

Hugh Downs School dean's medalist excels in academics, service and leadership while serving in US Air Force

By Charles Najera, ASU News
December 12, 2025

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

When Brandon Garlitos began his academic journey at Arizona State University, he was already balancing a demanding military career with a full slate of responsibilities. As a flying crew chief in the United States Air Force Reserve and previously on active duty, he traveled the world supporting complex missions while pursuing a communication degree through the [Hugh Downs School of Human Communication](#). That commitment carried through his academic journey.

His dedication was recognized this fall when he was awarded the [Dean's Medal](#) from [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) for Outstanding Academic Achievement.

Communication played a central role in Garlitos' decision to pursue the degree. Throughout his military career, clear communication often meant the difference between success and mission failure. "In my career field, communication is essential, whether it is coordinating during missions, working with other career fields or making decisions under pressure," he said. "I wanted to improve how I connect with people and tell stories that matter. Communication felt like the perfect path to grow as a leader and better serve others."

Garlitos entered ASU as an active service member, bringing with him the discipline, time management, and accountability that the Air Force instilled. "I came into ASU focused and organized, and used to high expectations, which helped me stay on track academically," he said. That discipline proved invaluable during a deployment, where he earned above a 4.0 GPA while flying combat missions. He credits structure, routine and a clear sense of purpose for helping him balance his responsibilities during that time.

His work in the classroom reinforced his goals for future leadership roles, both in the military and beyond. Receiving the [Hugh Downs School Scholars Program Scholarship](#) helped strengthen his connection to the school. “It made me feel seen and supported,” he said. “The scholarship gave me confidence and helped me feel more connected to the school and faculty.”

Faculty support was also an important part of Garlitos’ experience at the Hugh Downs School. He credits President’s Professor [Pauline Cheong](#) with providing steady guidance during his deployment, support that helped him stay grounded and focused during a demanding period of service.

Leadership and service have been consistent threads throughout Garlitos’ time at ASU. At the Pat Tillman Veterans Center, he helped more than 3,500 military service members, veterans and dependents transition into the university, an experience he found deeply meaningful. “Seeing them succeed and find community made the work worth it every day,” he said.

He also served as new member educator for Sigma Pi, where he mentored more than 100 students, guided philanthropic efforts and helped raise over \$10,000 for charity. Through this work, he learned patience, responsibility and how to support a large group with diverse backgrounds. He also participated in community service initiatives, including efforts that helped feed more than one hundred children in Guatemala for an entire year. “Knowing I can help improve someone’s life, even in a small way, is what continues to motivate me,” he said.

Looking ahead, Garlitos plans to continue serving in the Air Force while pursuing a master’s degree. He hopes to eventually work for a major defense company where his communication training will support leadership roles that require collaboration, teamwork and clear messaging.

Reflecting on his time at ASU, he is proud of how he balanced school, military service, leadership and community involvement. “Each experience, whether in the classroom, in uniform or serving the community, shaped who I am today,” he said. “My advice to other students, especially veterans, is to lean into your strengths and trust that you belong here.”

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

Main image



ASU grad Brandon Garlitos was awarded the Dean's Medal from The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for Outstanding Academic Achievement. Courtesy photo