

Dean's Medalist champions Indigenous voice through art and academia

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

When Randii Lantz Castaneda walks across the commencement stage at Arizona State University this spring, she'll do so carrying not just multiple degrees, awards and leadership titles, but the legacy and hopes of a community often left on the margins of academia.

A proud member of the Yaqui Indigenous people, Castaneda will be graduating summa cum laude with degrees in anthropology, American Indian studies, art (art studies), a minor in geography and a certificate in American Indian nation governance. She has also been named the spring 2025 Dean's Medalist for the [American Indian Studies](#) program and is The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences' Outstanding Undergraduate Award recipient for the social sciences.

"She exemplifies the strength and value of an American Indian studies degree, using her education to advance Indigenous sovereignty, promote ethical museum practices and create opportunities for Indigenous communities," Academic Success Specialist [Jennica Fulwilder](#) said.

"Her ability to bridge scholarship, activism and leadership demonstrates the power of an American Indian studies education in preparing students to serve Indigenous nations, drive institutional change and uplift Indigenous voices."

Castaneda's academic journey tells the story of someone determined to bring Native culture and art to the forefront.

"I didn't grow up as connected with my culture as I would have liked," Castaneda said. "Over time, I've tried to find ways to engage more with the community, and I've seen this has been something that's common within our communities."

Originally from Van Nuys, California, Castaneda started at ASU as an art student minoring in American Indian studies. However, as she leaned more into art as a passion, she realized there weren't many platforms for Indigenous artists to share their work. This led Castaneda to pursue a

foundation that amplified Indigenous art and dove deeper into the cultural aspects of academia and law.

“I am an artist at heart, but I soon realized that a lot of us don't have a platform to share our art. It made me want to connect more with that cultural side to bring us to the forefront of these spaces,” Castaneda said.

During her time at ASU, she founded the American Indian Art Association at ASU and took on leadership roles as president, librarian and dean of honeycombs for the Iota chapter of Alpha Pi Omega Sorority Inc., the nation's first and largest Indigenous sorority. She served as Ms. Indigenous ASU 1st Attendant (2024–2025), was selected as a Mellon Foundation Native Narratives Fellow and facilitated documentation for the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples Coalition.

She also contributed her time to culturally significant work as an intern with the S'edav Va'aki Museum, the Tempe History Museum and with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) team in the Center for Archaeology and Society in the [School of Human Evolution and Social Change](#).

Through her work with NAGPRA, Castaneda learned how complicated operations within the museum field can be, as well as the legal component of repatriating cultural artifacts and other items.

She also expanded her efforts with repatriation as an archival assistant for the [Center for Archaeology and Society Repository](#).

“Randii has been an incredible joy to have as a student. She joined the Center for Archaeology and Society Repository as a member of the Archaeological Collections Care and NAGPRA class,” said [Christopher Caseldine](#), an assistant research professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change and curator of collections for the repository.

“(We all) found Randii to be a very engaged and thoughtful student. Her care and dedication to the work was an inspiration and model for others. Her inclusion among this year's Dean's Medalists is a well-deserved recognition of both what she has done and an acknowledgement of her future success and impact. We are incredibly proud of Randii and wish her continued success.”

Community was something Castaneda sought within the university to connect with other Indigenous students and provide opportunities to learn one another's traditions. Last fall, she became involved in the Native Narratives program that brought in 15 Indigenous students to encourage them to pursue graduate studies in hopes of “Indigenizing academia.”

“Being an Indigenous student in a Western institution, there is this push for having to work twice as hard to reach these accolades to be recognized. I just want to acknowledge that a lot of our students are first-generation, and we don't have the highest retention rates. So every one of our voices does matter in these spaces, and there is a place for every student,” she said.

Because retention rates are low among Indigenous college students, Castaneda made it her goal to finish her education for both herself and her community.

“I personally like to thank myself because I wouldn't be here if I didn't always push myself to continue getting to this point,” she said. “There were times when I didn't want to do the things that I

had to do, but I know that other people counted on me, and I was counting on myself. I was thinking it's just pushing through this time during my undergrad, and in the long run, I could really be giving back to my community.”

This fall, she will be returning to ASU's School of Human Evolution and Social Change to pursue her master's degree in museum studies and a future in museum repatriation work.

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

Main image



Randii Lantz Castaneda was awarded Dean's Medalist from the American Indian Studies program in spring 2025. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU