

Dean's Medalist finds passion in public service, international relations

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Liam Nelson knew no limits when finding his niche at Arizona State University. The soon-to-be graduate's collegiate career was marked by his engagement in his surrounding community and passion for public service. Now, he's set to graduate with three degrees: Asian languages (Japanese), international relations and history.

Managing three degrees is no easy task, but for Nelson, it encouraged him to further pursue his interests.

"I think at the highest level, this shows my ability to connect and synthesize information across a variety of disciplines," he said. "In an ever-diversifying world and career market, being adaptable is an extremely valuable skill."

The [Barrett, The Honors College](#) student took advantage of every opportunity he came across. Throughout his undergraduate experience, Nelson has interned for agencies such as the United States Department of State in Washington, D.C., where he worked with the Press and Public Diplomacy team and the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. In Phoenix, he has served as an ambassador for ASU's [Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative](#) and worked for the Phoenix Sister Cities to welcome students and young professionals to Arizona from across the world.

He also revitalized [Bridge of Japan-America](#), a club previously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since leading the club in 2021, he has helped engage students with Japanese cultural exchange and social events.

His dedication to his academic programs and community has ultimately led Nelson to be named the spring 2025 Dean's Medalist for the [School of International Letters and Cultures](#).

"Mr. Nelson is the model of what we hope our students will do with a Japanese degree, and I am absolutely certain that he stands at the beginning of a brilliant and socially engaged career. He is a

global citizen with a locally embedded focus, whose accomplishments embody the design principles of ASU,” said [William C. Hedberg](#), an associate professor in the school and head of the Japanese section.

After graduation, Nelson will be attending the [Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law](#) at ASU as an O'Connor Fellow.

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

Answer: There were definitely a lot of different “aha” moments, considering I have three majors. As far as Japanese goes, I wanted to be a diplomat at the time I entered ASU and had to take a language for a different degree. I saw there were a few intensive courses and thus chose Japanese almost on a whim. During my first few classes, the professor said there was an old club that needed people to revive it. I revived the Bridge of Japan-America club and saw that it brought together a great community, which was a huge affirmation of my path of study.

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

A: One thing that I had to learn between shared communities and relationships was that people who like the same things as you might like them for different reasons, but that doesn’t mean they like it any less. Realizing this helped me connect with other people around me a lot better and added depth to my relationships too.

Q: How do you feel your degrees have prepared you for future career opportunities?

A: My degrees have given me a lot of employment opportunities between the U.S. Department of State, city of Phoenix and ASU itself. Having to learn and debate history, political theory and more in all of my classes has also taught me to understand the foundations of almost any argument and more effectively empathize with, or oppose, anybody I am arguing or discussing with, which I believe to be a great skill especially in law.

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

A: [Tara Lennon](#) taught me a good lesson about being adaptable in the “Do You Want to Build a Nation” class, but also more generally. That class specifically required me to adapt to many different situations and helped me during the remainder of my academic career. You don’t always have to be ready for the unexpected, but build your skills in adapting to the unexpected when it arrives!

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

A: Work and other experiences outside of class are good for you. Often, your job is much less about what you know than how you can apply it and work with other people to do so. Projects, jobs, collaborative research and connections demonstrate these factors. Get involved on campus. If anything, be over-involved for a bit, and then whittle down your programs to get to those activities and communities you truly enjoy.

Q: Would you encourage other students to pursue multiple degrees? How did it impact your workload?

A: Yes, I would encourage other students to do multiple degrees. I was fortunate to have gotten a lot of college credits in high school, so the multiple degrees were about the same workload as one degree without that already-earned credit. Even so, a lot of credits and classes can overlap, especially between similar majors, such that it doesn't seem like doing multiple complete majors simultaneously.

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

A: My favorite spot on campus was definitely [Noble Library](#). Although I am not a STEM major, that library has individual study rooms which were often an amazing place to get focused and get some work done.

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

A: If there's one problem that I would want to make a dent in, it's definitely urban sprawl, especially in Phoenix. Urban sprawl necessitates automobile use and contributes to so many different issues. I think denser cities with public transportation would have massive benefits.

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

Main image



Liam Nelson. Photo by Meghan Finnerty.