

Department of Psychology graduate turns recovery into a path for helping others

Jenaro Hernandez will continue working with children in Phoenix while pursuing licensure

By Laura Fields, ASU News
May 7, 2026

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Jenaro Hernandez is graduating from Arizona State University with a master's degree in [applied behavior analysis](#), a field focused on understanding behavior and helping people build new skills.

A first-generation college student in the [Department of Psychology](#) within [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#), Hernandez entered the program in recovery from substance use, determined to build a career shaped by both clinical training and his own experience.

"I wanted to transform my own history into something useful, and my experience with addiction gives me a perspective that many clinicians do not have, one rooted in lived understanding," said Hernandez, who is a native of Phoenix.

Hernandez completed his practicum training at [Success on the Spectrum](#), where he progressed from behavior technician to registered behavior technician, trainer and student analyst intern.

The program's built-in practicum hours, strong faculty and emphasis on evidence-based practice drew him to ASU.

"The students and board certified behavior analysts coming out of this program seemed warm, thoughtful and genuinely committed to the people they served," he said.

We spoke with Hernandez about his ASU experience and what's next.

Question: How is your work making an impact in the community?

Answer: My work lives in small moments, helping children in underserved communities build communication, self-regulation and the social foundations they'll carry into school and beyond. I incorporate mindfulness-based strategies to help them bend, rather than break, when the world feels overwhelming. I'm helping children find their voice, both the one they use to speak and the one they're still learning to hear.

Q: Tell us about your culminating program experiences.

A: With Dr. [Lorraine Becerra](#), I developed a creative capstone project: an interactive workbook based on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for adolescents titled "Hey, You! Help Me!"

It introduces core processes through hands-on activities using a narrative where the book itself asks the reader for help as it tries to figure out what kind of book it is. Each activity produces a tangible result, with the goal of promoting psychological flexibility in a way that feels creative and accessible.

Q: What were your professors like?

A: My professors shaped my understanding of this field. Dr. Becerra helped me reflect on how my identity and lived experiences influence the questions I ask. Dr. [Donald Stenhoff](#) showed me that applied behavior analysis extends far beyond one population, and can be practiced almost as an art form.

Others strengthened my ethical framework, reshaped how I think about interventions and individual fit and deepened my interest in relational frame theory and ACT as practical tools.

Q: What's something you learned that changed your perspective?

A: I originally saw art and science as separate. Over time, that shifted. I now see this work as something that can be both precise and creative. My clinical approach is grounded in evidence-based practice, but I also think about how artistry shapes the way we connect through that science.

Q: How did you grow personally and professionally during the program?

A: I entered this program in early recovery, still learning how to regulate myself and leaning on mindfulness before I had language for it. When I encountered ACT, it didn't feel new. It felt familiar.

At the same time, I was navigating cravings while keeping up with deadlines, clinical hours and teamwork. There was a parallel process happening. I was building a clinical identity while still rebuilding myself.

What grounded me was the work. I could see my clients making progress and feel what it meant to be part of that. Over time, I stopped seeing my history as separate from the work. It became part of how I show up in it.

Q: What's on the horizon for you?

A: I plan to become a board certified behavior analyst, pursue licensure and continue toward a doctoral degree.

Long term, I want to bring addiction psychology into applied behavior analysis in a way that expands how we understand complex human behavior. I'm interested in approaches that are both evidence-based and creative.

I see myself as a clinical poet. The way a poet bends language to create meaning, I want to use my background to build interventions that don't sit in just one space. I see art, behavioral science and psychology as different instruments playing the same song.

Q: If given \$40 million to solve one global problem, what would you tackle and why?

A: I would invest in community-based spaces that bridge the gap between survival and substance use — spaces that offer not just clinical services, but meaningful human connection.

I imagine something that doesn't feel like a traditional clinic, but a place that invites people in and feels alive. I believe the opposite of addiction is connection. By building environments that feel human and accessible, we can support people in creating lives beyond survival.

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

Main image



Jenaro Hernandez built his ABA career from the ground up at Success on the Spectrum, advancing from behavior technician to trainer and student analyst intern, after connecting with his practicum site through a Department of Psychology meet-and-greet. Photo by Laura Fields/ASU

Text image(s)



Jenaro Hernandez, courtesy photo



For his capstone project, Hernandez created a workbook that introduces the six core ACT processes — acceptance, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, defusion, values and committed action — to adolescents. Photo by Lorraine Becerra/ASU