

Built at Barrett

These alumni can trace their careers back to the people and experiences found in their honors education

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
August 17, 2026

Editor's note: This story was featured in the fall 2026 issue of [ASU Thrive](#).

Story by Makeda Easter

Even though it's been more than a decade, Alyssa Nazareno vividly remembers her college application strategy. Then a senior at Xavier College Preparatory, a private Catholic high school in Phoenix, she knew she wanted to be close to her family in Scottsdale and be surrounded by other academically driven students.

She chose [Barrett, The Honors College](#) at ASU for its rigorous curriculum and close-knit community. Nazareno's older sister was also a Barrett graduate, so she was familiar with the program's reputation and advantages.

5 reasons why Barrett, The Honors College excels

1. The gold standard. The New York Times' Frank Bruni recognized Barrett as the "gold standard" among honors colleges across the U.S.
2. Exceptional academics. Honors-only classes, internships, research opportunities and programs at a premier Research I university.
3. Sense of belonging. Barrett's two-year, live-in commitment boosts students' academic life and creates a special community where they feel seen and accepted.
4. Dedicated staff. More than 45 full-time professors and 70 full-time staff.

“It was also nice to know that I would be in a community where I would have peers nearby where we could help each other throughout school and extracurriculars,” she says.

5. Spaces for connection. Honors-only residence halls, learning spaces and dining halls.

Now, Nazareno is a senior quality engineer at Disneyland Resort, where she helps ensure the park’s attractions comply with California safety regulations by performing inspections, documenting ride characteristics and maintenance requirements, and developing compliance procedures.

Nazareno credits her career trajectory to her challenging, yet rewarding experience as a Barrett student.

For nearly 40 years, ASU’s honors college — named in 2001 after longtime supporters Craig and Barbara Barrett — has offered individualized support to academically accomplished students, preparing them to excel in their careers and life through honors-only courses, mentorship and tailored programming based on students’ goals and needs.

Community, courage, curiosity and connections are among Barrett’s foundational values, says Tara Williams, dean of the honors college and a professor in the English department.

“We nurture the connections that are formed in Barrett,” Williams says. “The academic preparation, the engagement opportunities, the professional development, all of that is really important. But it also means more to them because they’re able to do it together and learn from each other.”

From Barrett to Disney

Alyssa Nazareno, '18 BS in mechanical engineering

Nazareno immediately felt that deep sense of community during her first year. Living in Barrett housing and being around “similar-minded engineering majors so close by to lean on when I needed support was definitely helpful,” she recalls.

Overall, Barrett students “had that high-achieving type mindset. We were all striving for similar goals, and we all took our schooling very seriously.”

Nazareno leaned on her peers and professors at Barrett for encouragement.

“I had a lot of good mentors in Barrett,” she says.

It was also nice to know that I would be in a community where I would have peers nearby where we could help each other throughout school and extracurriculars.

Alyssa Nazareno

'18 BS in mechanical engineering

In 2018, a Barrett alum helped her land her first mechanical engineering internship at a consulting firm. Next, she participated in the Disney College Program to work in the parks and receive access to professional development courses and networking. This helped her land an internship working in Disney's architecture and facilities engineering department.

Nazareno returned to Disney in 2021, where she has been working for the past five years.

As a self-proclaimed "Disney nerd," her job working on the park's famed attractions is a dream come true.

"I think back to my 18-year-old self and I knew I wanted to be in engineering, but I had no idea what the application would be," she says. "Never in a million years did I think I would end up in the role that I'm in now."

From thesis to career

Ryan Cantrell, '22 BS in supply chain management

Ryan Cantrell transferred into Barrett during the second semester of his first year, after realizing ASU's supply chain management program would best prepare him for the career he wanted to pursue. He's grateful that Barrett staff helped him seamlessly integrate into the honors college community. Cantrell was also excited about unique opportunities for mentorship, smaller class sizes and professional development.

"A lot of support, especially at the beginning, was getting me used to the amount of resources Barrett had available," he says.

After his sophomore year, Cantrell interned at the American Logistics Aid Network, a nonprofit that coordinates disaster relief. During the internship, he and two other Barrett students identified areas where the organization could improve processes to more rapidly respond to disaster-related events.

