

Dean's Medalist builds legacy of research, mentorship and innovation

By Jenny Green, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

When Shri Swaminathan steps onto Arizona State University's graduation stage, she'll be carrying with her not only years of hard work, discovery and growth but also the story of a journey that spans continents, disciplines and life-changing opportunities.

Born in the San Francisco Bay Area and raised in Alameda, California, until age 10, Swaminathan moved with her family to southern India, where she completed high school. The transition, she recalls, was challenging but formative.

"I learned to work with the difficulties," she said, reflecting on how the experience shaped her resilience and worldview. When it came time for college, she returned to the United States with a passion for science — and a need for a university that could make her dreams possible.

She found that in ASU's [School of Molecular Sciences](#).

Now, this fall, Swaminathan is graduating with dual majors in biochemistry (with a concentration in medicinal chemistry) and neuroscience, a pairing that reflects her interdisciplinary curiosity.

"Nearly all the schools I hoped to attend were unaffordable until ASU sent me a letter offering the President's Scholarship," Swaminathan said. "I would absolutely not be here without it. My time at ASU has changed my life in so many ways, and I will forever be grateful."

She has conducted research continuously since her second year as a student, not only at ASU but also as an NSF REU Fellow at NYU and as a protein structural chemistry intern at Merck.

In July 2023, Swaminathan joined the lab of Associate Professor Xu Wang in the School of Molecular Sciences, where she has worked for two and a half years — first under a graduate student mentor, and now independently.

"My PI, Associate Professor Xu Wang, has been my biggest champion at ASU," says Swaminathan. "Joining a biochemistry lab at ASU completely changed how I understood what I was learning. Hands-on research made everything come alive."

"An indelible piece of advice he gave me was to embrace the inherent trial-and-error nature of science. I was so beaten down by one of my first independent cloning experiments not working, but he reminded me to use it as a learning opportunity to try something better. I have used that advice as motivation on every research project, and I know it will be an asset for me in both graduate school and my future career."

Professor Wang praises her as an exceptional student: "Shri was (one of the best) undergraduate (students) to work in my lab. Very intelligent, extremely enthusiastic about science, and unafraid of challenges. She embodies excellence in our student population."

Swaminathan is a co-author on a published paper, has supported multiple projects and even helped establish large-scale recombinant protein expression systems in mammalian cell culture — an essential resource now used across the lab.

But one of her proudest achievements came from her role as a peer mentor. During a conversation with School of Molecular Sciences staff members Orenda Griffin and Ruby Arjona in the Peer Mentor course, she wrote a proposal seeking conference funding. That proposal helped lead to the creation of a new scholarship: the Futures Initiative Travel Award, which grants \$1,000 to support undergraduate research travel.

"I'm really proud of that," she said. "Getting funding for conferences as an undergraduate can be so hard. I hope this award helps others who are passionate about research."

As she prepares for the next step in her journey, ASU News caught up with Swaminathan to learn more about her ASU experience.

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

Answer: Honestly, I have loved chemistry for as long as I can remember. But a particular moment in a science class in seventh grade comes to mind, when I learned about acids and bases for the first time and was fascinated by it.

I took a lot of science classes in high school, right when COVID hit, and seeing the impact research had in ushering us back to normalcy really motivated me to pursue biochemistry in college. I have since fallen in love with the field more with every major-related class I have taken.

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

A: Hands-on learning! All my science education through high school was classroom based. Joining a biochemistry lab at ASU totally changed how I understood what I was learning in my biochem classes. I also completed two summer internships, and I learned so much from those experiences. I think practical experience is so essential to the learning process in any field, and I hope everyone gets a chance to immerse themselves in it as a college student.

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

A: Find the thing that brings you joy and pursue it. The hard work no longer feels that way when you genuinely love what you do. It is easy to be taunted by the big research question that I am working towards — and I sometimes am — but being in the lab and getting to do experiments brings me immense fulfillment. When you do something you love, it becomes a natural motivation for everyday life as a student and beyond.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends or just thinking about life? (For online students: What was your favorite spot for power studying?)

A: In my first year, I loved going to the Armstrong Hall basement. It is so quiet and calming there, and I would get a bagel from the Einstein Bros on the first floor to fuel my studying. Those bagels got me through gen chem!

However, when I joined professor Wang's lab, I got a designated desk with a large window right next to it on the fourth floor of ISTB1, where our lab is located. I'm not really a decorator, but I've personalized it quite a bit. I've written countless essays, contributed to a published research paper, and submitted successful internship applications from that space. I'm sad to leave it! But I'm sure the next person to occupy that space will find it to be an endless source of inspiration and joy.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: I have applied to PhD programs in chemical biology and hope to be a full-time graduate student in the fall. In the meantime, I will be doing a six-month co-op with the Protein and Structural Chemistry group at Merck beginning in January.

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

A: The lack of access and the immense cost of higher education is something we need to act on. It is a barrier that weeds out so many talented and aspiring individuals. I would use the \$40 million toward scholarship funds and also create nonprofit organizations that find solutions to combat the rising costs of education.

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

Main image



Shri Swaminathan is the School of Molecular Sciences fall 2025 Dean's Medalist. Photo courtesy David Rozul

Text image(s)



Shri Swaminathan working in Associate Professor Wang's lab. Photo courtesy David Rozul