

Sustainability and GIS student graduates with a passion for community service

Sophia Ruger combined her skills to support food banks, nonprofits and campus sustainability initiatives

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

For Arizona State University student Sophia Ruger, college was never just about earning a degree. It was about building community, saying yes to new opportunities and finding meaningful ways to leave a positive impact.

Originally planning to study sustainability and urban planning, Ruger discovered that geographic information science (GIS) offered the technical skills she wanted to apply to real-world environmental challenges. That pivot opened new doors, allowing her to combine her passion for sustainability with hands-on geospatial problem-solving across Arizona.

“As I began learning more about GIS, I also became extremely passionate about it,” Ruger said. “I think what sets me apart is that I can get passionate about almost anything, especially if I can use my technical skills to improve the lives of others.”

As a graduating [Barrett, The Honors College](#) student in both the [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning](#) and the [School of Sustainability](#), Ruger graduates this spring with bachelor's degrees in [sustainability](#) and [GIS](#) with a [minor in urban planning](#).

Along the way, she served as director of sustainability for [Undergraduate Student Government](#), worked with organizations including [Hope Women's Center](#), [St. Mary's Food Bank](#) and [Maricopa County Animal Care & Control](#), and helped lead sustainability events on campus.

We spoke with Ruger about her ASU experience, leadership roles and how studying GIS and sustainability helped shape her future.

Question: What was your “aha” moment when you realized you wanted to study sustainability?

Answer: I was in AP environmental science class, and we were studying how soil health affects an ecosystem's resilience amid record-breaking wildfires in my home state of Oregon. Then and there, I realized how much everything is connected and why sustainability is such an important field.

That moment helped me understand that environmental challenges are never isolated. They affect communities, ecosystems and people all at once, and I wanted to be part of finding solutions.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: Sunshine, a change of pace and scholarship opportunities.

I have received the [New American University's Provost Scholarship](#) and the [Undergraduate Student Government Leadership Scholarship](#). These scholarships have allowed me to pursue my education and take care of myself before anything else, which greatly contributed to my success. Good health is the first step in achieving great things.

Q: Were you involved in any clubs or extracurriculars at ASU?

A: I am the current director of sustainability for Undergraduate Student Government, where I recently organized and moderated the [2026 Sustainability Summit](#) with more than 60 attendees and nine speakers. It brought together students and professionals from different disciplines who all shared similar interests in environmental science and sustainable development.

Next, I will work with the events planning team at the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#) to help generate more student participation at events because they were impressed with how the summit turned out.

I also served as treasurer for the [ASU Wake Devils](#) team. I was an [Eco Representative](#) during my sophomore year and participated in the [Campus Student Sustainability Initiatives club](#) during my freshman and sophomore years.

Q: Can you elaborate on your internship and volunteer experiences and what you learned from those roles?

A: I gained so much self-confidence by applying the skills I learned in my courses to real-life projects. My work with [Hope Women's Center](#) in 2025 reassured me that I chose the right path and that my skills in GIS and science communication are truly valuable to others.

Through geospatial work in ArcGIS, I helped the nonprofit better understand service needs between their permanent and mobile center locations throughout the state. My work with [St. Mary's Food Bank](#) was equally rewarding because I got to help them use spatial tools to better understand their service area.

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

A: College's sole purpose is not to sit in a classroom and learn technical skills — it's really to connect with people. Always be nice, because you never know what opportunities may come from it.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning?

A: Professor [Kelli Larson](#) taught me to check my email frequently. It sounds silly and simple, I know, but I always hated checking my email.

Giving people a timely response communicates that you care what they have to say and that you are engaged in what you're doing. Even if you do not have a good answer for them yet, just replying with honesty makes a difference.

Q: What is the best piece of advice you would give to students still in school?

A: Say yes to as much as you can, with emphasis on *can*, because you also must save time for yourself. Mixing in a slow hobby with a busy schedule is super important for your body and attention span. Quality over quantity with everything you do.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends or just thinking about life?

A: The "light box," whose location will not be disclosed. But I will give you a hint: It is on the east side of the Tempe campus. I think you should have to work to find it so you appreciate it more.

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

Main image

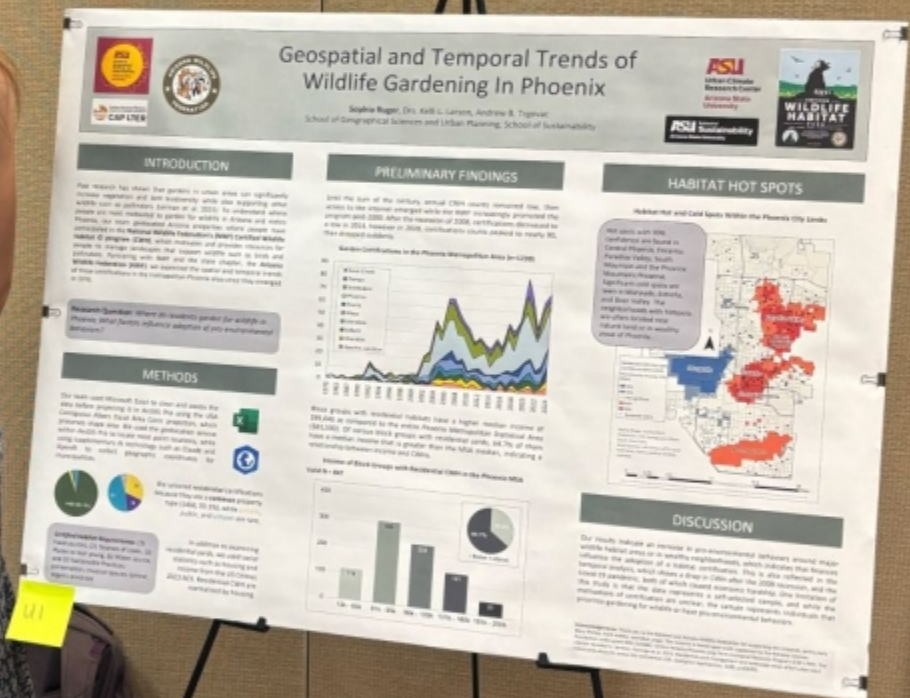


As a graduating Barrett honors student in both the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning and the School of Sustainability, Ruger graduates this spring with bachelor's degrees in sustainability and GIS with a minor in urban planning. Photo courtesy of Sophia Ruger

Gallery



ASU co-hosted a workshop at St. Mary's Food Bank with leaders of the state's largest food banks to learn how to use a data analytics tool to fight food insecurity in February. From left: Assistant Professor Aaron Flores (School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning), sustainability and GIS student Sophia Ruger, Associate Professor Connor Sheehan (School of Social and Family Dynamics), Executive Director of Social Embeddedness Christina Ngo, media arts and science student Sofia Ricci, and GIS graduate student Alexi Vogel.



Sophia Ruger presents her thesis project, "Spatial and Temporal Trends of Wildlife Gardening in Arizona," at ASU's annual Urban Climate Research Center poster event on March 26. Her research found that residential certified wildlife habitats are commonly located in higher-income areas, with hot spots in Paradise Valley, Encanto and central Phoenix.



Sophia Ruger paints at Papago Park on the edge of Phoenix and Tempe with new friends during freshman year.



Sophia Ruger boulders with friends at Pima Wash on South Mountain in Phoenix.



Sophia Ruger explores Zion National Park in Utah with her brother, Luke.