

CEHS Celebrates Department Valedictorians for 2025-26 Academic Year

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Jacey Hopkin, valedictorian for the Department of Psychology and for the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services

Valedictorians across USU are being recognized this month for the 2025-26 commencement and convocation ceremonies. These individuals are selected for their overall academic excellence for the duration of their undergraduate studies. Within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, eight valedictorians—one to represent each department in the college—have received the distinguished recognition.

Jacey Hopkin, CEHS Valedictorian and Psychology Department Valedictorian

When Jacey Hopkin came to USU as a freshman, she wasn't content with a one-size-fits-all education, so over the next semesters she went to work building her own path. Four years later and as valedictorian of the graduating class of 2026 in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, Hopkin has earned a 4.0 GPA and degrees in psychology and biology along with a minor in environmental and natural resource economics.

"Jacey represents the very best of what a university education can be: intellectually ambitious, deeply curious, and willing to build connections across disciplines in service of a meaningful goal," said Scott Bates, head of the Psychology Department. "I had the pleasure of working with her through the Honors Student Advisory Board and

attending her outstanding capstone presentation, where the same qualities were unmistakable. She brings together academic excellence, creativity, and purpose in a way that makes a lasting impression, and we are proud to celebrate her as our valedictorian."

As a first-year student at USU, Hopkin explored the majors she was most interested in but found there wasn't a major that perfectly encapsulated the coursework that would prepare her for the career she envisioned for herself: improving animal conservation by engaging communities in environmental outreach.

"My courses were initially built entirely around psychology," she explained, "but the more I studied, the more I fell in love with neuroscience. Since USU has only one undergraduate neuroscience class and a few graduate-level courses, I chose to take on a biology minor to unofficially broaden my study. From there, I became fascinated with ecology and conservation, so I bumped up my biology minor to a double major."

Her interdisciplinary approach didn't stop there. Recognizing that environmental issues are often shaped by economic factors, Hopkin added a minor in environmental and natural resource economics. Hopkin's coursework ultimately included classes such as mechanisms of neuropsychiatric disease, cognitive neuroscience, ecology, and natural resource economics.

Hopkin's willingness to adapt her academic path reflects her belief that education should be flexible and driven by curiosity. Looking back, she says psychology provided the perfect foundation for that exploration. "Psychology was the best choice I could have made for a foundational major," she said. "I consider myself a psychologist by training."

Undergraduate research opportunities also played a key role in shaping Hopkin's education at USU. "I loved the research," she said. "I've learned so much about my field through hands-on application in labs. It's so great to experience the cutting edge of what we know."

In early 2026, Hopkin was honored to represent the college as one of 20 USU undergraduates who met with legislators at the annual Research on Capitol Hill event at the Utah State Capitol. The research she presented explores how people's perceptions influence wildlife conservation. She learned that traits like perceived friendliness and intelligence can significantly affect how much support different animal species receive—insights she believes could impact animal conservation messaging.

Jacey's faculty mentor, Kerry Jordan, Ph.D., professor of psychology, said that Jacey's creative, interdisciplinary thinking helped to fuel the project. "Jacey has made connections between the fields of cognitive psychology, conservation, ecology, and social psychology I never otherwise would have thought to investigate," said Jordan. "She is equally interested in and dedicated to discovering how research can impact policy."

Following graduation, Hopkin plans to take a few years off before beginning a doctoral program focused on social or environmental psychology. Ultimately, she hopes to work alongside policymakers, using research to strengthen conservation programs and influence environmental legislation.

As she prepares to leave USU, Hopkin says it is the people and experiences at USU that she will miss the most. "I'm going to miss this environment. There are so many good people at USU and they've shaped me into the person I am today. I couldn't have done it without them."

opportunities to help those I care about—and I hope to be at lots of football games!"



