

Record Number of CEHS Students Graduate from University Honors Program

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Honors students Luke Waddoups, Avalee Dunkley, Mariah Morris, Jenni Funk, Brooke Stanton, Teegan Martinez, and Harley Thomas.

The University Honors Program has announced the largest number of University Honors Program graduates ever from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) for the 2025-26 academic year. A total of eleven CEHS students will graduate with honors. The University Honors Program cultivates a strong sense of connection and purpose for students while supporting them as they develop into thoughtful, engaged leaders. It emphasizes hands-on learning by connecting students with faculty, professionals, and community mentors through research, creative, and service-focused projects. "Each one of these graduates has embraced our program's motto from the poet Horace: *Sapere aude* or Dare to Know," said Kristine Miller, executive director of the University Honors Program. "They have demonstrated the curiosity to ask questions, the courage to solve problems as they seek answers, and the ability to share what they have learned with others. We are delighted by the number of graduates from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services and proud of the entire cohort of students graduating with University Honors this year."



Jasmine Banman

Jasmine Banman is graduating with honors in human experience design and interaction from the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences.

Banman shared that the University Honors Program provided her with the support and flexibility to pursue her academic interests beyond the traditional classroom. Through reflective learning and personalized opportunities, the program helped her make the most of her academics and explore her passions.

"Honors allowed me to work on something meaningful, get connected, and start projects that actually make a difference," she said. "The Honors Program isn't about doing more—it's about getting the support you need to reflect, grow, and be recognized for the work you care about."

A defining part of her experience in the Honors Program was the chance to work on high-impact, real-world projects. As an online student studying in Belize, she participated in a virtual lab designing practical virtual reality applications and completed an Honors Capstone Project on teaching analytical thinking.

Following graduation, Banman will complete the Full-Time Training in Anaheim (FTTA), a two-year, post-graduate Christian program focused on service and spiritual growth.

**Avalee Dunkley**

Avalee Dunkley is graduating with honors in communicative disorders from the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences.

Dunkley said the University Honors Program allowed her to grow academically and personally. With support from the Honors staff, she was able to tailor the program to her interests while receiving guidance and encouragement throughout her undergraduate experience.

One of the most meaningful moments of her time at USU was building strong relationships with classmates and faculty who were invested in her success. Dunkley credits her Honors Capstone Project mentor, Sonia Manuel#Dupont, Ph.D., associate professor of speech-language pathology in the Department of Speech and Hearing Services, for having a particularly lasting impact.

"Sonia's kindness and dedication as an instructor have made all the difference for me," she shared. "Because of her support and mentorship, I feel much more prepared and excited to take the next steps toward my career."

After graduation, Dunkley will attend USU's speech#language pathology master's program.

**Jenni Funk**

Jenni Funk is graduating with honors in communicative disorders through the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences.

Funk said the University Honors Program opened the door to meaningful connections and opportunities that shaped her undergraduate experience. Through the program, she built relationships with students from different majors and accessed resources that supported her learning.

One aspect she enjoyed most was engaging in undergraduate research. With support from the Honors Program, Funk received an Undergraduate Research and Creative Opportunities Grant, which allowed her to design and carry out a pilot study with Sound Beginnings, a program in CEHS that serves young children who are deaf or hard of hearing and whose families want their children to learn to listen and talk.

"Without the Honors Program, I wouldn't have been able to conduct research or receive the funding to present my work with Sound Beginnings," Funk shared. "The program has opened doors of opportunities that have helped me build my skills and grow more confident as a researcher."

Funk is also grateful for her mentors who played a central role in her education, with a special thanks to Brittan Barker, Ph.D., associate professor of speech-language pathology in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences. Funk shared that Barker's guidance helped her think more critically, broaden her perspective, and engage with the local community.

Following graduation, Funk plans to attend graduate school at the University of Maine and pursue a career as a speech/language pathologist.



Jacey Hopkin

Jacey Hopkin is graduating with honors in psychology and biology and is also the college valedictorian. She said the University Honors Program challenged her to fully engage in her majors and make the most of her time at USU.

The program encouraged her curiosity, helping her grow through hands-on research opportunities. Through the University Honors Program, Hopkin gained experience working in multiple research labs and said her faculty mentor, Kerry Jordan, Ph.D., professor of psychology, has helped shape her into the researcher she is today.

"I've loved the research opportunities and the chance to apply what I learn in class to a real-world setting," Hopkin explained. "Being able to connect theory to hands-on experience has made my education much more meaningful."

Hopkin said she is most proud of her Honors Capstone Project, which explored how people's emotional connections with animals shape their conservation choices. She presented this research at Research on Capitol Hill in February and hopes to publish it in academic journal.

Hopkin plans to pursue a doctoral degree in environmental psychology.



Teegan Martinez

Teegan Martinez is graduating with honors from the Department of Nursing. Martinez shared his appreciation for the strong sense of community he found through the University Honors Program.

