

# Psychology grad challenging a long-standing ‘culture of silence’ around mental health

**First-generation student Yesenia Cruz-Carrillo earns the Ed Pastor Outstanding Graduate Student Award while pursuing a PhD in developmental psychology**

By Laura Fields, ASU News  
December 1, 2025

**Editor’s note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

Growing up in Prescott Valley, Arizona, Yesenia Cruz-Carrillo rarely heard conversations about mental health.

“As a first-generation Latina, the topic of mental health was never discussed in our household,” she said. “Being the youngest of four, I often found myself observing the struggles and challenges of my family as they learned to navigate life in the U.S.

“Yet here was a culture of silence — perhaps because vulnerability is a luxury rarely afforded to the children of immigrants.”

Now, Cruz-Carrillo is breaking that silence through her research and advocacy. The [Department of Psychology](#) graduate student in [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) at Arizona State University is this year’s recipient of the [Ed Pastor Outstanding Graduate Student Award](#). She’ll be recognized at the ASU Hispanic Celebration on Dec. 13 as she earns her master’s degree in psychology, awarded in route to her PhD in [developmental psychology](#).

In the [Lifespan Development Lab](#), led by Professor [Frank Infurna](#), Cruz-Carrillo examines longitudinal survey data from countries all over the world to explore population-level health trends in midlife.

“I plan to build upon this work by focusing specifically on the foreign-born population in the U.S.,” she said. “My goal is to explore cognitive, mental health and physical health trends among foreign-born adults to inform policy and intervention.”

We caught up with Cruz-Carrillo to learn more about her time at ASU and her goals ahead.

**Question: Why did you choose ASU, and how has it shaped your experience?**

**Answer:** I chose ASU because of its commitment to inclusivity, innovation and collaboration. When I visited campus in 2023, I was drawn to the closeness and support of the department. As someone who’s had to learn how to navigate higher education on my own, I wanted a program that pushed students to grow but also supported them when needed. Research is a collaborative effort and knowing you have people to support you makes all the difference.

**Q: Can you briefly describe your master’s thesis and the role of your faculty advisor?**

**A:** My master’s thesis examined cohort trends in the self-rated health, memory and depressive symptoms among foreign-born middle-aged and older adults. Previous studies have documented poorer health and memory, and more depressive symptoms in midlife for U.S.-born adults; however, few have explored these trends in the foreign-born population. Using national longitudinal panel-survey data, I found that people who were born later reported better health, fewer depressive symptoms and exhibited more stable memory than their peers several decades ago.

I’m beyond grateful for my mentor, Frank J. Infurna, for his patience and unwavering support throughout this process. His enthusiasm for his students’ research, openness to questions and consistent encouragement have made all the difference. I also want to thank my committee members, Joseph L. Saenz and Mary Davis, for their time, support and valuable feedback.

**Q: How was your experience making friends at ASU?**

**A:** I am thankful for the kindness and support I’ve received from my department and lab. Students and faculty were welcoming from the start, and I immediately felt part of the ASU community. That sense of belonging has been fundamental in my graduate school experience.

**Q: What’s the best piece of advice you’d give to current students?**

**A:** First: Know that you belong. As first-generation students, we often find ourselves in spaces our families have never been. While this is a tremendous achievement, feelings of self-doubt may emerge. Know that you are not alone and that you deserve to be here. You are our future and an inspiration to those around you.

Second: Graduate school is a marathon, not a sprint. Balancing multiple responsibilities is an ongoing process; don’t forget to slow down. Learn as much as you can, ask questions and enjoy the little things in life. There will always be work that needs to get done, and it will, but everything at its own time.

**Q: What are your plans after graduation, and what projects will you focus on as you finish your PhD?**

**A:** My next milestones are passing my comprehensive exams and dissertation defense. I plan to continue working on immigration-related research and look for ways to connect this work to the community. After earning my PhD, I hope to pursue a career in academia to train the next generation of scientists.

If it were not for the mentors I met along the way, I would not be where I am today. They dedicated time to my training, provided support when I needed it most and continue to cheer me on in life. I want to be that mentor for my students too.

