

PhD grad decodes rhetoric of eating disorder recovery

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](#).

Hannah Benefiel had gotten used to learning in a competitive environment and was expecting the same at Arizona State University.

But when this PhD student from Knoxville, Tennessee, set foot on the Tempe campus in early 2020, her anxiety dissipated. Instead of competition, she found camaraderie.

The warmth and collegial atmosphere made it possible for Benefiel to begin her groundbreaking doctoral research — on the language of eating disorder recovery — at what was otherwise a disconcerting time: summer and fall of 2020, during the early COVID-19 pandemic.

Benefiel said that her "pandemic puppy," Sherman, an Australian shepherd mix whom she adopted at the beginning of her program, was "a huge source of support."

And now, that academic journey is coming to a successful end.

Benefiel defended her dissertation, "How We Learn to Eat: Rhetorical Education and the Language of Eating Disorder Recovery" on Nov. 10 and graduates this fall with a [PhD in English \(writing, rhetorics and literacies\)](#). For her doctoral project, Benefiel evaluated two specific manuals used in eating disorder recovery settings to discern whether the rhetorical conventions in them might further healing or harm.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses with the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric condition. Around 9% of the U.S. population struggles with the condition, according to the [National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders](#).

Benefiel explained some takeaways from her findings: "My work helps people see how messages about eating show up in everyday life, including in recovery materials that many people trust," she said. "By breaking down the exact lessons these manuals teach, I show where language can support healing and where it can accidentally make symptoms worse. I hope that in the future this can help clinicians, caregivers and people in recovery make more informed choices about the lessons they read and believe."

During her ASU career, Benefiel was a standout student, being active in professional activities and publishing. She was a member of the [2023 Bedford New Scholars Advisory Board](#), an initiative run by Bedford/St. Martin's Press, that gathers promising graduate students to provide feedback on educational materials. She also contributed an essay on disordered eating and compulsive truth-telling for the [forthcoming collection](#) "Purity Culture, Bodies, and Beliefs: Stories of Religious Trauma," edited by Victoria Houser and Mari Ramler (Penn State University Press, 2026).

Benefiel answered a few questions about her journey.

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

Answer: I realized I wanted to study eating disorders when my advisor asked me: “What are the problems you want to solve?” Once I started thinking in terms of real problems that impacted me and those around me rather than focusing on opportunities to just publish something, the field opened up for me.

Q: What’s something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you, that changed your perspective?

A: I came to ASU expecting the same competitive atmosphere I felt in my MA program, so I was surprised by how openly supportive other (writing, rhetorics and literacies) students were. Instead of guarding their ideas or comparing progress, they celebrate one another with real excitement. Learning to match that generosity helped me let go of comparison and cheer for people with my whole chest, which changed how I understand community in academic life.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I chose ASU partly because I wanted a year-round tan, but mostly because I felt instantly welcomed the moment I stepped into (Ross-Blakley Hall) on my campus visit. The professors were warm, curious and genuinely interested in who I was and what I hoped to study.

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

A: (Professor of English) [Kyle Jensen](#) taught that nothing is worth sacrificing my mental health, my family, or my friends, and that academia will always be there. The work is important, but my life outside of school is immensely more so.

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

A: If your insurance covers it, get a therapist.

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

A: If I had \$40 million dollars, I would tackle the crisis of eating disorder care and education. People are dying because they do not have access to treatment, because treatment is inconsistent, and because our culture teaches harmful ideas about health long before someone ever walks into a clinic.

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

Main image



Graduating PhD student Hannah Benefiel presented a flash talk about her work at a Department of English event on Nov. 14 during ASU Homecoming week. Photo by Ashley Sorensen/ASU.

Text image(s)



Hannah Benefiel says her dog, Sherman, provided emotional support during her academic journey. Courtesy photo