

# ASU staff member earns master's degree, embraces cultural bridge-building

By Kristen LaRue-Sandler, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

Arizona State University student Theresa Zimm is an avid traveler, community volunteer, former K–12 classroom teacher, fluent speaker of Russian, former website administrator, current university staff member and the mother of three grown children.

But, she wants you to know: She's just getting started.

This fall, Zimm is graduating with a [Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages \(MTESOL\)](#) degree and she's already queued up another ASU program. She plans to finish her [certificate in computer-assisted language learning](#) next December.

She's also been named this fall's University Outstanding Graduate Student for humanities in The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Zimm is most interested in building bridges between cultures. With her husband, she's an active member of the [Phoenix Foreign Relations Committee](#), a nonpartisan organization working to make metro Phoenix into an international policy center. Zimm is also a senior program coordinator for the [Critical Languages Institute](#), a project of [The Melikian Center](#) at ASU. In that role, she advocates for less commonly taught languages and helps manage scholarships and grants. She says it's more than just a paycheck — it's about personal meaning.

"It has been my passion to champion language-learning as a pathway to self-development, cross-cultural literacy, prestigious national awards, federal funding for internships and career opportunities," she said.

Zimm has seamlessly blended her role in promoting less commonly taught languages with her interest in teaching English. For instance, she completed a TESOL internship during summer 2025 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, while serving as a point of contact for students in ASU's Russian study abroad program.

"While the Melikian Center's regional languages are considered critical because not enough Americans speak them, English has solidified its place as the dominant language worldwide for global communication, education and research, career opportunities, technology and media, and travel in a multiplicity of contexts," Zimm said. "Teaching English to speakers of other languages improves their access to the wider world, and students are eager to learn! Plus, it's just fun."

Zimm explained a bit more about her past and future career trajectories and her work at ASU.

**Question: What was your "aha" moment, when you realized you wanted to study in your field?**

**Answer:** The decision to seek a TESOL degree was a convergence of life experiences rather than a revelation. I spent several years teaching elementary and junior high in private and charter schools. Before the classroom, I studied Russian at Dartmouth, and ever since my first trip abroad — to the USSR — I have greatly enjoyed meeting people from different nations, cultures and backgrounds. With English as the world's lingua franca, a TESOL degree opens many opportunities for careers and relationships around the globe, even at my age.

**Q: Why did you choose ASU?**

**A:** As an employee, I am able to take advantage of ASU's tuition-reduction program. However, once I started my TESOL degree, I was pleasantly surprised at the many ways one can tailor a program.

**Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?**

**A:** All my professors were very accessible, encouraging and supportive of my work commitments. Given the nature of the TESOL program, most of my classmates were international students. It was refreshing to be around such talented and motivated people! Although I was usually their parents' age, they didn't seem to mind. International students are also open to discussing topics many Americans won't, and I like that.

I also must give credit to Melikian Center directors [Keith Brown](#) and [Jamie Edmonds](#) for offering me opportunities for personal and professional growth. They communicated trust in my ability to succeed, which in turn grew my confidence and skills. Sometimes the most important lesson you can learn is to believe in yourself.

**Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?**

**A:** Only one piece of advice? At my age, I've got so much to say!

First, find your community. ASU is a big place, and you'll need some people in your corner to help you succeed. Next, find some way to differentiate yourself from the pack, such as a job or internship overseas, a leadership position, etc. Third, after getting a bachelor's degree, continue on to get a graduate degree while you're in the swing of studying. Last but not least, dream big and don't be afraid to think outside the box. Ask for help and advocate for yourself. You won't always be successful, but your failures will teach you more than your successes ever could.

**Q: What are your plans after graduation?**

**A:** I love supporting our regions' critical languages, funding students' journeys, and working with my exceptional colleagues, so I would like to stay at ASU. I'll likely volunteer locally in TESOL work and continue to travel overseas with my husband whenever possible.

**Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?**

**A:** I would give K-12 teachers raises. Many are overworked, undercompensated and leaving the profession they love because they no longer feel valued and/or must provide for their families.

Those who educate the next generation — parents, teachers, caregivers, and even grandparents — are worthy of honor because investing in others is hard work; raising children and teens of good character does not just simply happen. The more we outsource that responsibility to others — even and especially to screens — the more we allow others who do not share our values to dictate the future.

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

**Main image**





Graduating MTESOL student and ASU staff member Theresa Zimm completed an internship during summer 2025 in Kyrgyzstan, where she interacted with a steppe eagle — an endangered species native to Eurasia. Courtesy photo