

# Online biochemistry graduate finds her path forward at ASU

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](#).

Kea Gustavus has lived in a few very different places — she grew up in Las Vegas, moved to Wisconsin as a teenager and now calls the state's city of Madison home. This month, she's celebrating another milestone: graduating from Arizona State University with an online degree in biochemistry.

But the journey to graduation wasn't straightforward.

Gustavus originally began her college career at a state school in Wisconsin, completing three years of coursework with plans to fast-track into pharmacy school. "You don't need a completed bachelor's to go to pharmacy school," she said. "I was accepted, moved to Madison and thought that was the plan."

Then everything shifted. "Life really didn't pan out the way I had planned it. I was kind of lost for a little while there. I had 75% of my degree completed and no plan."

She realized pharmacy school wasn't the right fit — not the path, not the four more years. That's when her fiancé suggested she apply to ASU's online biochemistry program. "He told me ASU had a great program and that I should apply just to see if I could get in," she said. "And the rest is history."

Despite being an online student, Kea had the chance to travel to ASU for her in-person biochemistry lab. "The campus was outstanding. I've never seen something that large — palm trees everywhere, these gorgeous gardens," she said. "The state school I went to had only about 8,000 students, so it was pretty small and compact. ASU was just crazy. I'm kind of sad I spent all my days in labs because it would've been nice to wander around."

Those labs ran Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., but even with that intense schedule, the experience solidified her love for the field. And surprisingly, even through a screen, she found community. "I've really enjoyed my time at ASU. Even being an online degree, I've met so many people — honestly, even more than I would have in person."

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

**Answer:** I’ve always been a naturally curious person — the kind of kid who wanted to know how everything worked and why it worked that way. In high school, biology and physiology quickly became my favorite subjects because I loved learning about the mechanisms behind the human body. Understanding those systems felt exciting and intuitive to me, so moving into biochemistry in college was a natural next step. It brought together everything I enjoyed: exploration, problem-solving and a deeper look into how life works at a molecular level.

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

**A:** An environmental ethics elective completely shifted my perspective. I knew a little about pollution and climate issues, but I was genuinely shocked to learn how many factors — especially animal farming — contribute to environmental damage. Reading about the way animals are raised and treated was upsetting, and it opened my eyes to the ethical implications behind everyday choices. That class changed me so much that I decided to stop eating meat, and I’ve been vegetarian for over a year now. It’s one of the most unexpected but meaningful impacts of my time at ASU.

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

**A:** I transferred to ASU after spending three years at a state school in Wisconsin. At the time, I had planned to “fast-track” into pharmacy school, but life took a different turn and I suddenly found myself unsure of what to do next. I had moved away from my previous university and felt pretty lost. My fiancé told me about ASU’s strong online programs and encouraged me to apply. ASU ended up giving me the direction I needed, helping me regroup and get back on track toward my professional goals. It was exactly the fresh start I needed.

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

**A:** Dr. Jim Allen taught me one of the most valuable lessons during my biochemistry lab. We were often running protocols we’d never done before, collecting data we didn’t fully understand yet, and it was easy to feel pressure about whether our results were “good” or “bad.” Whenever I asked him which one mine were, he would simply say, “It’s just data.” That perspective stuck with me — data isn’t good or bad; it’s information. Focusing too much on getting “good” results can distract from the bigger picture, and that mindset has shaped how I approach scientific work and problem-solving.

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

**A:** Don’t give up. If one path doesn’t work out, or if Plan A or B fails, there are still 24 other letters to work with. Life doesn’t always go the way you expect, and that’s OK. There’s always another option, another direction and another chance to start again.

**Q: What's your favorite spot for power studying?**

**A:** As an online student, my favorite power-study spot has been my home office. I’ve spent countless hours at that desk prepping for exams and working through assignments. I’ve decorated

the space with artwork and kept all my stationery neatly organized, so it's a genuinely comfortable and happy place to be — a small sanctuary for productivity.

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

**A:** I don't have one set path yet, but I know I want to do benchwork. Whether that's in food testing, pharmaceutical quality control or a related area, I'm excited to be hands on in the lab. I'm open to different opportunities and looking forward to wherever this degree takes me.

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

**A:** I would use the funding to improve medication access for older adults. Many rely on Medicare plans that don't offer adequate coverage, and they have very few alternatives. After working in retail pharmacy for four years, I've seen firsthand how many older patients struggle every single year to afford the medications they need. The system needs major reform, but it lacks the federal resources required for meaningful change. I would invest the \$40 million into programs and infrastructure that help ensure seniors can receive affordable, consistent access to essential medications.

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

**Main image**



Kea Gustavus is graduating this month with a biochemistry degree. Courtesy photo