

FINDING THE RIGHT UNIVERSITY

STORY | CASSANDRA BALLARD
PHOTO | ERIC URAN

Kevin McQuirk strolls onto campus each day wearing his hiking boots and two lanyards hanging from his neck. One lanyard carries his keys. The other is dark blue and reads, "Center for Advanced STEM Education."

His new hiking boots already have wear biting at the edges from the long walks he takes. McQuirk walks everywhere because it lets him spend more time outside. "I'm fascinated by the natural world," he said.

That love for wildlife grew into a passion for science and biology. He combined his love of science with his desire to help others and created a Puksta scholars' project helping high school students transition to college while getting them interested in math and science. "I try to help students become effective learners and transitioners, to be the best they can be," he said. "The point is we get them interested."

McQuirk is a Puksta Foundation scholarship recipient, a program administered at MSU Denver through the Applied Learning Center. Puksta Scholars identify needs in the community and then craft projects to effect change. McQuirk's project goals include giving high school students more access to resources in higher education, encouraging them to join student organizations, and helping them gain self-confidence. His motivation comes from his own experience.

When McQuirk started college, he did not feel fully prepared for college-level courses. He had to take a math class to catch up. And he did not feel his high school counselors gave good advice on choosing schools.

Luckily, when McQuirk toured the CU Boulder campus as a high school senior, he did receive help from Juedon Kebede, a University of Colorado Puksta scholar. Kebede helped him understand the scholarship process and encouraged him to apply for the Puksta program. Now, McQuirk gives other high school students the same guidance Kebede gave him.

When McQuirk graduated New Vista High School in Boulder, he applied to MSU Denver and CU Boulder. He received a leadership scholarship to go to CU Boulder, but MSU Denver was able to match the scholarship.

The tie was broken when McQuirk learned he could

do undergraduate research at MSU Denver, something only accessible to graduate students at many universities. He wanted that chance to perform hands-on research earlier in his education. "Metro is unique because of undergrad research," McQuirk said.

McQuirk has done DNA research for the biology department, looking at different ways to read and understand DNA, potentially making it easier to identify species. Although he did not get to pick the project, he was excited to assist with a professor's research.

"Professors need students to physically run experiments and get answers," McQuirk said.

With the guidance of his professors, McQuirk gained the experience of running experiments in a real lab. In a challenging and competitive field, the additional exposure can give students an advantage while helping them discover their interests.

"STEM positions overall are competitive. They are very competitive," McQuirk said. "It takes discipline, a lot of effort and a lot of perseverance."

McQuirk is not only helping other students persevere, he is thriving with a humble attitude.

