

**FIU** | University  
Graduate School

# 2025 UGS EXCELLENCE AWARDS CEREMONY

Celebrating outstanding graduate  
students & faculty

**April 15, 2025**



**FIU**

University  
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# PRESENTATION OF 2025 UGS EXCELLENCE AWARDS

STUDENT AWARDS

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Teaching Assistant

**S M Sajjad Hossain Rafin**  
**Electrical & Computer Engineering**



“S M Sajjad Hossain Rafin is an exemplary graduate teaching assistant who excels in teaching, research, and academic leadership. His passion for education, innovative teaching methods, and contributions to student success make him highly deserving of the UGS Excellence Award for Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Creative Project

**Melany Gutierrez-Hernandez**  
**Electrical & Computer Engineering**



“Her technical expertise, research contributions, leadership skills, and academic achievements exemplify the highest standards of excellence in the field. She is not only a brilliant engineer but also a dedicated researcher who is poised to make significant contributions to the scientific and engineering communities.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Paper or Manuscript | Non-STEM

Da Yeon Her

Global Leadership and Management



“Da Yeon has been an invaluable member of the FIU community and is expected to continue making a meaningful impact in academia through her research. Her dedication to research, commitment to academic excellence, and active engagement in the department have been consistent with and further enriched FIU’s reputation as a leading research institution.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

**Outstanding Paper or Manuscript  
| STEM**

**Badhan Chandra Das  
Computer Science**



“Through this research, Badhan has contributed to Florida International University's reputation as a center for AI-security research. The work has both national and international relevance, particularly in enhancing LLM safety across critical sectors such as transportation, science, healthcare, and education.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Graduate Student Engagement

**LuLu Victoria-Lacy**  
**Earth & Environment**



“LuLu has been one of the most ambitious, creative, and professionally mature graduate students with whom I’ve ever worked...Lulu’s innate adaptability, curiosity, hard-work ethic, and empathy make them very well suited to international collaborations and community engagement and have elevated the participation of so many people in scientific research”

# PRESENTATION OF 2025 SCHOLARLY FORUM AWARDS





# 2025 Scholarly Forum Awardees

## Arts & Humanities



**First Place**

**Tatiana Nunez & June Bravo**

English - MA



**Second Place**

**Maria Ruiz**

English - MA



**Third Place**

**Lydia K. Mallah**

Teaching & Learning - PhD

# 2025 Scholarly Forum Awardees

## Health & Life Sciences



**First Place**

**Niloufar Khakpour**

Biomedical Engineering - PhD



**Second Place**

**Stephanie L. Scott**

Social Welfare - PhD



**Third Place**

**Inge Claassen**

Biomedical Sciences - PhD

# 2025 Scholarly Forum Awardees

## Physical Sciences & Engineering



**First Place**

**Varad Agarwal**

Materials Science & Engineering - MS



**Second Place**

**Md Akib Zabed Khan**

Computer Science - PhD



**Third Place**

**Badhan Chandra Das**

Computer Science -PhD

# 2025 Scholarly Forum Awardees

## Social & Behavioral Sciences



**First Place**

**Eduardo Mendoza Montoya**  
International Crime & Justice -  
PhD



**Second Place**

**Ana Paula Fabian Freire**  
Teaching & Learning - PhD



**Third Place**

**Troy Teresak**  
International Crime & Justice -  
PhD

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# PRESENTATION OF 2025 UGS EXCELLENCE AWARDS

FACULTY AWARDS

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Mentorship of Graduate Students Dr. Matthew DeGennaro Department of Biological Sciences



“In our lab, Dr. DeGennaro encourages a culture of collaboration and intellectual curiosity. He pushes us to engage with the broader research community and actively supports our participation in conferences, workshops, and collaborative research projects. These experiences have been invaluable, enabling us to cultivate a broader perspective and a robust professional network. Dr. DeGennaro’s impact on my journey as a PhD student has been profound. His belief in my abilities and his unwavering support have opened doors I never imagined could be possibilities for me.”

“As my advisor, I am proud that his story and my story intersect. I am confident that he will remain a lodestar of sound guidance throughout my career, and his devotion, character, and excellence make him a worthy nominee for an award for excellence in mentorship.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Mentorship of Graduate Students

**Dr. Ryan Pontier**

**Department of Teaching & Learning**



“Yo pienso/believe and know that mentorship—true mentorship—is defined as the response-ability y capacidad that an individual can and does comprometerse towards another’s success—éxitos no matter la circunstancias or language... ese individual does not identify/label themselves as “mentor” this title—response-abilidad is entrusted [never conferred] to them by their mentees, aprendices, and pupils—estudiantes. Y without a doubt o vacilación te puedo decir que, Profe Pontier is my guía—guide y mi Mentor.”

“Dr. Pontier shows a passion for providing support to all his students through opportunities for collaboration. On multiple occasions, he has invited us and our families to his home for dinner, where we spent hours discussing each other’s research (and our lives in general) over a shared meal and fellowship.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Graduate Program Director

**Dr. Christopher Dares**  
Chemistry - MS and PhD



“One of the most striking aspects of Chris’s role as GPD has been his empathy for the students. He knows each of the students personally, which is no small feat given the size of the program (100+)...To top it all off, Chris has managed the role of GPD expertly while also continuing to be a successful researcher and mentor. He is the PI or co-PI on several nuclear chemistry grants that support his research and provide research assistantships and fellowships for doctoral students. He consistently publishes with an h-index of 22 since 2020 and has a recent US patent.”



# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## Outstanding Graduate Program Director

**Dr. Susannah Ali**

**Public Administration - MPA**



“Through strategic innovation, unwavering commitment to student success, and proactive engagement at both institutional and national levels, Dr. Ali has made a lasting impact on the program, faculty, and students. Under Dr. Ali’s leadership, the MPA program has seen remarkable progress, including a 12-spot climb in the Best Public Affairs Graduate Program ranking of the U.S. News & World Report, a testament to the MPA program’s rising reputation and academic excellence.”

# 2025 UGS Excellence Award Recipients

## UGS Lifetime Achievement Award

**Dr. Florentin Maurrasse**

**Professor**

**Department of Earth & Environment**

Over 50 years of service at FIU  
Recipient of FIU's first NSF grant  
Presidential Award for Excellence Recipient – 1992  
Honors College Excellence Award – 2004  
First Excellence in Graduate Mentorship Award – 2007  
Fellow of the Geological Society of America - 2024



# Special Thank You

A special thank you to Sigma  
Chi, SGA and the following  
Graduate & Professional  
Student Committee (GPSC) and  
GAB members!



## GPSC Members

Larissa James  
*Assistant Director, SGA*

Anurag Sharma  
*Chair, UGS Liaison*

Angel Herrera  
*Medical Senator, Vice Chair*

Oliver Bernal  
*Law Senator, GSAW Coordinator*

Hossam Hussein  
*Events Coordinator*

Mahmoud Abdelrahman  
Patraillia Davis Bryant  
S M Sajjad Hossain Rafin  
*Graduate Senators*

## GAB Members

David Olusanjo

Derrick Boakye Boadu

Jamie Haynes

Lousindy Mitton

Melissa De Jesus

Michelle Penalver

Oluwatosin Orimolade

Rafael Camilo Gutierrez Melgarejo

Ruthny Charles

Vaishnavi Sundar