

A banner year for ASU's Russian program

Students outperformed NYU, Vanderbilt and West Point in national essay contest

By Thit Thit T Win, ASU News
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On a single class day, every student in Arizona State University's [Russian program](#) sat down and wrote an essay in Russian. Twenty-eight of them won national awards.

The students, from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences' [School of International Letters and Cultures](#), ranked seventh in the [American Council of Teachers of Russian](#) National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest — the largest competition of its kind — out of 49 institutions and 838 students, ahead of NYU, West Point, Vanderbilt and the Defense Language Institute.

It is the program's best year ever.

"Although ASU's Russian program is small, we are among the top 10 nationally for the number of majors," said [Hilde Hoogenboom](#), associate professor of Russian and head of the program.

The contest was just the beginning.

Three students also received [Boren Scholarships](#) from the U.S. Department of Defense, including one graduate now studying in Estonia.

Andrew Dumenigo, a 2023 graduate who minored in Russian, is in Uzbekistan on a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship.

Two undergraduates presented research at NYU's Jordan Center Research Symposium for the third consecutive year.

Since 2005, Russian students at ASU have earned 127 prestigious awards across federal agencies and international organizations.

A contest built on community

Each year, all Russian students write together during a single class session on a topic assigned by the American Council of Teachers of Russian. The essays are evaluated anonymously by judges assessing content, language and creativity.

"This builds community and gives all students a chance to shine nationally," Hoogenboom said.

That culture is deliberate. Faculty present scholarship and study abroad opportunities to every class each semester and invite award-winning alumni to speak to current students. They provide detailed feedback on applications, conduct mock interviews and guide students through reapplication, working closely with the [Lorraine W. Frank Office of National Scholarships Advisement](#).

2 Marines, 2 Borens

Two of this year's Boren recipients are former Marines.

Spencer Horne spent eight years in the U.S. Marine Corps before enrolling in the Russian program. He is heading to Riga, Latvia, to study at Liden and Denz Russian Language School.

"Receiving the Boren Award is an opportunity to take language study out of the classroom and place it in a real-world environment," Horne said. "This is an opportunity for me to not just learn at a desk but to be immersed in a language and culture."

Patrick Kenney started studying Russian online while serving as a Marine at a U.S. Embassy in Africa, then moved to Arizona to finish his degree. He is heading to Estonia.

Where they go next

The program's reach extends past graduation.

Collin Frank, a 2023 Pickering Fellow and Fulbright recipient, recently completed a master's degree in foreign service at Georgetown University. Jessica Sims, a 2023 Boren Fellow, served as resident director for the Critical Language Scholarship Program in Daugavpils, Latvia, last summer.

Drake Leary and Juliette Shumway-Yurova presented research on post-Soviet diaspora perspectives at NYU's Jordan Center and the AZ-AATSEEL Conference at ASU. It was the third consecutive year ASU students were selected for the NYU symposium.

More than an awards list

Eighteen students were inducted into the Dobro Slovo Slavic Honor Society this year. Four received [Melikian Center](#) Board Awards for summer study in Kyrgyzstan and Latvia.

Hoogenboom said what holds the program together goes beyond any list.

"Our students love the sense of community," she said. "They connect with students at all levels through the [Russian Conversation Club](#) and the [Central Asian Student Association](#). Our students have a small college experience with the resources of one of the largest research universities."

The program graduated four majors, two minors, one certificate student and one graduate student this May.

And next year, a new group of Russian students will sit down together on a single class day and write.

Russian student 2025–26 awards at a glance

American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest

Gold: Aliyev Fuad, Yaran Hojaberdiyev

Silver: William Hartt, Maria Humen, Yunis Osmanli

Bronze: Sean Deeny, Spencer Horne, Yagub Osmanli, Laney Rock, Pamela Shafir

Honorable mentions: Abdulaziz Alroomi, William Brodie, Hansel Ford, Joyce Gunaraj, David Hildebrand, Drake Leary, Marc Martinez, Hidefumi Matsuda, Michaela Moore, Nikita Petrov, Mira Preston, Daniel Printz, Rameen Rehman, Alex Scarpa, Spencer Stenholm, Anton Voronov, Starr Wilson, Ethan Wolford

ACTR Scholar Laureate Award: Drake Leary

ASU SILC Russian Program Awards: Nickolas Cook (Best Graduating Student) Rafael Fontanez (Best Continuing Student)

Boren Scholarships: Spencer Horne (Latvia), Patrick Kenney (Estonia), Spencer Johnson (Estonia)

Fulbright ETA: Andrew Dumenigo (Uzbekistan)

Jordan Center Research Symposium, NYU: Drake Leary, Juliette Shumway-Yurova

AZ-AATSEEL 2026 Conference: Drake Leary, Juliette Shumway-Yurova, Daniel Sominsky

Melikian Center Board Awards: Sean Deeny (Kyrgyzstan), Booker Proffitt (Kyrgyzstan), Maria Humen (Latvia), Alexander Scarpa (Latvia)

Dobro Slovo Slavic Honor Society: Alex Chekanov, Rafael Fontanez, Spencer Horne, Maria Humen, Patrick Kenney, Mira Preston, Daniel Printz, Booker Proffitt, Laney Rock, Spencer Stenholm, Rameen Rehman, Nikita Petrov, Joyce Gunaraj, Yaran Hojaberdiyev, Yunis Osmanli, Ilya Tate, Ben Moriarty, William Brodie

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

Main image



Professors Hedberg Olenina and Moldabekova Robb with the awardees of the National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest. Photo by the ASU Russian program

Text image(s)



Yaran Hojaberdiyev and Fuad Aliyev, gold medalists of the National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest. Photo by the ASU Russian program