

# Dean's Medalist pursues passion through ASU Online, anthropology program

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

Transferring to Arizona State University after realizing she wanted to pursue a career in forensic science, Julia Cassella has taken advantage of every opportunity available to set herself up for success after graduating.

Cassella transferred to [ASU Online](#) after finding the [School of Human Evolution and Social Change's anthropology](#) program.

"I chose ASU because I knew they had a strong reputation in the anthropology world. I remember being a little girl and being riveted by a National Geographic magazine about [Donald Johanson](#) and [Lucy](#)," Cassella said. "My graduation year, being the same year he [retired](#), was such a wild full-circle moment for me."

This December, she'll graduate with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and as the School of Human Evolution and Social Change's fall 2025 Dean's Medalist.

Working remotely near her hometown in Pennsylvania, Cassella has shadowed numerous autopsy teams to gain a deeper understanding of forensic pathology. She also worked with [Christopher Stojanowski](#) in the [Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program](#), as well as the [Culture, Health, Environment, and Language Lab](#), to gain a better understanding of research methods and ethics. Cassella took her experience from her programs and applied it to her independent research on occupational burnout among forensic pathologists and death investigators.

"Julia is an alumnus from my forensic anthropology course and actively sought additional experience in the field," said Stojanowski, professor and director of the Center for Bioarchaeological Research. "This semester, she is completing a position with me for the Research Apprentice Program that is structured around building basic research skills."

“Julia completed her work with a high attention to detail, was very organized, was an excellent communicator and finished her project early. This is the kind of motivation that is so valuable these days.”

After graduation, Cassella will begin dual master’s degrees in forensic medicine and anatomical sciences education at the University of Florida.

“I can't wait to apply the skills I've developed from my classes and beyond in a medicolegal context. I am also very pleased that the research I started here regarding burnout in forensic medicine will be used for my master's thesis.”

Learn more about Cassella and her time at ASU.

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

**Answer:** My "aha" moment was when I was at the university I transferred to ASU from. I was taking a forensic science lab and realized that I wanted to be a medicolegal death investigator. After doing some research and seeing that anthropology was a popular major among the profession, I realized it was time for me to find a better fit with anthropology as an option to major in.

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

**A:** I learned a lot of things during my time here, but what stood out to me the most was what I learned in ASB 484: Culture, Health, and Environment Lab Social Research Training (CHELab SoRT). I learned so much about how social science research works, things I would have never gotten the opportunity to be immersed in otherwise. That program helped me develop my own research on burnout in forensic medicine.

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

**A:** I would be remiss if I didn't bring up my favorite professor here, Christopher Stojanowski. Not only did I learn so much about forensic and biological anthropology from him in [ASM 275: Forensic Anthropology](#) and [ASM 450: Bioarchaeology](#), but I was also in his online Research Apprenticeship Program (RAP) this semester. He has taught me how to effectively network with professors in an online environment, which used to be quite the challenge for me. The research skills I acquired during the RAP can be boiled down to "never take no for an answer" when trying to metaphorically dig around for scholarly articles.

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

**A:** Get out of your comfort zone. Try everything you can, so you know what you really want to do once you graduate. Go sign up for that class, take that internship, shadow somebody! You'll never know unless you try.

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

**A:** I would use that money to make sure that everyone can have access to clean water. I took ASM 414 with [Rhian Stotts](#), and I will never forget the frustration I felt knowing that there are people in the world who don't have access to safe drinking water. There has to be a sustainable solution for this problem.

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

## Main image



Julia Cassella is graduating with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and as the School of Human Evolution and Social Change's fall 2025 Dean's Medalist. Courtesy photo