

From massage table to research lab, psychology grad earns Dean's Medalist honor

Massage therapist-turned-psych-major will inspire fellow students as New College convocation speaker

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

When Melissa Roeder realized that many of her clients' pain stemmed from unspoken trauma, she set out to study the mind-body connection. Years after pausing her education to work and save, Roeder returned to college, transforming her experience as a massage therapist into research that earned her the highest student honor from Arizona State University's [New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences](#) on the [West Valley campus](#).

Originally from Washington state, Roeder moved to Glendale, Arizona, in 2024 and will graduate from New College this fall with a [BS in psychology](#). Nominated as the Dean's Medalist and selected as the student convocation speaker, Roeder came to ASU through the Starbucks tuition program and a career rooted in helping others heal. Her current research examines health care messaging and the factors that cause women to delay seeking treatment for endometriosis.

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

Answer: My turning point came while I worked as a massage therapist. I saw clients who had long histories of pain and trauma, and I kept running into the same gap: People had seen specialists but didn't understand the physiological relationship between trauma and the body. I wanted to study the neurological and physiological side of psychological experience and help build that body of knowledge.

Q: Why did you choose New College?

A: I started as an ASU Online student while working two jobs. I learned about and used the Starbucks tuition program so I could start school without stepping away from paying work. Once I realized I needed hands-on research experience, I transferred to the West Valley campus because the program at New College was the best fit for the research-focused psychology path I wanted.

Q: What's something you learned while at New College that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: I entered focused on trauma research, but a positive psychology course shifted my perspective. I realized many self-healing methods people use are grounded in positive psychology. I'd been practicing parts of it instinctively for years, but didn't realize its scientific basis until that course.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at New College, and what was that lesson?

A: I've been fortunate to have many mentors at New College. (Assistant Teaching) Professor [Haideen Perkins](#), who taught my social and positive psychology courses, created a welcoming, community-centered classroom that made learning deeply engaging. Another mentor, (Assistant Teaching) Professor [Aris Karagiorgakis](#), encouraged me to apply for awards and the convocation speaker role. He challenged me to aim higher and helped me recognize the value of my own work.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd offer to someone considering applying for college?

A: Fold your support system into your plan. College is hard; you don't have to do it alone. Community and family kept me on track, helped me see myself as someone who belonged in higher education, and made success possible.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: Plans are tentative; my husband's job may relocate us next spring or summer. I'm applying to PhD programs in the 2026 cycle. In the meantime, I'll volunteer locally with the botanical garden and the zoo (I'd love to be a docent and share fun facts about cacti) and aim for a post-baccalaureate research assistant position while I await grad school results.

Q: Where do you see yourself in 10 years or more, and how do you think New College has helped prepare you to get there?

A: I hope to be conducting research and in a PhD program by 2030. New College's smaller classes and concentrated fields let me build close relationships with faculty mentors and gain the hands-on research experience that will make that possible.

Q: Part of New College's name is "New." What does the word mean to you? Describe how you feel "new."

A: It means chapters and fresh horizons. I've lived many lives; this chapter felt like the one I'd been striving for. New College helped me access that horizon.

Q: How do you think you embody ASU's charter through your actions and experiences?

A: My passion is making research and resources accessible so people can better care for themselves without cost barriers. The charter's emphasis on inclusion, research for public value and community impact aligns exactly with my goals for research to translate to widely available, actionable information.

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

Main image



Dean's Medalist and New College Student Speaker Melissa Roeder will graduate this fall with a bachelor's degree in psychology via ASU Online. Courtesy photo

Gallery



Research is Melissa Roeder's favorite part of her program, and she earned an NCUIRE grant to explore how media portrayals of women's pain affect endometriosis care.



Melissa and her biggest supporter, her husband Marcus.



Melissa is stepping confidently into the future, empowered by the knowledge she gained at ASU West Valley.