

Thunderbird at ASU grad finds deep connections between education and heritage

Jess Oldham will graduate this spring with a Master of Global Management

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

Jess Oldham's roots are steadfast. Originally from the Navajo Nation and spending much of his upbringing in Wyoming, his life was shaped early on by his heritage and the unique rhythms of agriculture communities.

Both have taught him a great deal about what is at stake when opportunity does not arrive on its own.

When he learned about [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#) at Arizona State University, he also found the [SHARE Fellowship program](#) and received support through the Persons Scholarship — established by alumnus Thomas H. Persons to expand the program's support and ensure funding for Native American SHARE Fellows. There, he saw a special alignment between a school's values and his own.

"For my people, education is the great equalizer," Oldham said. "Despite my deep ties to home, I knew Thunderbird was the best step forward, not only to grow myself, but to help grow my community and create meaningful change."

At Thunderbird, he pursued a [Master of Global Management](#) with a concentration in global business. As a Navajo student, he also found that the T-bird identity carried a meaning most of his classmates could not have anticipated.

As he graduates this spring, Oldham leaves with a clear sense of what his education was for, and how his past and present can shape his future as a global leader.

“The Thunderbird emblem holds a cultural significance for me, one of strength and power. I love that I can embody that with purpose and authenticity, while connecting with people across the world and growing as a leader while staying rooted in my heritage,” he said.

Question: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

Answer: I would start by addressing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Children crisis across Indigenous communities. This is deeply personal and long overdue for real attention, accountability and resources. I would invest in community-based safety systems, data infrastructure and advocacy efforts led by Indigenous people, because too often communities like mine are expected to solve urgent problems without the support we need.

From there, I would focus on reducing food insecurity in underserved communities by strengthening local food systems and access. These are not just priorities tied to a hypothetical investment, they are issues I am committed to working on and hope to continue advancing throughout my career, with or without \$40 million.

Q: What advice would you give to a student just starting a program at Thunderbird?

A: Don't be afraid to say yes more than you say no. You came here for a reason, so act like it. Meet people on purpose. Learn names, ask questions and follow up. Your network is your real degree from Thunderbird. From day one, think about the story you're building and be open to exploring who you are. Some people just drift through grad school. Don't drift. Decide who you want to be when you leave Thunderbird, and start being that person now.

Q: For what do you feel most grateful?

A: I'm most grateful for my family, friends and community. I'm a living reflection of their hard work, sacrifice and belief in me. Everything I'm building stands on the foundation they gave me. I know I can never thank them enough, so I carry that gratitude as a responsibility and strive to make the most of my life and do the same for others.

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Main image



Jess Oldham. Photo courtesy of Thunderbird School of Global Management