

# From college pause to PhD graduate

By Amanda Goodman, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Growing up in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, Sara Crance was taught early on that community was everything.

Her hometown of Ironton, Ohio, had a population of just over 10,500 in the 2020 census. That's less than half of the number of students graduating from Arizona State University alongside her this May.

In such a tight-knit place, people look out for one another, and as she got older, Crance inherited this sense of responsibility.

"That was a big part of why I wanted to go into a field where I could help and serve others," said Crance.

Her route to achieving that goal was a bit indirect. After taking a break from college following her first year, Crance spent the next two decades returning to her studies at different points in her life. Along the way, she earned a biology degree, an MBA, got married, and had two daughters before going back to complete an associate degree in nursing, followed by a Master of Science in nursing.

Now, Crance has completed the PhD portion of her [Doctor of Nursing Practice–PhD concurrent enrollment program](#) through ASU's Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation — she earned her Doctor of Nursing Practice in May 2025 — capping off a winding yet impressive collegiate career.

"I think back to my first year of college and how hard it was. I failed miserably and thought I'd never get to do what I really wanted. I wish I could go back and tell my 19-year-old self to hang in there, you'll get there."

Crance is the first graduate of the dual degree program and received a full scholarship from the college's namesake. She was also selected as Edson College's Outstanding Graduate Student.

"Being the first to graduate from this program means a lot. I think about my daughters and the idea that it's never too late, you're never too old. It doesn't matter where you came from or what you've been through."

It's a lesson she also models for her students as a faculty member at Edson College. After graduation, she will continue teaching and will expand her role in Hospice of the Valley's

Supportive Dementia Care program.

*Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.*

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

**Answer:** I chose ASU because of the innovative dual DNP-PhD program, which aligned with my unique goals of integrating advanced clinical practice with research. There are only a handful of universities that offer this combined degree, and it was important to me to be at an institution that not only recognized the value of this dual pathway but was also intentional in preparing advanced practice nurses to bridge the gap between practice and research. Edson College consistently ranks among the top graduate nursing programs in the country and is housed within a [\(R1\) research institution](#), which creates an environment that fosters both academic rigor and innovation.

In addition, the DNP and PhD faculty stood out to me as not only experts in their fields but also deeply committed to student success, innovation and growth. I also highly value the interdisciplinary nature of the PhD program. Learning from faculty across disciplines has fundamentally shaped how I approach research as well as clinical practice and has encouraged me to think more broadly about complex health care challenges.

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

**A:** [Allie Peckham](#) has had a profoundly positive impact on my growth and development as a researcher, student, clinician and future mentor. Throughout my time at ASU, she has not only taught me essential skills in research, writing, presenting and dissemination but also helped me recognize my ability to make a meaningful difference, specifically in advancing the voices of a marginalized population that is often underrepresented in research. Peckham's mentorship has encouraged me to pursue work that is not always the easiest path, but is the most meaningful one.

During my PhD dissertation, there were moments when I chose a more complex or challenging direction because it aligned with my values and the population I am passionate about serving. Through her guidance, I learned to trust my instincts, believe in my capabilities, and approach research with intention, integrity, purpose and always remember my "why." Peckham is thoughtful, supportive and continually challenged me to push myself and grow in ways I did not think were possible. She represents the kind of mentor I hope to be for students and clinicians in the future.

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

**A:** After graduation, I plan to continue my work at Hospice of the Valley and at ASU, integrating clinical practice, research and education. Thanks to this dual degree, I will be able to work toward my goal of developing and leading dementia research and translational work to bridge the gap between research and clinical practice. I am very passionate about improving care for individuals living alone with dementia by advancing research, informing policy and programming, and developing dementia-specific education for frontline health care workers. I hope to contribute meaningful changes in how we support individuals living with dementia, ensuring that their voices are represented in dementia research, care delivery and health system design.

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## Main image



Sara Crance, who is earning a PhD in nursing and health care innovation and completing her dual DNP-PhD this May, is Edson College's Outstanding Graduate Student. Photo by Louis Tortora/ASU Health