

# Scholarship recognizes 'grit' of working students

**After helping pay for siblings' college costs, Blake Randall is pursuing biological sciences degree with help from the Gritty Scholarship**

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
September 22, 2026

## Story highlights

Student who works full time while pursuing a degree full time is winner of new Gritty Scholarship

Scholarship is for academically "average" students who must balance work and studies

---

Ever since high school, Blake Randall has worked full time to help his brother and sister pay for college and to support himself.

He worked at 7-Eleven for several years, then at a retirement community before enrolling at Mesa Community College and earning two associate degrees.

Now a full-time student at Arizona State University, Randall is still working full time. His persistence and resilience in pursuing his goals led to him winning the new Gritty Scholarship.

"I've never not had to work," Randall said.

"I've always had to pay for my own roof over my head, food, textbooks. So there was never a point where I didn't work for what I wanted to succeed in."

The Gritty Scholarship was founded by [two ASU alums](#) who wanted to help average students who are working their way through college. Grace and Ryan O’Sullivan, who both earned undergraduate and master’s degrees at ASU, raised money for the Gritty Scholarship because they were in the same boat during their time at ASU — having to manage work and full-time classes.

On the scholarship website, they described how they were ["average" students](#) because they had to work, so the Gritty Scholarship is for applicants who have a grade point average of 3.5 or lower.

Grace O’Sullivan, vice president for TSMC partnership initiatives at ASU, earned a bachelor’s degree in justice studies, and her husband, Ryan O’Sullivan, senior vice president of real estate at PetSmart, earned a bachelor’s degree in political science. They both earned master’s degrees in business administration.

The O’Sullivans were able to review applications for the scholarship as part of a larger selection committee.

“The ones that stuck out to us really showed that they were super resilient and had to overcome lots of adversity,” Grace O’Sullivan said.

Randall, 31, was one of two students who received the Gritty Scholarship. Because it’s a new scholarship, the endowment at this point is enough to fund one award.

“But they were both such compelling stories that we decided to just out-of-pocket fund the second,” O’Sullivan said.

“The two recipients really stood out as fitting what we are trying to accomplish.”

The O’Sullivans raised the endowment funding over the past two years.

“In lieu of birthday gifts or Christmas gifts, we asked people to donate to the scholarship fund,” said Grace, who also held a solo exhibition of her artworks at the MIX Center last fall to raise money.

She and her husband are still raising money to increase the endowment enough to fund as many students as possible.

Randall now works full time as a concierge at Mirabella at ASU while majoring in biological sciences. He heard about the Gritty Scholarship from his financial aid advisor at ASU.

“I didn’t apply for college until I was 24. I helped my brother and sister finance their college as much as I could because our family had a single parent,” he said.

“So while I was working, I would help them with textbooks or food or whatever they needed for their studies, like a lab coat.”

Randall worked at 7-Eleven for four years and then at a retirement community during the pandemic, where he tested the residents for COVID — an experience that piqued his interest in the health field.

---

## More information

[Learn more](#) about the Gritty Scholarship or [donate](#) to the endowment.

---

“The ability to apply science has always been the point that interests me,” he said.

Randall is proud that he was able to help his siblings. His brother is now a professional musician, and his sister is an aerospace engineer.

“After working for 7-Eleven for so many years, you start questioning, ‘Is this all you can do?’ And being able to see that I had a passion, a question, led me to pursue my college degree,” he said.

He has learned a lot about himself during his journey.

“It’s important to remember to take time for yourself. Working toward the end goal without taking the necessary recognition of the small steps that lead to success will undermine you greater than any adversity,” he said.

“It’s often when I look back on the challenges of my life that I can remember the moments when I allowed myself to be so absorbed in the result that I didn’t notice the method that led to the solution.”

Randall wants to become a perfusionist — a specialist who operates a heart-lung machine used on patients during open-heart surgery — so he’ll need additional training after earning his bachelor’s degree. He’s grateful for the Gritty Scholarship award.

“There aren’t many scholarship opportunities for those that don’t have the time to excel academically or who don’t come from a sports background,” he said.

“Working full time makes it very difficult to find the time to gain these opportunities, and the Gritty Scholarship recognizes these challenges.”

