

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences honors outstanding grads with spring 2025 Dean's Medals

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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On May 16 and 17, The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University will recognize its highest-achieving students from the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences at the spring 2025 convocation ceremony.

Every semester, departments and schools within The College choose a student whose dedication to their studies stands out among their peers. From published research to national fellowships, the awardees have shown they have a bright future in their respective fields and have been honored with the prestigious Dean's Medal for their academic achievements.

Meet this spring's Dean's Medalists from The College:

Miranda “Randii” Lantz Castaneda

Dean's Medal: [American Indian studies](#)

Majors: American Indian studies, anthropology, art (art studies)

Minor: Geography

Certificate: American Indian nation governance

[Castaneda](#) is an advocate for Indigenizing museum work and amplifying Indigenous histories and oral traditions. She worked with the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, the Tempe History Museum and the ASU Center for Archaeology and Society Repository to build her skills in collections care, lithic analysis and decolonized museum methodologies. She is also a member of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act team, contributing to the repatriation of cultural materials and human remains.

She has been involved with American Indian Student Support Services and ASU's Alliance of Indigenous Peoples coalition. Castaneda also founded the American Indian Art Association at ASU to celebrate Indigenous history through artistic expression.

Dahlia Horani

Dean's Medal: [Department of English](#)

Majors: English literature, psychology

Minor: Sociology

With eyes on a future law career, [Horani](#) has participated in several internships, including assisting Regents Professor Devoney Looser with research on her forthcoming novel, "Wild for Austen," which earned Horani the department's Research Internship Award. The Phi Beta Kappa member also completed her honors thesis on Muslim representation in young adult literature and the stereotypes Muslims face in contemporary literature.

In 2024, Horani interned with AmeriCorps at the Maricopa Superior Court Law Library, where she supported individuals navigating the legal system. She is set to attend law school at ASU this fall.

Jordyn Hitzeman

Dean's Medal: [Department of Economics](#)

Majors: Economics, mathematics (statistics)

Flinn Scholar Hitzeman received a [Killam Fellowship](#) in 2022, administered by Fulbright Canada, to study economics and mathematics at McGill University of Ottawa. She was also an industrial engineering intern for American Express and a data analysis and business operations intern for Culdesac Inc.

The honors student worked as a research assistant for the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning, where she co-authored four research papers analyzing transportation behavior and demand for car-free living. Hitzeman also researched the impact of digital labor opportunities on women's economic and social freedom in Cambodia and Thailand, as well as the historical usage of racial code words and language undermining fair housing.

After graduation, Hitzeman will begin her career at Cornerstone Research, a global consulting firm.

Olivia Calcerano

Dean's Medal: [Department of Physics](#)

Major: Physics

Minor: Mathematics

Pondering the universe's unsolved queries, [Calcerano](#) sought out to find her own answers.

Starting in 2023, Calcerano partnered with Department of Physics Assistant Professor [Matthew Baumgart](#) on several research projects. This semester, the two finished their contributions as

theorists to the VERITAS (Very Energetic Radiation Imaging Telescope Array System) search for weakly interacting massive particle (WIMP) dark matter.

Outside of the lab, the honors student has served in multiple leadership roles for ASU's Society of Physics Students and co-founded the Association of Women in Physics in 2024.

After graduation, Calcerano will pursue her PhD at the University of Washington, where she'll study theoretical particle physics.

Vincent Truong

Dean's Medal: [Department of Psychology](#)

Majors: Psychology, biochemistry (medicinal chemistry)

Minor: Disability studies

An honors student, [Truong](#) was involved in the SOCIAL Neurobiology Lab for three years, investigating the intersection of autism and aging. Working alongside Department of Psychology Assistant Professor Jessica Verpeut, Truong designed an analysis pipeline through the use of Google Colab that will be used at events in Arizona schools to teach students about neuroscience and computational analysis.

Since 2022, he has acted as an ambassador for the Research for Inclusive STEM Education Center to collaborate with disability resource centers, initiating conversations and policy changes to better accommodate students in a learning environment.

Truong will start his next chapter at the Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine in the fall.

Grant Skala

Dean's Medal: [Hugh Downs School of Human Communication](#)

Majors: Communication, political science

Minor: History

Certificate: Political history and leadership

Since 2022, [Skala](#) has worked as a research aide for the Center for American Institutions and has interned for U.S. Congressman Andrew Garbarino twice. In 2023, he was awarded a Liberty and Learning Fellowship, allowing him to spend the summer in Washington, D.C. His experience complemented his honors thesis, which focused on the use of communication theory research to better understand the delivery of information for public consumption.

During his time at ASU, Skala also served as the president and training chair of Devils' Advocates. He was recognized for his work there with the organization's 2023 Tour Guide of the Year award.

Maxim Tarasov

Dean's Medal: [Interplanetary Initiative](#)

Major: Technological leadership

Committed to long-term goals to advance artificial intelligence models, Tarasov maintained a 4.0 GPA during his undergraduate studies and participated in an internship program through Temple University, where he participated in research on AI. His work and contributions to the team led him to be selected as the presenter for their work.

He is currently a software engineer at biosensor company Biolinq Inc., where he works with algorithm teams on sleep and activity detection.

Hannah Falvey

Dean's Medal: [School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership](#)

Majors: Civic and economic thought and leadership, economics

Minor: Political science

Certificate: Philosophy, politics and economics

[Falvey](#) participated in several prestigious fellowships and programs, including her selection as a Don Lavoie Fellow at George Mason University's Mercatus Center and being the only undergraduate participant in the Harwood Graduate Colloquium at the American Institute for Economic Research. Her involvement with the school extended to research on Fredrick Douglas, and she authored over 80 pages of synthesized complex information.

She has served in numerous leadership positions for ASU's chapter of the Alexander Hamilton Society and was most recently the president of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership Student Assembly.

Emily Speckman

Dean's Medal: [School of Earth and Space Exploration](#)

Major: Earth and environmental sciences

Certificates: Atmospheric sciences, cross-sector leadership

Her desire to learn more about the Earth's systems led [Speckman](#) to ASU.

In 2023, Speckman worked as a Fulbright summer research intern at the Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada, and over the past year, she has served as a NASA Space Grant intern. She has also worked in Kelin Whipple's lab analyzing watersheds to understand changing flood trends.

She was the founder of the Environmental Science Club and served on the School of Earth and Space Exploration Undergraduate Council. Speckman has also mentored students in the school and through the Next Generation Service Corps.

Nathaniel Bush

Dean's Medal: [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning](#)

Major: Urban planning

Minor: Geography

[Bush](#), a first-generation college student, has committed his time to cleaning up local communities through the Keep Tempe Beautiful organization and has worked with HOPE for the Homeless to assemble and distribute care packages for the unhoused community. At ASU, he served in numerous leadership roles for the Student Planning Association and participated in a study abroad program in Italy.

He is currently an intern for Espiritu Loci Inc., a planning and development assistance firm.

Benjamin Ash

Dean's Medal: [School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies](#)

Majors: History, political science

[Ash](#) participated in numerous research projects on topics ranging from fishing and travel writing in the 19th century to medieval slavery and captivity. Currently, he is working with Dean of Humanities Jeffrey Cohen on an annotated bibliography and essay collection for the 30th anniversary of "Monster Theory: Reading Culture."

The honors student was named a Barrett Global Explorers Grant Scholar and traveled to Great Britain and France to conduct survey research for his study, "Analyzing Youth Perspectives on Imperialism and Identity: A Multidisciplinary Study." His research from the study applied to his thesis, "How to Cope in a Falling Empire: Rationalizing Decline Within National Identity."

Bianca Obando

Dean's Medal: [School of Human Evolution and Social Change](#)

Majors: Global health, molecular biosciences and biotechnology

[Obando's](#) interests led her to several labs during her time at ASU, including working with the Maricopa County Department of Public Health on valley fever and salmonella cases in the Applied Infectious Disease and Epidemiology Lab and examining population genetics research in the Stone Laboratory. The Phi Beta Kappa member was also a Helios Scholar for the Translational Genomics Research Institute, where she worked to improve information dissemination of research institutions.

After graduating, Obando plans to pursue a career in public health research.

Liam Nelson

Dean's Medal: [School of International Letters and Cultures](#)

Majors: Asian languages (Japanese), history, international relations

In 2024, [Nelson](#) interned for the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C., and with the Press and Public Diplomacy team to distribute communications and coordinate meetings for the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau.

Nelson served as a student ambassador for the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative and an education and exchange assistant for the Phoenix Sister Cities program. The honors student helped revitalize ASU's Bridge of Japan-America club in 2021 and was the recipient of numerous accolades, including the Rapporteur MCC Model United States Award, The College Student Leader Award and the ASU Outstanding Service for the Japanese Community Award.

Nelson will attend law school at ASU next fall.

Alexander Sastokas

Dean's Medal: [School of Life Sciences](#)

Major: Biological sciences (biomedical sciences)

Certificate: Evolutionary medicine

[Sastokas](#) has participated in research with the [Kerry Geiler-Samorette \(KGS\) Lab](#), the [Center for Mechanisms of Evolution](#) and the [School of Life Sciences Undergraduate Research program](#). Sastokas was also listed as a co-author on two publications on evolving yeast resistance to combinations of antifungal drugs.

He is moving to Maryland to begin a position at the National Institutes of Health in the post-baccalaureate Intramural Research Training Award (IRTA) program, where he'll be a full-time researcher and train under a principal investigator.

