

8 Sun Devils win federal awards for studying critical languages abroad

Prestigious Boren Awards focus on languages important to US interests; come with 1-year commitment to government work

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
November 25, 2025

Arizona State University is a [national leader](#) for recipients of the [Boren Awards](#), a federal program that funds travel abroad for the immersive study of languages critical to U.S. interests.

Eight Sun Devils have won Boren Awards in the 2025 cycle — seven for studying Mandarin, and one for studying Russian. Seven are winners of Boren scholarships, which are for undergraduates, and one is a fellowship, which are for graduate students.

The awards provide up to \$30,000 to study in areas including Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Eurasia, Latin America and the Middle East. Winners must commit to working in the federal government for at least one year after graduation.

ASU's success reflects the civic commitment of its students, according to Kyle Mox, associate dean for national scholarship advisement at ASU.

"Our advisors work closely with each applicant to help them connect their interests in language and culture with long-term goals in public service, turning individual passion into purposeful global engagement," he said.

The Boren Awards are sponsored by the National Security Education Program in the U.S. Department of Defense, and winners can be at any level of language learning — even beginner.

Valerie Hammond has been informally learning Mandarin for about a year, taking some classes and using language-learning apps. She won a Boren Fellowship to study the language at a university in Taipei, where she's lived with her husband for about a year.

Hammond is pursuing a master's degree in sustainable food systems in the [School of Sustainability](#) through ASU Online.

"My master's thesis is on water management in Taiwan and how it relates to Arizona with agriculture and the tech industry, because both use a lot of water," said Hammond, who earned a bachelor's degree in marine science at the University of California, Berkeley.

She sees water management as an area that's important to U.S. interests. For her post-fellowship commitment, she would consider working for the Army Corps of Engineers or the National Security Council.

"I would really like to get into water security, helping to plan water resources and being aware of what's going on in other countries," she said.

"There are 'hot spots' around the world where there is going to be conflict because of continental drying — countries are losing fresh water.

"We can work on some of the cultural barriers with water management because it's important for people to learn from other cultures."

A major advantage

The [School of International Letters and Cultures](#) at ASU enrolls about 10,500 students per semester in language, culture, literature and linguistics courses. The 20 language programs have about 500 majors and nearly 1,000 minors, according to Sara Beaudrie, director of the school and professor of Spanish linguistics.

About 500 students study Chinese each semester, and about 120 study Russian.

"(The school) is home to the [Chinese Language Flagship](#) program, one of only a handful nationwide funded by the U.S. Department of Defense through the National Security Education Program," she said.

"It's a tremendous distinction and it means that ASU students can achieve professional-level Mandarin proficiency while pursuing degrees in fields like engineering, business, political science or global studies. The Flagship program includes study abroad and intensive language training, preparing graduates for international careers and government service at the highest level."

Studying a language equips students with lifelong skills that open doors professionally and personally, Beaudrie said.

"From a career perspective, bilingualism is a major advantage. Employers consistently report that they need professionals who can work across cultures and communicate with diverse clients and partners," she said.

"Job postings for bilingual candidates have more than doubled in recent years, and multilingual employees often earn 5% to 20% more than their peers."

Beyond employability, language study builds intercultural communication, creativity, collaboration and complex problem-solving — skills that make graduates stand out, especially in fields that combine human insight with technical expertise, she said.

“These human-centered skills are increasingly vital in the age of AI, where technology can process information, but only people can interpret meaning, navigate cultural nuance and build authentic connections across borders.”

For the good of the US

Spencer Johnson was awarded a Boren scholarship to study Russian, a language he’s been learning since childhood. During middle school, he met with a private tutor twice a week, becoming proficient enough to hold simple conversations.

He expected to continue Russian as a hobby during college and chose ASU because he wanted a degree in business data analytics.

“The Russian was a minor at first and I was like, ‘Wow, it’s five credits and every day of the week. It’s rigorous.’”

After realizing he would complete the requirements for a minor by his second year, Johnson opted to double major — a decision reinforced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the time.

He applied for a Boren scholarship his junior year and was not selected, and applied again in his senior year and was waitlisted. Like Hammond, Johnson got help from the National Office of Scholarship Advisement on refining his essay, which he believed was much better the second time he applied.

He graduated in May with degrees in Russian and business data analytics and found out over the summer that he was accepted into the program, which started a mad rush to change his plans. Johnson had returned home to Colorado to work as a coach for pickleball — one of his passions.

The Boren scholarship requires recipients to be undergraduates, so he enrolled in an online global-management degree program in the [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#) at ASU.

In January, he will travel to the Tallinn, Estonia, for a Russian language immersion program — and he’ll take his pickleball paddles with him.

“I’m so passionate about so many things, and pickleball is definitely one of them,” said Johnson, who hopes to have pickleball added to the Olympics so he can compete or coach.

“Another career aspiration is to do something in national security or cybersecurity to defend against Russian interference. If that’s in Ukraine, that would be awesome, but if it’s in Eastern Europe or the United States, that’s great.

“I do want to use my Russian language internationally for the good of the United States in whatever role they see fit.”

Want to apply?

The [Boren Award application](#) is now open. Students interested in applying must work with the Lorraine W. Frank Office of National Scholarship Advisement and be nominated by ASU. The campus deadline is the first week in January.

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

Main image



Arizona State University is a national leader for recipients of the Boren Awards, a federal program that funds travel abroad for the immersive study of languages that are critical to U.S. interests. Eight Sun Devils have won Boren Awards in the 2025 cycle — seven for studying Mandarin, and one for studying Russian. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU

Text image(s)



Valerie Hammond has begun an intensive Mandarin program in Taiwan. Courtesy photo



Spencer Johnson will travel to Estonia for an intensive Russian-language program. Courtesy photo