

ASU Online helps conservation explorer turn passion into purpose

Balancing life as a military spouse, full-time employee and Barrett honors student, Madison Eklund connected her coursework to conservation research around the world

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

After spending nearly four years working towards an engineering degree, Madison Eklund realized it wasn't her dream.

Eklund stepped away from school for almost 10 years, giving herself space to explore, recharge and uncover a passion for doing meaningful work.

She embarked on a 1,700-mile solo kayaking expedition, a route from Minneapolis to the Hudson Bay and up the Arctic Ocean, becoming the first person to complete the route solo and one of only seven people to ever paddle the full distance.

Along the way, Eklund partnered with the North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality to collect PFAS (forever chemicals) water samples on her route — the first study of its kind done in the state.

“As I talked with the public about what I was doing and took samples on the muddy banks of the Red River, I realized that this felt right,” she said. “My calling in life exists somewhere in the intersection of outdoor recreation, academic research and science interpretation to the public.”

In 2023, she decided to give college another try, but her experience at her previous university had been less than ideal, and her grades had suffered as a result.

ASU Earned Admission gave her a second chance at earning a college degree.

[ASU Earned Admission](#) is designed to help adults and transfer students move forward, regardless of prior academic history. Students take online courses, designed by ASU's expert faculty, earn college credit and qualify for admission into ASU's degree programs.

Not only did Eklund achieve a 4.0 grade point average her first semester taking courses through ASU Earned Admission, but she was also accepted to [ASU Online](#) and Barrett, The Honors College.

The [Barrett Online program](#) is the first of its kind offered by a top-rated honors college in the country. Similar to Barrett Honors College on-campus students, online honors students have access to honors-only research and internship opportunities, events, activities and lectures.

"I looked forward to doing a thesis, so I could connect with local organizations and try to better my community, as well as get some experience with real academic research," she said.

As a military spouse, Eklund currently resides in Rosamond, California. Frequently stationed in remote areas, hours away from college campuses, ASU Online gave her the ability to earn her degree from anywhere, allowing her to travel, join her husband on military training and visit family.

Her college experience was not limited to pursuing her degree online. It provided her the flexibility to explore the world through three study abroad trips.

She traveled to Antarctica in 2024 through the [Global Intensive Experiences](#) program, where she got hands-on experience with field research, collecting samples of phytoplankton for FjordPhyto, a collaborative project between scientists at Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Universidad Nacional de la Plata.

"It ended up being one of my favorite experiences during my time here at ASU, so I'm so thankful that this opportunity opened up for me," Eklund said.

She went on to study abroad in Costa Rica through BIOMA, where students can participate in hands-on sea turtle field work with experts, learn about sea turtle biology, ecology and conservation.

"I got to patrol the beaches at night under moonlight, locating nesting sea turtles, collecting data points on them and their nests, tagging the turtles to be tracked and calling in poachers who hunted their eggs," Eklund said.

When she embarked on her solo kayaking expedition, Eklund became a member of The Explorers Club, a society dedicated to scientific exploration and resource conservation.

Eklund's third study abroad program was a self-designed research project, through a grant program through The Explorers Club, where she traveled to the Greenlandic Arctic, again partnering with FjordPhyto to collect foundational phytoplankton data.

She credits each experience for expanding her connection with nature and conservation, sharing it with others through her page, [Expedition Alpine](#), which documents her conservation work and travel adventures.

Meanwhile, Eklund thrived in Barrett's honors environment, which encouraged curiosity, reflection and deep engagement with academic goals while providing the structure and support she needed to align her academic interests with real-world scientific engagement. She completed honors coursework and integrated her fieldwork into her studies, demonstrating how online honors students can create meaningful, hands-on academic experiences.

Eklund's dedication and involvement earned national recognition. In 2024, she received a Udall Scholarship Honorable Mention and an Online Undergraduate Research Scholarship. That same year, she was awarded the Gilman-McCain Scholarship and STEM Award. And in 2025, she received the Young Explorers Grant through The Explorers Club.

Alongside her studies, Eklund volunteers with the local search and rescue team in her community. She also participates in humanitarian and environmental volunteer work, dedicating much of her free time outside of class to helping others and protecting the planet.

This fall, as she completes her bachelor's degree in [biological sciences \(conservation biology and ecology\)](#), she defended her Barrett, The Honors College thesis on Joshua Tree populations.

"It sounds cliché, but everything we do as a society causes a ripple effect and influences conditions elsewhere," Eklund said. "My study abroad experiences and personal travels have shown me how immensely interconnected we all are, which is simultaneously a comforting and terrifying realization. It's up to us all to ensure a healthy and equitable future."

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

Main image



ASU Online student Madison Eklund in Antarctica. Courtesy photo