Katarina Fenner

Dean's Medal: [School of Mathematical and Statistical Sciences](#)

Major: Mathematics

Minor: Music performance

[Fenner's](#) impressive performance in some of the degree's hardest courses helped her maintain a 4.0 GPA. She worked as a math tutor for the Joaquin Bustoz Math-Science Honors Program and was an instructional assistant and grader for classes ranging from algebra to calculus.

With a passion for music, Fenner was a member of the Sun Devil Marching Band and Sun Devil Pep Band. In her honors thesis, she discussed the development of story-based design in drum corps.

Fenner will begin her PhD in mathematics education at The College after graduation.

Vaikhari Nalole

Dean's Medal: [School of Molecular Sciences](#)

Major: Biochemistry

[Nalole](#) will graduate this spring with a 4.0 GPA.

Her schedule at ASU was filled with a variety of research and health care experiences, including her involvement in the Van Horn Lab, where she studied the chaperone protein GRP75. She was a Joyce Hubbard Fellow at the Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis, Indiana, and worked with the Dementia Care and Education Campus at Hospice of the Valley, the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network and the Ironwood Cancer & Research Centers.

The Phi Beta Kappa member and honors student also served as a senior tutor in the Barrett Writing Center to mentor students and fellow tutors. She has aspirations to become a doctor.

Mia McLaughlin

Dean's Medal: [School of Politics and Global Studies](#)

Major: Political science, global studies

Since coming to ASU, [McLaughlin's](#) interest in pursuing impactful research and taking on complex problems has been evident.

McLaughlin worked as an intern for the Center for Work and Democracy and the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict. From 2019 to 2022, she served as a congressional campaign intern for Arizona Congressman Greg Stanton, and coordinated virtual fundraisers to increase campaign contributions. She also took advantage of a study abroad program at the University of Manchester on the politics of development, environmental justice and security studies.

Her honors thesis presented important trends in United Kingdom politics and debates, including topics ranging from post-Brexit financial hardships to national-scale political polarization in South and East Belfast.

She is currently pursuing an accelerated master's degree in public administration at ASU.

Mia Bazbaz

Dean's Medal: [School of Social Transformation](#)

Major: Justice studies

Certificate: Socio-legal studies

[Bazbaz](#) has been actively engaged with her ASU community through her involvement in multiple clubs. She sat on the Barrett Honors College Council as the director of advocacy, leading thoughtful discussions on challenging topics ranging from feminist theory to homelessness.

Bazbaz had several ambassador and intern experiences in giving back to the unhoused communities in Tempe through Hillel at ASU, where she directed service projects and taught lessons on food justice. At Project Humanities, she conducted a research project to identify key barriers to resources and support for the unhoused. She presented her findings to community members to spark further discussion on solutions and opportunities.

She is currently pursuing an accelerated master's degree in justice studies at ASU.

Divina Ranger

Dean's Medal: [School of Transborder Studies](#)

Major: Transborder Chicana/o and Latina/o studies

In 2023, [Ranger](#) interned at an acupuncture clinic in Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico, to learn about holistic medicine and treatment plans. She also worked as a customer service representative for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona, and volunteered as a deputy field organizer in 2024 for NextGen America to organize voter registration events on the Tempe campus.

For her honors thesis, Ranger wrote a 120-page screenplay for a psychological thriller based on themes from her Mexican cultural and religious heritage.

Ranger hopes to have a career in teaching and eventually obtain her master's degree.

Helena Silva Goldbaum

Dean's Medal: [T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics](#)

Majors: Family and human development, psychology

Originally from Pelotas, Brazil, [Goldbaum](#) participated in research opportunities at the Emerging Minds Lab and the Child Study Lab. An honors student, she also completed an internship through Harvard University, where she explored how young children understand their environments and other people's minds.

After graduation, Goldbaum will begin her PhD in educational psychology with a focus on applied developmental science at the University of Virginia.

Daniel Nichols

Dean's Medal: [Department of Aerospace Studies](#)

Major: Aerospace engineering (aeronautics)

Minor: Military leadership

Nichols has overseen \$52,000 in flight training funds for 19 cadets across 12 flight schools and has been instrumental in securing an additional \$50,000 to expand opportunities for future officers.

He helped redesign the detachment's Cadet Wing accountability processes to increase the tracking accuracy of 142 cadets. Nichols has also led the organization of community service events, generating over 350 volunteer hours.

Part of ASU's Air Force ROTC, he has been selected to become a U.S. Air Force pilot.