It was a springboard to a thesis project that he worked on during his junior year. Completing a thesis is an important component of the Barrett experience in which honors students develop an original piece of work such as a scholarly, research-based written article, a creative project or a group project. It provides an opportunity to "see something from the very beginning of an idea all the way to the final product that they defend with a group of experts," says Williams.

Cantrell's thesis dove into how the students supported supply chain improvements at the nonprofit, and how their work could be applied to similar organizations. The Barrett capstone had a profound impact on Cantrell's career.

All those experiences prepared me immensely for the work I do today, being in such a relevant, but extremely challenging and dynamic field.

—

Ryan Cantrell

'22 BS in supply chain management

When he began applying to internships before his senior year, the thesis helped him land a position at Intel, where he works today as a supply chain technical analyst.

“I got a lot more offers than I was expecting,” he says. “Those hiring managers were telling me that a big thing that stood out to them was Barrett, but also the thesis work made them comfortable and confident knowing that I would be able to take on their extremely complex global supply chain, be able to understand it and effectively work in an environment that’s so fast-paced.”

Cantrell will return to ASU this fall to start an evening on-campus MBA program — sponsored by Intel — while he continues working for the company. He hopes to eventually step into a strategic leadership position and direct the next generation of analytic support at Intel.

An ongoing Barrett legacy

Scott Fitzgerald, '18 BS in business data analytics and BS in finance

“It was always going to be Barrett,” says Scott Fitzgerald, who graduated with dual degrees in finance and business data analytics.

Born and raised in the Valley, Fitzgerald attended Brophy College Preparatory. Similar to Nazareno, he was already familiar with the honors college through his two older brothers who were Barrett graduates. Fitzgerald was excited about the opportunity to be surrounded by other students who could motivate him, while also having access to the many resources of a large, public, Research I university.

He still has fond memories of one Barrett hallmark: The Human Event, a yearlong course for first-year honors students, focused on diverse perspectives across history. In the seminar, students read and discuss works from authors to hone their critical thinking, analysis and persuasive writing skills.

The course “continued that education I had, challenging yourself to think bigger, ask more complex questions, but at the same time, to listen and be receptive to other people’s point of view,” Fitzgerald says.

Being around peers who have similar drive to you and wanting to do more to challenge themselves, that was a big draw to Barrett.

Scott Fitzgerald

'18 BS in business data analytics and BS in finance

A throughline of service and community guided Fitzgerald's experience as a Barrett student.

During his junior year, he participated in the Pat Tillman Foundation Leadership Through Action, a yearlong program in the W. P. Carey School of Business that develops student leaders and supports them as they create community outreach projects. As a Tillman Scholar, Fitzgerald organized a scholarship fundraiser for his high school to support students with fewer financial resources.

After graduation, Fitzgerald began his career in consulting for the multinational accounting firm KPMG, earning a senior-level promotion after a few years. He credits Barrett for building the work ethic needed to manage a demanding workload.

Fitzgerald later worked as a senior financial analyst at Shamrock Foods Company. And at 28, he was promoted to branch finance manager for Arizona.

But even as he rose through the ranks of the corporate world, Fitzgerald still felt pulled toward helping others. Eventually, he created an endowment with his brothers, and his younger sister who also attended Barrett, to offer scholarships to honors students.

"It was really special that my siblings and I created something that gives back, and gives others an opportunity to experience (Barrett) which made such a profound impact on us," he says.

In 2025, he pivoted to the family business, Fitzgerald Wealth Management LLC, to lead and expand the firm as his dad retires.

"Not only do I get to work with my dad," he says. "I get to work with people and help people navigate the complexities of the financial world as they move throughout their life."

About the author

A journalist, Makeda Easter was previously a staff writer at the Los Angeles Times and a science writer for a supercomputing center at The University of Texas.

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

Main image



Alyssa Nazareno, a Barrett, The Honors College alumna, is now a senior quality engineer at Disneyland Resort. Photo by Sabira Madady

Text image(s)



No caption



No caption



No caption