

# Dean's Medalist epitomizes a compassionate natural leader

By Jenny Green, ASU News  
April 28, 2025

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

Vaikhari Nalole has distinguished herself through her outstanding academic achievements, unwavering commitment to research, peer mentoring and community engagement.

This spring, she is graduating with a Bachelor of Science in biochemistry from Arizona State University, marking a significant milestone in a journey defined by curiosity, perseverance, and service.

In recognition of her exceptional accomplishments, Nalole has been named the Dean's Medalist for the [School of Molecular Sciences](#) — an honor reserved for students who exemplify academic excellence and leadership within their field.

Nalole has been working to understand how regions inside of cells communicate and has emerged as a creative and independent young researcher.

"Currently, we know a lot about cell-to-cell communication, but there is important information transfer inside of the cell that we know much less about," said Wade Van Horn, School of Molecular Sciences professor and Nalole's research advisor. "Nalole's work has been to make proteins that are thought to form transient communication bridges between two organelles, the endoplasmic reticulum and mitochondria. These short-lived bridges are important for healthy cell function and alterations are implicated in many diseases, including neurodegenerative diseases, like Alzheimer's disease, or metabolic diseases, like obesity and Type 2 diabetes. This is important for us to understand."

Nalole has become an expert in recombinant protein expression techniques to the point where she was able to make sufficient protein for nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy experiments to study a particular protein's structure and binding interactions.

Her research led to her defending an outstanding Barrett honors thesis in the fall of 2024. Nalole also presented her research at the Biodesign Fusion poster session this spring. Van Horn anticipates that she will be a co-author on one or two peer-reviewed papers once the studies that she has contributed to are completed.

Nalole has also selflessly taken on a mentorship role in the laboratory, guiding a new undergraduate student through protocols and experimental design. And as a senior tutor at the Barrett Writing Center, Nalole not only helps students with academic writing but also mentors fellow tutors, leads meetings and assists in hiring decisions.

Her commitment to community engagement extends to volunteering at the Hospice of the Valley Dementia Campus, where she provides companionship to patients, and with the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network, or PanCAN, where she raises awareness and resources for those affected by pancreatic cancer. Her dedication was recognized when she was invited to PanCAN's national volunteer conference in 2024, where she collaborated with advocates across the country.

Nalole plans to become a doctor. Last summer she completed an internship in cardiology at Indiana University School of Medicine, and she received an exceptional score on the MCAT exam.

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

**Answer:** When I chose my major, biochemistry, I honestly didn't know what I was getting myself into. I loved chemistry in high school, and I wanted a major that complemented medical school prerequisites. However, in my sophomore year in a class called Animal Physiology, I realized that biochemistry is the builder of life itself. There is a whole different world inside of our bodies! That realization and learning how important proteins, molecules and chemical interactions in our body are, was something that catalyzed my interest in my major.

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

**A:** Seeing the diversity of students on campus really made me think about how different we all are from each other. At ASU I was taught to look at different perspectives, which was a very valuable lesson to learn. On the other hand, taking classes relating to biochemistry and health, I realized that although we are diverse, we are also so similar on the inside. I realized that we are all human, with differences to be celebrated.

**Q: Why did you choose ASU?**

**A:** When I first visited ASU, I loved how lively the campus was. I saw people sunbathing on the Sun Devil Fitness Center fields, having lunch at the MU and studying with friends. The diversity and community culture are why I chose ASU.

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

**A:** Professor Wade Van Horn, who is my research PI as well as my instructor for biophysical chemistry, taught me to not underestimate myself. He taught me that believing in yourself is the first step to achieving your goals.

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

**A:** Again, believe in yourself! Do not let yourself get in the way of yourself. Put yourself out there, and find joy in the little things. As students we get so caught up in the big picture, whether that is getting your degree or getting that esteemed job position, but I would say have fun with the journey.

**Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends or just thinking about life?**

**A:** I love to study on the tables right outside of Hayden Library. I love to get in the zone, or zone out there.

**Q: What are your plans after graduation?**

**A:** I plan to take a gap year to focus on medical school applications.

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

**A:** I would distribute menstrual products to communities that don't have regular access to them. Reproductive/women's health care is a passion of mine, and educating women on the health of their bodies is something I hope to dedicate my life towards.

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

**Main image**



Vaikhari Nalole is the spring 2025 School of Molecular Sciences Dean's Medalist. Photo by David Rozul/ASU