

ASU Online graduate finds new purpose in public health

By Meenah Rincon, ASU News
April 28, 2025

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Samantha Karkar started her college journey with a bass in her hands and music in her heart — but life had a different rhythm in store.

Originally a jazz studies major at a university in California, Karkar was living her dream: studying music, playing bass in multiple ensembles and experiencing life away from home for the first time. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and a carpal tunnel diagnosis made playing her instrument painful, everything changed.

Faced with this major challenge took a toll on her mental health, and Karkar made the difficult decision to leave school and begin working full-time at Starbucks.

It was there, through the encouragement of supportive coworkers, that she found a new path through the [Starbucks College Achievement Plan](#), a first-of-its-kind partnership with ASU that allows all eligible U.S. partners (employees) to earn their first-time bachelor's degree through ASU's top-ranked online degree programs.

Inspired by her own experiences with injury and the broader effects of the pandemic, Karkar enrolled in the [Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences](#) program through ASU Online.

"The Starbucks partnership with ASU has completely changed the trajectory of my life," Karkar said. "I was in a really hard spot in my life when I found the Starbucks College Achievement Plan, but both ASU and Starbucks have shown me so much support and compassion."

One of the most meaningful courses she took at the College of Health Solutions explored the many social, economic and systemic factors that contribute to health inequities in the U.S. and around the world.

For Karkar, it was a powerful reminder that health care isn't one-size-fits-all.

"It is important to always think of others and what is limiting their access to health," she said. "It is not enough for providers to simply tell individuals to eat right and stay fit, but to understand why they feel like they cannot."

Question: What was your “aha” moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

Answer: Truly, I have been interested in health outcomes and the social determinants of health from a young age. I believe everyone should have a right to equitable healthcare and a long, happy life. However, it is very hard to achieve this, with many roadblocks in the way, especially in the United States. I was pushed even further to pursue a degree in the College of Health Solutions after the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seeing the public health efforts all around the world to mitigate the spread of COVID, to keep individuals safe, to research and distribute a vaccine, etc., was extremely inspiring. The pandemic also brought into light the importance of mental health, camaraderie — especially for disadvantaged communities — and the harmful effects of long-COVID. I wanted to learn more about what efforts are being made to ensure equitable access to health care, cultural competency within health care and more. I got all of this and more from my health sciences degree!

Q: What’s something you learned while at ASU Online — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: One thing that truly surprised me about ASU Online was just how amazing of an education you can get online. I used to think online learning was not for me because of how I experienced it during COVID lockdown. However, ASU Online has amazing faculty, extremely organized courses, and plenty of opportunities for collaboration and engagement. I now recommend this process to everyone I know. All it takes is a really good planner and a willingness to learn new things.

I would say to never be afraid to try something you think you will not like — as you truly never know! I’ve gained so much from this experience, and if you had asked me four years ago if I thought this would happen, I would have said no.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU Online?

A: Last semester I took MED450 Leadership and Professionalism with [Dr. Marjon Forouzeshyekta](#), and I learned so much about being a leader, standing up for what is right and various other healthcare leadership issues.

When speaking with Dr. Forouzeshyekta during office hours one day, I asked her what her biggest piece of advice would be for improving leadership skills and outcomes. Her response to me was to be confident in myself and my abilities and to be receptive to feedback. I used to shy away a lot in “uncomfortable” situations as a leader, but I learned it is important to be confident yet teachable in all situations. It may not be your experience that lands you a job, but your attitude and teachability.

Q: What’s the best piece of advice you’d give to those still in school?

A: To all of those still in school, never forget to invest in yourself. Working hard is important, but rest is just as important. In this day and age of social media, extreme productivity has become a culture and a large platform for many content creators. Do not let the pressures and implications of these posts, videos, etc. make you feel like you can not rest. Finding a work-life balance is extremely important and contributes to your overall health, happiness and success. It is okay to rest and to take days off. Trust me — we all need them.

Q: What was your favorite spot for power studying?

A: My favorite study spot is Philz coffee or one of my local libraries. I feel like I can achieve anything with a honey haze in my hand and my headphones on.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: After graduation, I plan on continuing my education at Arizona State University, pursuing a MAS in health informatics starting in the fall.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: If someone gave me \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, I would work on targeting food insecurity. More individuals than you may think experience food insecurity, live in food deserts, etc. Food and water is a basic human need, and everyone deserves to have equitable access to them. This includes fresh, affordable food. In many communities, the only available and affordable food is fast food or extremely processed food. While everything is great in moderation, eating exclusively processed foods leads to higher rates of chronic disease. I would also like to bring food banks and food distribution agencies to communities in need.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

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