Magei Farley,

Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling

Magei Farley majored in special education with a concentration in mild/moderate disabilities. She also earned minors in psychology and disability studies. Farley hopes to teach in an elementary resource classroom and is aiming for a master's degree in the future. Her experiences in the education program at USU were life changing. "We have the best professors in the special education and elementary education departments," she said. "They care so much about the students and really want us to become the best teachers we can be. I'm really going to miss the amazing community I found here."



Noelle

Ashcraft, School of Teacher Education and Leadership

Noelle majored in elementary education and appreciated the hands-on approach she found, particularly in her practicum experiences. "I believe the experiences during my practicum and student teaching have been the best preparation I could have for my career," she said. "There's also something really special about being surrounded by people who want to see you succeed—whether that's professors who take the time to check in or classmates who turn into close friends." Following graduation, she plans to return to her hometown of Salt Lake City to seek employment as a teacher. "I hope to become well established in my community and have lots of

**Emma Griffin,****Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences (ITLS)**

Emma Griffin majored in human experience design and interaction (HEDI) and minored in psychology. “The best part of a niche major like HEDI has been the close relationships I’ve built with my professors, which led to research and conference opportunities,” she said. “Those experiences, along with mentors like Dr. Kristin Searle (ITLS) and Dr. Sofía Monzón Rodríguez (in the Department of World Language and Cultures), made my education much more personal and meaningful.” After graduation Griffin will work in an estate planning law firm in Logan and will travel to Madrid to teach English in the fall. She hopes to begin law school next year and become an immigration lawyer, using her Spanish skills and passion for helping others to make a meaningful impact.

**Teegan Martinez,****Nursing Department**

Teegan Martinez earned his bachelor’s degree in nursing (BSN) and minored in healthcare management. He will work in a medical-surgical unit following graduation and will go on to graduate school to become a certified registered nurse anesthetist. Martinez says his experiences at USU positively impacted his life by providing him with a lifelong community. “The best part of my major was my nursing cohort,” he said. “Being with the same group of people for each course over the last two years has been so rewarding. Through USU, I have been able to discover so many things about myself and the world that will serve me well throughout my life.”

**Jared Olson,****Human Development and Family Studies**

Jared Olson majored in human development and family studies with emphases in family and community services as well as human development. He also completed minors in mental health advocacy and awareness, psychology, and Spanish. Following graduation, Olson will begin the marriage and family therapy master's program at USU and hopes to one day earn a Ph.D. and work as a faculty member in an MFT master's program. He also wants to own a private practice as a marriage and family therapist. Olson says the best part of his education was applying the principles he learned to his own life. "I love the person that I have become. I also have more loving relationships with each member of my family and my friends."

**Alison Richter,****Kinesiology and Health Science**

Alison Richter is graduating with a degree in kinesiology with a emphasis in exercise science and minors in yoga studies, physical education/coaching, and psychology. She also competed on the track and field team, setting a Utah State record in the 4x400-meter relay in 2025. Richter looks forward to enrolling in a graduate program and one day working as a sports psychologist or coach. She recognizes the many benefits her education at USU has given her. "I loved learning about the anatomy and physiology of the human body from a health and fitness perspective," said Richter. "This knowledge has allowed me to improve the health and fitness habits of others as well as myself. USU has also positively impacted my life by allowing me to pursue an educational path I'm passionate about, compete in athletics at the college level, and meet many amazing people, including my husband."



Adalie Smith,

Speech and Hearing Sciences

Adalie Smith majored in communicative disorders and earned a minor in American sign language (ASL). She says attending USU opened her eyes to the Deaf culture and the world of audiology, a program she knew nothing about before she began her coursework. "My major introduced me to the field of audiology. Prior to taking the Basic Audiology class, I knew nothing about the career. And through my minor in ASL, I gained an immense amount of knowledge regarding Deafculture. Thanks to USU and Professor Brian Burns, I now have a new and more personal perspective of my future career." Smith has been accepted into the Doctorate of Audiology program at the University of Texas at Dallas and will begin in the fall. She hopes to one day work as a clinical audiologist, assessing, diagnosing, and treating hearing and balance disorders in adults.