The program gave him opportunities to push himself academically while connecting with students and faculty who shared his motivation to learn and grow. A highlight of his time at USU was being named valedictorian for his class, along with his nursing cohort that helped shape his undergraduate journey.

"My nursing cohort, which I've been part of for the last two years, has had the greatest impact on me," he shared. "My professors and peers played a huge role in preparing me for a future career in healthcare."

Following graduation, Martinez plans to gain experience working in a medical-surgical unit before pursuing graduate school to become a certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA).

**Mariah Morris**

Mariah Morris is graduating with honors in communicative disorders through the Speech and Hearing Sciences Department. Throughout her undergraduate studies, Morris developed a strong interest in research and how that informs clinical decision-making.

For her Honors Capstone Project, Morris focused on common misconceptions in speech-language pathology. She reviewed research on late talking, bilingualism, and the use of augmentative and alternative communication, showing how misconceptions in these areas can lead to delayed support or misdiagnosis. The project reflects her commitment to improving outcomes for individuals with communication disorders as she prepares to begin her career.

**MaKayla Norton**

MaKayla Norton is graduating with University Honors from the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (SPERC).

Norton said her experience in the University Honors program reinforced her love for learning and her commitment to become the best version of herself. She is especially proud of her student teaching experience, which played a key role in refining her skills.

"My student teaching experience was difficult, but it challenged me in many ways. It made me refine my knowledge, my teaching abilities, and most importantly my character," Norton said.

Norton also valued the opportunity to collaborate with faculty and build impactful relationships with her mentors, Stephen Kwiatak and Willa van Dijk, both assistant professors in SPERC.

"Stephen has taught me the importance of remembering why I started in the first place and helping students and their families find the most success," Norton shared. "Willa has pushed me to be a better student. She encouraged me to grow, and I couldn't be more thankful."

Following graduation, Norton plans to work at Ridgeline High School in Cache Valley as an essential elements teacher. She also intends to return to USU to pursue a master's degree in special education.

**Tess Ramussen**

Tess Rasmussen is graduating with honors from the Department of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL). She said the University Honors Program encouraged deeper engagement in her coursework and added purpose to her learning.

As an elementary education major, she especially valued the hands-on experiences, like working in a lab school

and literacy clinic, which helped her prepare for student teaching.

Mentorship also played an essential role in her education, particularly through her Behavior Management course taught by Laura Harvey, lecturer for TEAL.

"It's my job to be an advocate for my students, and Laura taught me how to be the best advocate I can be," she shared. "I've learned how to develop my teacher voice and create safe, supportive environments for students."

Rasmussen plans to start teaching elementary school in the fall.



Brooke Stanton

Brooke Stanton is graduating with honors from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

Stanton shared that the University Honors Program is a community grounded in curiosity, critical thinking, and active engagement. Through Honors, she found chances to challenge herself academically while contributing to a culture that values personal growth and academic success.

A defining achievement of her Honors experience was completing a research-driven capstone project, which allowed Stanton to develop an idea from concept to completion. "The research process has pushed me to think more independently, ask harder questions, and trust my own voice in a way I haven't before."

Stanton also valued the strong sense of purpose and collaboration in her classes. She said the course that had

the biggest impact on her was Addiction and the Family, which helped her understand the complex ways addiction shapes relationships in the home.

Looking ahead, Stanton plans to pursue a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) with a focus on women's health and nurse-midwifery.



Harley Thomas

Harley Thomas is graduating with honors from the Department of Psychology. Thomas said the University Honors Program pushed her to step outside of her comfort zone and invest more intentionally in her own growth.

Thomas shared one of the most meaningful aspects of her Honors experiences was the community of students she connected with along the way. She valued working alongside students in psychology and across CEHS who brought diverse perspectives.

"It's been great meeting such a variety of people who are all so incredibly passionate about a wide range of things," she said. "Those conversations broadened my own perspective and sparked new research ideas."

Thomas said her work as a mental health coach and her Honors Capstone Project were among the most meaningful parts of her undergraduate career. As a mental health coach through USU's Counseling and Prevention Services (CAPS), she supported students and community members, while her capstone research on online content and mental health will be published with her as the primary author.

Thomas is preparing to apply to graduate school for clinical or counseling psychology.



Luke Waddoups

Luke Waddoups is graduating with honors from the Department of Psychology. He said he values the University Honors Program for the faculty's commitment to student success and the opportunities it provided for personal and professional growth.

"The Honors Program pushed me to think more critically and take ownership of my work," Waddoups said. "Those experiences helped shape my approach to problems and prepared for the kind of work I hope do in graduate school and in my career."

Reflecting on his undergraduate experience, Waddoups said he is most proud of earning second place at the Huntsman Student Research Symposium. He credits the mentorship and encouragement he received as key factors in reaching this milestone.

After graduation, Waddoups plans to attend graduate school for organizational behavior.