William Liley, the Director of Personnel for 34 years at Colorado State University, is no stranger to the twists and turns of life, and his adaptability and penchant for hard work have served him, and our university, well. About his life philosophy, he says, “You have sense of the way the script is going to play out, and all of a sudden, there’s an opportunity that comes up that you happen to be in the right place for, and you happen to have what it takes for that.”

Born on October 23, 1944, Liley grew up in Denver, reading novels about WWII and working in his father’s coal mine and on the family farm, where they grew wheat. The experience “stimulated me to have nothing to do with coal mining or agriculture.” His superb elementary education, along with encouragement from his parents, sparked a lifelong interest in learning. He came to CSU as an undergraduate student in 1962. The land-grant concept, that “there should be opportunities for higher education for the children of the workers as opposed to the elite,” was essential in getting him to college, as his parents, while hard-working, weren’t wealthy. He explains, “I was eager to learn. I had no idea what I would use it for. It wasn’t a career.” His aimlessness coupled with vast curiosity took him through philosophy, accounting, physiology, geology, and business classes. He had so many electives that he graduated with a degree in social sciences but no specific major.

Liley realizes that his aimlessness wasn’t unique to him, but rather a product of his generation, many of whom “really had little sense of a future past what we saw as the probability of having to serve in Vietnam.” After graduation, he spent 3 years in the Marine Corps, serving in North Africa and Germany. “When I actually survived my military experience, I recognized that I was then going to have to make choices about the rest of my life,” and so he came back to CSU for graduate school. He was interested in business, so he joined the Management Department with a concentration in Personnel in 1969. CSU was on a quarter system back then, so Liley “went through the first three quarters and then the first summer quarter, and basically got burnt out.”

He considered discontinuing graduate school, but before he could get out, one of those life-changing opportunities arose; the Assistant Director of Personnel at CSU resigned. Jack Farrar, then Director of Personnel, recruited him. His decision wavered due to a girlfriend in Denver, but advice from his father came back to him. “My father once told me that as a youngster, I had certain personal habits that were not consistent with the expectations in terms of people on farms. I liked to sleep late in the morning … So he once told me … if you find somebody that’s willing to hire you, don’t wait.” Although he had no direct experience and hadn’t finished his Master’s Degree, Farrar, also a military veteran, saw potential and insisted he accept the offer. He started in 1970.

At the time, the personnel department was “primarily focused on keeping records more than anything else.” After just three years in the department, Liley found himself as the Director, a position he held for 34 years. He managed many changes, including federal legislation dealing with employee-employer relations, the Civil Rights Act, affirmative action plans, and increasing authority of state governments over institutions of higher education. Some of the biggest changes brought about during his time concerned faculty benefits. When he first began, only medical insurance was covered, and that by an outside insurance company. In the early ‘90’s, though, the university shifted to a self-funded insurance plan, which included “our medical plan, our disability plan, our two dental plans.” In self-managing the benefits program, a job which largely fell to him and his department, they “[saved] not just the
institutions but the members of our faculty and staff enormuous amounts of money.” Also, because Colorado doesn’t participate in Social Security, Bill helped create a retirement plan. He also served on county boards and nonprofits, the board of the United Way, and the Center for Community Partnerships to give back to the community.

He worries that the land-grant institution, which was so vital in getting him an education, might be in danger, but overall, he says “I do believe in cycles. We’re going through a very difficult cycle [concerning the cost of education and student debt ... Our current financial problems are not related to an absence of opportunity with resources but an absence of confidence that we have those opportunities and resources.” He is optimistic about the future though, just as long as we work - as hard as our predecessors have.