

Academic excellence, leadership skills earn earth and environmental sciences grad a Dean's Medal

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

By Gabrielle Sangervasi

Emily Speckman can hardly wrap her head around the fact that when she graduates with a bachelor's degree in earth and environmental sciences this May, she will join a prestigious list of [School of Earth and Space Exploration](#) Dean's Medalists.

The Dean's Medal is awarded to the highest-achieving student graduating from each school within Arizona State University's [College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#). Given Speckman's academic excellence in her field of study and her impactful leadership within the ASU community though, it's no surprise that she is being honored with the recognition.

Speckman's love for earth and environmental science was inspired by her eighth grade teacher's own love for earth science, which prompted her to get a degree in earth and environmental sciences. Speckman received multiple scholarships to attend ASU, where her passion for the subject thrived under the guidance of ASU's award-winning faculty.

"What is really special about Emily is her capacity to make connections," says Professor [Kelin Whipple](#), associate director of undergraduate initiatives in the School of Earth and Space Exploration. "She is often able to link lessons from earlier in the term, or even in other courses, with a current topic and both realize and explain to others the implications of the connection. When she does this and, often phrased as a question, shares her thinking in group discussions she greatly enriches the learning experience of all in the class."

Most notable of Speckman's academic achievements though was being awarded a [Fulbright Canada-Mitacs Globalink fellowship](#) in summer 2023.

This program provides exceptional U.S. undergraduate students with a 10 to 12-week internship to undertake an advanced research project in their area of interest at a Canadian university. For her fellowship, Speckman traveled to Newfoundland and Labrador to work on a research project studying the greenhouse gas emissions coming from agricultural fields.

"During this experience I learned that field work is very meaningful to me. I think that is the 'fun' part of my field, despite the sediment that I can never seem to fully wash out. Science is fascinating, and I think that being able to quantify the concepts I have been learning in class for the past several years while contributing to ongoing research — that will inform both policy and climate models — is meaningful," Speckman says.

"I was especially buoyed when I learned about her recognition as a Fulbright Canada-Mitacs Fellow, as it was a clear indication of her intellectual curiosity and dedication, a characteristic consistently demonstrated during all our interactions," says Matei "Matt" Georgescu, a professor in the [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning Professor](#). "This prestigious opportunity felt like a natural next step for someone so committed to deepening her understanding and making a meaningful impact."

This desire to make a meaningful impact seems to be a defining quality of Speckman's character. She worked in University Housing as a community assistant for two years, mentored first-year students, was a peer instructor and structured ways for students to build community through classwork as a teaching assistant. In her free time she helped found the SESE Undergraduate Council and the Environmental Science Club to promote community in the school and advocate for her peers.

"I have tried to give back," Speckman says. "I've advocated for my peers at school and at work. ... Why? Because on my worst days someone was there for me and I can only hope to give that back to someone else. Honestly, sometimes I feel what I have 'given back' is insufficient."

"All this to make the point, I think receiving the Dean's Medal showed me all that effort has not been futile," she says. "That somewhere along the way, choosing to be kind, repeatedly, was the most important choice I made."

After graduating, Speckman will pursue a Master of Science degree in boreal ecosystem and agricultural science at Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada.

Question: Why did you choose ASU?

A: ASU has an amazing program for earth and environmental science, with a ton of opportunities for learning content in adjacent fields. Additionally, Next Generation Service Corp offered me an amazing scholarship that helped me afford an out of state education while making a network of impressive peers.

ASU has represented a chance to grow beyond my small town, and I am incredibly lucky to have gotten the chance to study here.

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

A: This is a really difficult question. I have had quite a few professors who have really looked out for me during my time here at ASU. Kelin Whipple, [Arjun Heimsath](#), [Duane DeVecchio](#) and [Matei Georgescu](#) have given me the most notable lessons.

Professor Whipple has taught me what compassion looks like in a university setting. He always assumes the best of others, and I can only aspire to be that kind as I move forward in my career.

One lesson that sticks out to me that has helped me while evaluating my career path is a lesson from Professor Georgescu. One day, freshman year, I was asking him about what a career might look like if I wanted a similar job as the one he has. I still remember him telling me one of the most insightful lines about career I have ever heard. ... He said that 95% of science is tedious work, but whatever that last 5% is, it better make it worth it. I think this conversation helped me reflect on my interests in science and has helped me choose what to study in graduate school.

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

A: College is not easy. You will have bad days, your neighbors will have bad days. I think the most important thing you can do is be a neighbor. Community is the best way to get through it. I have had a lot of people look out for me, be kind to me on my bad days. Be that kind person. Assume the best of the group member who isn't contributing to the assignment or the roommate who forgot to do their dishes last night. Assuming the best of others, and being there when others need you, is what makes a community. You do not have to be lonely in college. Help someone carry their cat during a fire drill, and someone might make you soup when you get sick. It is really easy to get lost in the numbers here at ASU, but the students here are kind and helpful people, and all of us are looking for a sense of community.

Q: How do you feel your degree has prepared you for future career opportunities?

A: What is great about my degree is how flexible it is — there is space for certificates or taking classes I find interesting. I ended up getting a certificate in atmospheric science, which has given me a new perspective on the Earth as a system and has given me a unique perspective on climatic data.

The opportunity to be part of NGSC (Next Generation Service Corp) also helped significantly for my career preparedness. From mock interviews to financial wellness workshops, they have provided many of my career preparation needs. Most notably, NGSC has given me the chance to network with an amazing group of peers, and taught me how to grow my leadership skills in ways that I will continue to use regardless of where I end up.

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

A: I have so many joyous memories on campus. From playing DnD in Farmers Ed to getting sprayed by sprinklers while watching a lunar eclipse on PV Beach. Part of what makes graduation so bittersweet is my sense of place. Palm Walk is beautiful, there are birds by Noble library who are active during the spring semester, and spring blossoms near Coor Hall. I have spent late nights in Hayden library, and spent countless hours in the PSF Student Success Center. I boast (about) ISTB4 to my friends and family, and have spent lunch on the benches near the Crepe Club.

I love campus, but if there is any one place I had to choose, it would be the booths near the PV East UPS store. There are three tables and booths, and I usually choose the one in the corner. I have shared Starbucks drinks, stories and difficult assignments with friends in this spot. Since freshman year, it has been a great place to meet friends or do homework.

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

Main image



School of Earth and Space Exploration Dean's Medalist Emily Speckman explores a slot canyon.
Photo courtesy Emily Speckman