon started as an infantryman and eventually worked his way up to the rank of first sergeant. His service involved multiple combat tours, including participating in Operation Al Fajr (Second Battle for Fallujah, Iraq) in 2004.

After more than 16 years of service, Dixon left the military and began yet another battle: Finding the answer to the question, "What's next?" He knew exactly what he wanted to do – accounting – and where he wanted to go – Colorado State University.



"As I advanced in the military, I was charged with accounting for more and more things," said Dixon. "I also served as a dispersing agent in Iraq, so a lot of the things I did later in my career in the

military were accounting-related. It seemed like a natural fit."

There were more hurdles to conquer, such as earning a place at CSU (his first two applications were not accepted) and overcoming a cancer diagnosis in 2012.

In 2014, as a Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholar, he graduated from CSU with a bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in accounting

and a minor in history. Upon graduation, he applied to CSU's highly competitive Master of Accountancy program, without much expectation of being accepted. Not only was he accepted, he eventually earned his Master of Accountancy.

"I knew how amazing the M.Acc. students were," said Dixon. "I wasn't sure I could be successful at that level. I'm extremely fortunate. Our University has tremendous professors and people who support veterans."

Dixon also served as the vice president of SALUTE, the veterans honor society on campus. "My favorite memories of CSU will be of the people here – the faculty and students," said Dixon. "I love the Ram spirit. I think CSU has a great culture of school pride and people really care about each other." □

Peer mentors improve academic performance and success for student-veterans

Peer mentoring has been proven to increase success rates for student-veterans. Colorado State University recently was chosen to participate in the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education Program, a peer-support initiative that connects incoming student-veterans with student-veterans already on campus to help them navigate college life, identify challenges they are facing, refer them to the appropriate resources on or off campus, and provide ongoing support for their academic and personal ventures.

The PAVE Program at CSU is a collaboration between the University of Michigan Depression Center and Department of Psychiatry and Student Veterans of America, and is partially funded through a generous gift to CSU from the Denver-based Anschutz Foundation.

"We know how powerful peer relationships are as veterans transition from the military to college life, and with PAVE, every student-veteran starting his or her higher education journey at CSU will be assigned an experienced student-veteran who knows exactly what they're going through," said Marc Barker, director of Adult Learner and Veteran Services.

Training of the first PAVE peer mentors began during the summer of 2016 with a four-day leadership excursion into the mountains of Northern Colorado on



horseback. The group was led by Chuck Peterson, a CSU equine sciences professor and Vietnam veteran. Calling it the "trip of a lifetime," peer mentor Laura Feger, an Army veteran and equine sciences major, said the leadership opportunity will benefit those she mentors and will lead to her own academic success, as well. "I am forever grateful to have this experience," she said. □

For more information on PAVE, visit paveoncampus.org.

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Courtney and Dean Graby both receive financial aid and supportive services at CSU, made possible by generous donors.

Dean Graby, a 13-year Army veteran, admits that the pressure that he and his wife face as both attend school while raising two small children, as well as adjusting to civilian life after the military can sometimes feel overwhelming. Graby and his wife, Courtney, an Anschutz Veteran Spouse Scholar, are both studying sociology. Graby said the New Start program, Liniger Scholarship, and Anschutz Veteran Spouse Scholarship have all allowed him to sleep better at

night, knowing he is able to care for himself and his family.

Graby said he has a message for Dennis Repp, Dave and Gail Liniger, members of the Anschutz Foundation, and others who have donated to student-veteran programs: “Your generosity is working. Programs like New Start and the scholarship programs wouldn’t be around without private donors, and it is a huge stress relief to veterans and their families to know we have this kind of support. Thank you.” □

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while climbing a 14er or scaling an ice wall, wouldn’t other veterans reap the same benefit?

That’s when he discovered Veterans Expeditions, a nonprofit started by veterans to help other veterans through challenging outdoor adventures. Perrault started working with Nick Watson, a former Army Ranger who is co-founder and executive director of Veterans Expeditions, and was immediately hooked.

Perrault was part of an eight-man team that summited Denali (formerly Mount McKinley) in Alaska, North America’s tallest peak at 20,301 feet. The climb required planning and patience – the team was stalled for 16 days at 14,000 feet, waiting out a dangerous storm – they reached their goal on the 27th day. “It was a long, long wait, but we were rewarded with a perfect day to summit,” Perrault says. “It was a great relief, but also an amazing experience.”

Perrault, who interned for Veterans Expeditions, is set to earn a degree in recreation and tourism, and has been assisted by the Liniger Honor, Service & Commitment Scholarship. He has been involved with CSU’s New Start program designed to help veterans achieve success in college and beyond, and volunteered with Larimer County Search and Rescue. He plans to become an EMT and, eventually, a ranger with Colorado Parks and Wildlife or the National Park Service. □



Rear Adm. (Sel.) Michael Wettlaufer, U.S. Navy, a 1985 Colorado State University microbiology graduate, visited campus this spring to speak to ROTC cadets about leadership.

Wettlaufer commanded the U.S.S. John C. Stennis until 2015 and, while on campus, he had the opportunity to reconnect with Petty Officer Karla Schwartz, who served four years in the Navy and graduated from CSU in December 2015. Schwartz is one of two inaugural employees in a veteran

benefit certificate program funded by the Anschutz Foundation. Schwartz served on the nuclear-powered flagship of the John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Group, from 2009-2013, when Wettlaufer was the executive officer. Wettlaufer currently serves as deputy director, ECJ-5, U.S. European Command. □



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