

Hugh Downs School Dean's Medalist finds purpose through communication at ASU

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

For Samantha Emerson, majoring in communication was a natural choice. What she didn't realize was how quickly that decision would lead to experiences that would shape her academic and professional path.

"I originally chose communication because it felt like a major that could take me anywhere," she said. "But it ended up taking me somewhere I did not expect, into a genuine passion."

That sense of discovery ultimately led Emerson to be named the Dean's Medalist for the [Hugh Downs School of Human Communication](#), an honor that recognizes the school's top graduating student.

After exploring different academic paths, Emerson found her place at the Hugh Downs School, where she said everything began to click.

"With each class I took, communication became more than a major," she said. "It became how I make sense of people, ideas and the world around me."

Emerson's leadership and commitment were recognized through the College Leaders Certificate of Recognition, an honor awarded by The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She said the recognition reflects her dedication both inside and outside the classroom, as well as her willingness to take on additional responsibilities and go beyond expectations.

Her experience extended well beyond the classroom. During the [Hugh Downs School's study abroad](#) program in London, Dublin and Edinburgh, Emerson conducted hands-on research comparing communication styles across cultures. She interviewed people throughout London, going beyond project requirements by engaging additional participants and contributing further analysis to strengthen her team's work. These everyday interactions became meaningful data.

Emerson was drawn to research during her time at ASU, inspired by the experiences her professors introduced in the classroom. Across multiple classes, she explored topics ranging from online dating to cross-cultural communication, applying communication theory to real-world questions and developing strong analytical and critical thinking skills.

“I loved that I could take a simple observation and turn it into a full project that connected me with real people and real perspectives,” she said.

Through her coursework, Emerson developed a deeper understanding of how people communicate and why it matters, a perspective she said she will carry with her beyond ASU.

After graduation, Emerson plans to pursue opportunities where she can apply her skills in research or communication strategy while remaining open to new paths.

“ASU taught me that I do not have to have everything perfectly mapped out to move forward with confidence,” she said.

Looking back, Emerson encourages other students to take full advantage of opportunities that push them outside their comfort zones, including research and study abroad experiences.

“Say yes more than you say no, especially to things that feel a little intimidating at first,” she said.

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

Main image



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