

ASU psychology graduate studies military mental health, earns Dean's Medalist honor

Barrett student Ava Santiago plans to pursue a PhD after researching trauma and resilience in military populations

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

When Ava Santiago started at Arizona State University, she didn't have a major in mind, just an interest in understanding people.

"I came in undecided as an exploratory social behavioral sciences major," said Santiago, who is from Silver Spring, Maryland. "I took classes in sociology, anthropology, economics and psychology, but I was most compelled by the questions asked in my psychology courses."

That curiosity led her to declare psychology by the end of her first year and begin exploring research opportunities.

As a sophomore, Santiago joined Associate Professor [Rebecca Blais'](#) [Military Social Science Laboratory \(MiSSiLe\)](#), where she studied outcomes associated with military-related traumas.

She presented research at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies and completed a [Barrett](#) honors thesis examining the relationship between institutional betrayal and alcohol consumption among survivors of military sexual trauma. She was also named a finalist for the Best Honors Thesis Award, received the Psychology Rising Scholar Award and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa.

This May, Santiago will graduate from [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) with a Bachelor of Science in psychology, a minor in business and recognition as the [Department of Psychology's](#) Dean's Medalist, the highest honor awarded to a graduating senior in the department. She will pursue a PhD in clinical psychology at the [Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences](#) after graduation.

Question: Why did you choose ASU?

Answer: The ability to engage with what I was learning outside the classroom was important to me. After touring ASU and Barrett, I was impressed with the infrastructure supporting students in finding community and developing skills beyond just getting a degree. At ASU, I've been able to conduct research, apply for scholarships, receive mentoring from experts and be a mentor myself.

Q: What drew you to the Military Social Science Laboratory?

A: My father served on active duty in the U.S. Navy for 22 years, so the military was an important part of my childhood. I felt supported by that community. All my doctors were in uniform, and I now use the GI Bill to fund my education.

That experience, combined with my interest in how cognition and behavior affect health outcomes, drew me to Dr. Blais' lab. I wanted to better understand the community I've been part of and how to improve health outcomes within it. Through my work, I've learned about the unique stressors, barriers and protective factors in military environments.

My ASU degree reflects more than just coursework. It represents the mentorship I've received, the research I've conducted, my involvement in the community and the skills I've developed.

Ava Santiago, '26 BS in psychology

Q: Can you share more about your honors thesis?

A: My thesis, completed through the [Psychology Honors Thesis Seminar Sequence](#), examined the relationship between institutional betrayal and alcohol consumption among military sexual trauma survivors. Serving on my thesis committee were Dr. Blais and Drs. [William Corbin](#) and [Deborah Wu](#).

Having a committee with such versatile expertise strengthened my thesis. I'm especially grateful for Dr. Blais' mentorship and the opportunity to work with a dataset she collected to study outcomes among survivors of military sexual trauma.

We found that higher levels of institutional betrayal were associated with higher alcohol consumption, suggesting that when addressing alcohol misuse, perceptions of how the military institution contributes to and responds to trauma should be considered.

Q: What internships or other experiences had the biggest impact on you?

A: I completed two funded summer internships at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences that focused on research in military medicine. My first summer was when I started viewing myself as a scientist.

I was exposed to interdisciplinary research, from chronobiology and sleep to epidemiology, which broadened my perspective and made me excited about the possibilities of science.

Leadership was another area of growth. As a Barrett mentor, I learned how curiosity and vulnerability are strengths, and I saw a big difference in how people engaged with me.

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

A: Read your email. I learned about many opportunities, including research, internships, scholarships and courses just by paying attention to what was being shared.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus?

A: The dance studio at Mill Avenue Student Housing. As part of [Devil DanceSport](#), it is a great space to practice, refine my technique and connect with other students. I have been dancing for over 13 years, and it's important to me to have an outlet for artistic expression.

Q: How has your ASU degree prepared you for what comes next?

A: My ASU degree reflects more than just coursework. It represents the mentorship I've received, the research I've conducted, my involvement in the community and the skills I've developed.

When interviewing with clinical psychology PhD programs, I talked about my honors thesis in a way that showed a hands-on, real-world understanding of research, which helped me stand out.

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

Main image



Ava Santiago has been named the Department of Psychology's spring 2026 Dean's Medalist for The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The honors student graduates this May with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in business. Photo by Laura Fields/ASU