Andrew Napier

Dean's Medal: [Department of Military Science](#)

Major: Liberal studies

Minor: Military leadership

Since 2016, [Napier](#) has been involved with the U.S. Army, serving in roles from squad leader in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to working as the executive assistant to the command sergeant major on Alaska's Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson. While in ASU's Army ROTC program, Napier was the cadet battalion commander. He extended his responsibilities to mentoring younger cadets in mission planning and leadership development.

He has been selected as an aviation officer in the U.S. Army.

Reely Daugherty

Dean's Medal: [Department of Naval Science](#)

Major: Mechanical engineering

Minor: Military leadership

In ASU's Navy ROTC program, Daugherty has served as a team leader and squad leader. He has balanced rigorous coursework and leadership roles with the responsibilities of raising his daughters, all while maintaining a 4.0 GPA.

His performance and dedication to his studies, unit and family have highlighted his strong potential for a successful and highly impactful career in the U.S. Marine Corps.

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Main image



2025 Dean's Medal. Photo courtesy Meghan Finnerty/ASU

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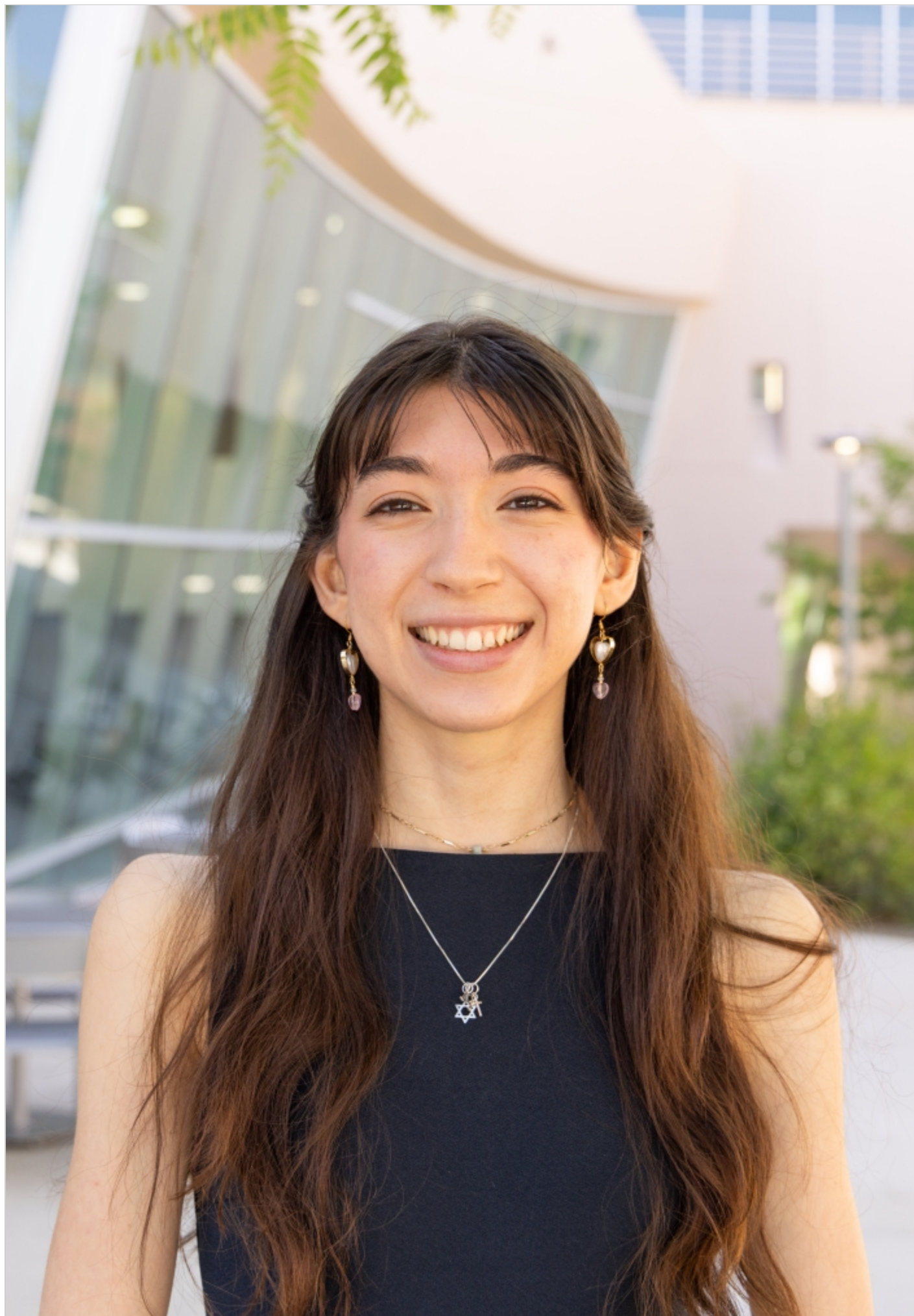
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