

ASU Online grad prepares to inspire young learners

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

For JJ Mende Ceja, a college degree represents more than academic success — it's a symbol of family, perseverance and breaking barriers. As a first-generation college graduate in his Mexican-American household, Ceja carries the dreams of his parents and siblings with him.

Growing up, his parents held various labor-intensive jobs. They emphasized the importance of education as the key to a better future. His mother, in particular, remains his greatest inspiration, showing him what it means to lead with hard work and perseverance.

Through the [Starbucks College Achievement Plan](#), or SCAP, Ceja was able to pursue a college degree from the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University.

SCAP is a first-of-its-kind partnership with ASU allows all eligible U.S. partners (employees) to earn their first-time bachelor's degree through ASU's top-ranked online degree programs.

"With this partnership, I was able to pursue a career with Starbucks and further my education without having to compensate for one or the other," he said. "What I love is that ASU made it very simple for me to transfer from Bakersfield College, a California community college, after I obtained a degree from there."

This spring, Ceja will earn his Bachelor of Arts in [liberal studies](#) through ASU Online, but his academic journey was one he didn't take alone.

With the support of his husband, Kurtis — also a Starbucks partner and SCAP scholar — the two navigated their studies side by side, turning late-night study sessions into shared accomplishments, often celebrated with a well-earned trip to Cold Stone Creamery.

The work-life balance made possible by ASU Online allowed them to grow in their careers, moving from baristas to supervisors, gaining valuable on-the-job skills while working toward their degrees.

"It was a lot to juggle at one time, but the ASU Online's flexibility made it easier for me to log on and work on my classes when I wasn't working while still being able to partake in my new responsibilities as a shift supervisor," Ceja said.

As he prepares to graduate and pursue a career in education in his home state of California, he's leveraging ASU resources like Handshake and AI resume tools to take the next big step.

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

Answer: My brother is an educator. When I was younger, I would help him in his classroom. Helping students reach that “aha” moment of their own learning has inspired me to become a teacher. I've always been drawn to collaborative work, and it aligns with my personal values.

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

A: Art 320: Botanical Design and SCN 309: Nature Journaling sparked my interest in gardening. These courses taught me the basics of gardening and using botanical elements in presentation. I now have a backyard garden where I grow vegetables, fruits and care for potted plants. This rewarding hobby is something I wouldn't have considered a year ago. I'm glad I was able to explore these courses offered because my major is very flexible.

Q: What was your favorite or most meaningful course and why?

A: OGL 375: Starbucks Corporate Leadership with [Bill Erwin](#). This course is a unique course provided for scholars who are in the SCAP program. In this course, we explored how we become the leaders we want to be. Also, there were multiple sessions with Starbucks executive personnel. One advice that I will take with me from those sessions is from Michelle Burns, executive vice president, global coffee and tea sustainability. She said one tip she learned to really get herself noticed at big conference table talks was within 10 minutes of conversation in a meeting to try to give your input. Eventually, it will become easier, and you'll get noticed more for your input.

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

A: No matter what happens in life, stay in school. One thing I've learned for sure is that life is unpredictable. There will be highs and lows, but education needs to be a priority — the sun is brighter on the finish line. If you happen to take a break because of life, take it, but get back on the road because your journey still needs to continue.

Q: What was your favorite spot for power studying?

A: My favorite spot for power studying is Starbucks. What I like about studying at Starbucks is that I'm not the only one studying. It makes for a sense of community within my own community, and in addition, I typically go to the same Starbucks locations, so they always know me by name and add more substance to my day by connecting with me.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: After graduation, I plan to apply for teaching positions in my area. Once hired, I will pursue my multiple-subject teaching credential at CalStateTEACH. I want to gain some field experience before considering a master's degree, possibly through ASU Online. Forks Up!

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

A: If I had that kind of money, I would use it to launch after school programs in elementary level Title I schools, where students can receive homework help, participate in extracurriculars — art, dance, gardening, sports, etc. — and provide an afterschool snack before they are sent home to be with family for the evening. When I was in elementary school, my school had a program in place like this, and I believe it contributed to a better after-school experience for me, which benefited me socially and academically.

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Main image