---

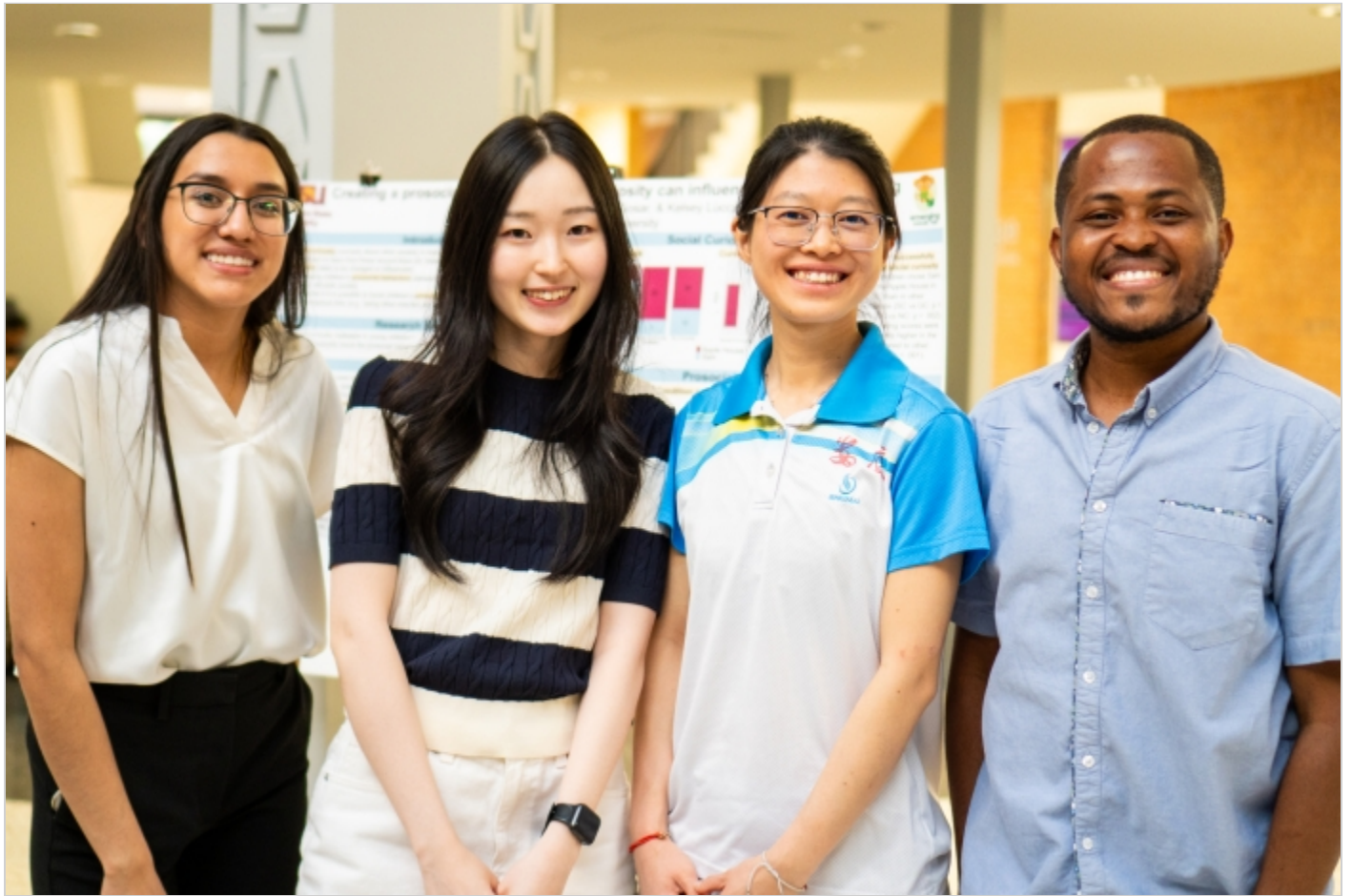
*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Yesenia Cruz-Carrillo is studying population-level health trends in midlife using national data from 16 countries. Photo by Laura Fields

## Text image(s)



Yesenia Cruz-Carrillo (left) with fellow graduate students Nayen Lee, Ye Li and Nutifafa Dey at “A Leap Forward: Celebrating Robert B. Cialdini and the Future of Social Influence,” a spring 2025 event featuring a student poster reception for Cialdini Research Award projects.