

3 alumni honored for significant contributions to their communities

This year's inductees to The College Leaders include a judge, an advocate and a restaurant CEO

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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In its 28th year, [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) is inducting three outstanding alumni to the [The College Leaders](#) on Nov. 14.

This year's inductees — Bonnie Bulla, Kathryn Helgaas Burgum and Lawrence Johnson — have made significant contributions to their state's legal systems, local communities and businesses.

The honor was established in 1997 to highlight alumni who have made a profound impact on others within their work. Out of more than 130,000 alumni from The College, only 89 have been honored with this award.

The College Leaders represent a growing global network of alumni who have used their degrees in the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences to establish successful, fulfilling careers and make a difference in their communities.

Get to know The College Leaders of 2025.

Bonnie Bulla

Bachelor's degree in economics, 1984

Chief Judge Bonnie Bulla of the Nevada Court of Appeals began her legal career in Nevada in 1987, including working as a private practitioner handling professional negligence cases before becoming the discovery commissioner in Clark County, where she resolved pretrial civil discovery disputes for 12 years. She joined the Nevada Court of Appeals by gubernatorial appointment in 2019, was retained by voters in 2020 and was elected to a six-year term in 2022. In 2025, Bulla was appointed to a four-year term as chief judge.

After graduating with her degree in economics, Bulla attended what is now known as the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law.

“The most valuable thing that I learned at ASU was how to communicate in person or face to face with faculty and other students whose perspectives were different from mine,” Bulla said. “Learning the value of how to both give and take when communicating has proven to be an invaluable skill not only in the practice of law and as a judge, but also in my daily life.”

When asked to describe how her degree helped her throughout her career, Bulla stated: “Be curious, not judgmental.”

“Telling you not to be judgmental may sound a bit odd coming from a judge, but the point is a good judge needs to have an inquiring and open mind. This is the essence of curiosity, the desire and ability to search for and find solutions to problems,” Bulla said. “I value the time I spent at ASU obtaining my liberal arts education and my degree in economics has served me well.”

Kathryn Helgaas Burgum

Bachelor’s degree in textiles and clothing in business, 1985

Kathryn Helgaas Burgum became North Dakota’s first lady in 2016 when her husband, Doug Burgum, was sworn in as the 33rd governor of North Dakota. Serving until 2024, her priorities supported and developed initiatives to eliminate the stigma surrounding addiction in North Dakota’s communities.

In long-term recovery from alcohol addiction for over 23 years, Burgum has shared her story and has encouraged others to do the same to normalize the conversation around addiction. She led Recovery Reinvented, a statewide and national initiative dedicated to eliminating shame and promoting compassion through storytelling and education. She now works on redefining how the country understands and treats addiction.

“I lead national efforts to unite government, health care, philanthropy and the private sector around a shared mission: saving lives and strengthening families through compassionate, science-based approaches to prevention, treatment and recovery,” Burgum said. “I currently speak nationally about eliminating the stigma of the disease of addiction and recovery from addiction. I also speak about resilience and redefining what it means to live a life of purpose.”

Burgum was originally drawn to ASU for its dynamic energy. She says her degree gave her not only a professional foundation, but also a mindset to balance strategy with empathy, structure with innovation and data with human stories.

“ASU taught me the power of connection and possibility — that ideas come to life when people from different disciplines and backgrounds come together with curiosity and courage. I learned to think creatively, to communicate effectively and to see challenges as opportunities to make a difference,” Burgum said. “Those lessons became the foundation of my leadership style and my mission to help others find hope and purpose, even in the face of adversity.”

Lawrence Johnson

Bachelor’s degree in political science, minor in Portuguese, 1975

Lawrence Johnson is the retired CEO and chairman of the board for the upscale Brazilian steakhouse Fogo de Chão. He started his career as a corporate attorney for the international law firm Baker McKenzie, working in Chicago and Rio de Janeiro, and launched the firm's office in Dallas.

Under his leadership, Fogo de Chão expanded from 11 restaurants in 2007 to over 100 today, taking the restaurant's pioneering hospitality concept to a global stage, allowing it to compete and set a new precedent for the steakhouse experience.

"I couldn't have had those two great careers if I weren't fluent in Portuguese and Spanish. My journey is so different, but it shines a light on thinking outside the box," Johnson said. "If you had asked me when I started at ASU where I'd end up, I'd never pick (CEO), but I had the tools, critical thinking along the way, good intuition and instincts. If I didn't have those unique skills, I'd have been successful, but it just wouldn't have been the same."

Johnson credited his long career to his humanities minor in Portuguese. He arrived at ASU already fluent in Spanish, and his professor challenged him to try a new language. By obtaining that minor and learning Portuguese, he was able to take advantage of opportunities in law school that led to his job at Baker McKenzie and ultimately played a role in his partnerships and leadership within Fogo de Chão.

"I'm a huge supporter of the humanities. It forces you to think. If you want to do well (in the humanities), it forces you to work hard," Johnson said. "I learned how to interact with people who were above me as a student, whether it was professors or people in a position of power."

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

Main image



Old Main and Alumni Lawn on the ASU Tempe campus. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

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