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

**Main image**

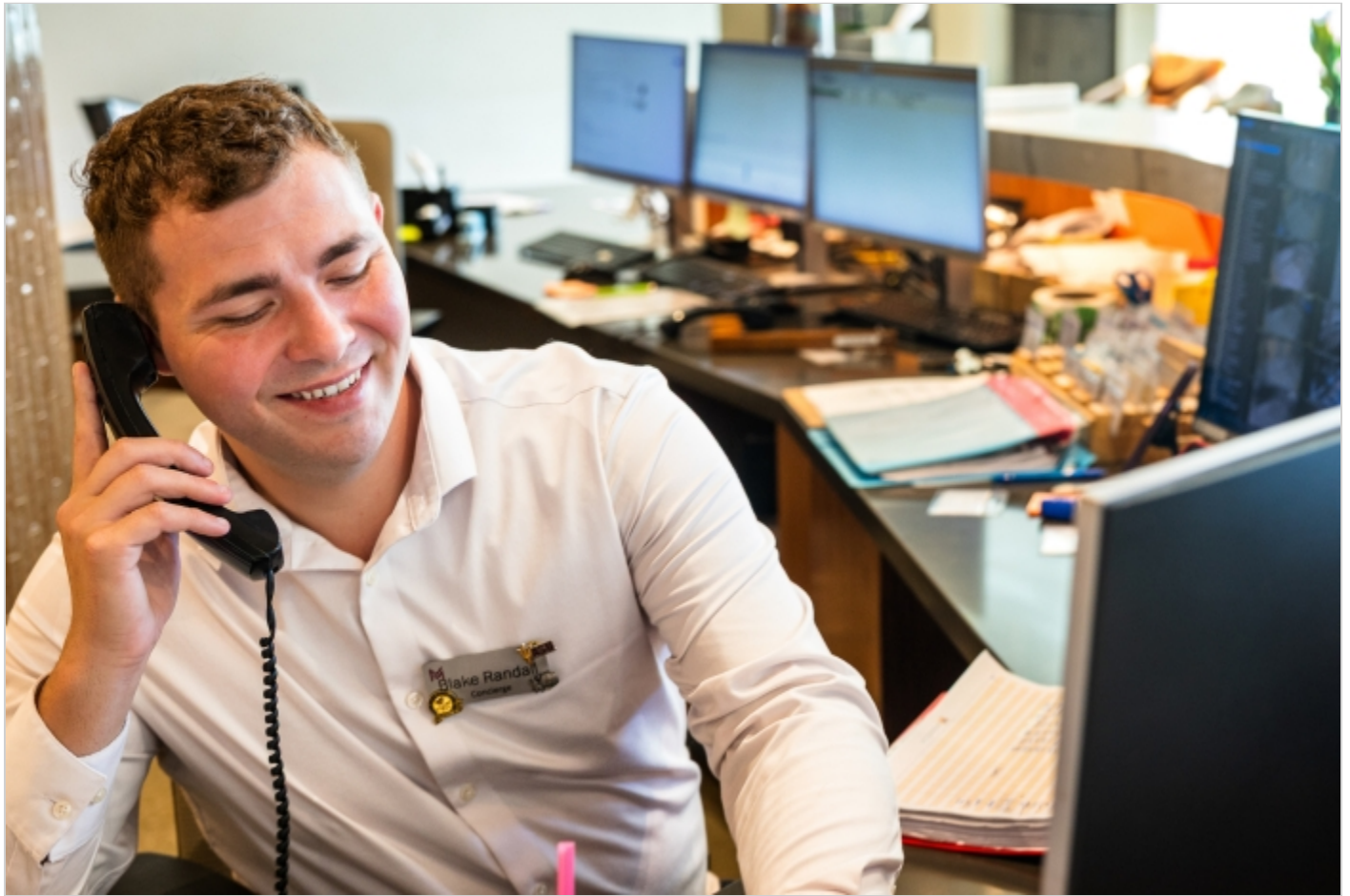


Full-time third-year biological sciences major Blake Randall works as the concierge at the front desk of Mirabella at ASU. He is in the first cohort of winners of the Gritty Scholarship, founded by ASU alumni who weren't defined by academic accolades but by their hard work through undergraduate and graduate studies. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

**Text image(s)**



Gritty Scholarship founders Ryan and Grace O'Sullivan. Courtesy photo



Before working as the concierge at the front desk of Mirabella at ASU, Blake Randall worked at 7-Eleven for several years, helping his brother and sister pay for college. Now he is a full-time third-year biological sciences major at ASU and a winner of the Gritty Scholarship, meant for academically "average" students who must balance work and studies. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News