2026 Rising Star Alum Honoree
Aaliyah Thompson-Mazzeo

Class of 2021



Aaliyah Thompson-Mazzeo is that rare combination of intelligence, talent, determination and grace that makes people stop and take notice. When she graduated from ASA, Aaliya was Co-Salutatorian, a Schay Award recipient, a National Foreign Language Honor Society awardee, the winner of the National Dance Education Organization Award, and an Arizona Arts Seal recipient.

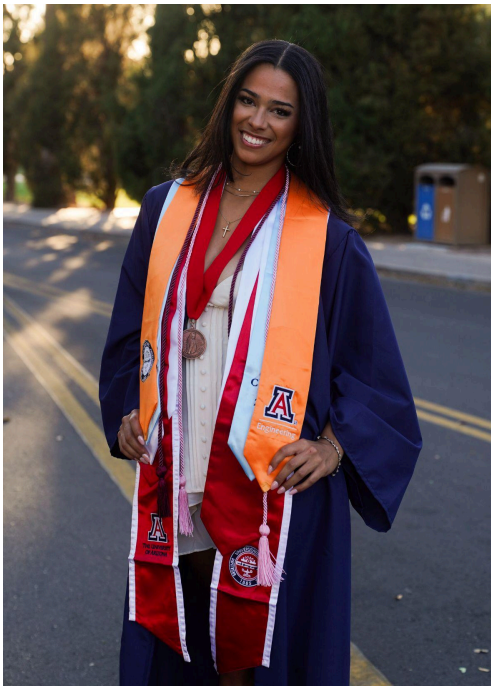
Aaliyah continued this success at the University of Arizona. The recipient of several competitive scholarships, she graduated in 2025 magna cum laude with a BS in mechanical engineering and minors in biomedical engineering, mathematics and dance and at graduation was awarded the prestigious Robie Gold Medal, which honors two graduates per year who are "...active contributors to the University of Arizona community and consistently demonstrate a willingness to give more than what is required."

Now as a Vivien Thomas Scholar, Aaliyah is in her first year pursuing her Doctorate in biomedical engineering at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore where she is also a cheerleader for an NFL football team. Just last week she was awarded a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.

You have your feet firmly in two worlds: demanding PhD coursework at one of the country's most prestigious universities as well as nights and weekends as an NFL cheerleader during football season. How do you keep balance in your life?

This is a hard question. I would say balance is not perfectly equal in the lifestyle I live; it's about being intentional with where my time and energy go. There are definitely times when my courses or research take priority, and others when cheerleading or activities that make me happy come first. I think the most important part about living this lifestyle is about having

strong support systems in each part of my life that make the busy schedule feel worth it. The communities I've built in each part of my life really ground me and make it easy to find pockets of joy in the chaos. Being an NFL cheerleader never truly feels like "work" because dance has been and always will be such a big part of my life. It's my escape from being in the lab and something that re-energizes me. At the same time, I could also say the lab is my escape from cheerleading. That back-and-forth creates a kind of cyclical balance that keeps me mentally engaged and fulfilled. Although this all sounds very time-demanding, I still make it a priority to do things purely for enjoyment, like drawing, baking, and more recently running and snowboarding. So, work-life balance is important to me, even though it's never perfect. Taking intentional breaks allows me to stay present and dedicated to everything I'm involved in.



This is nothing new for you, you kept a very busy schedule at the University of Arizona -- Pomline, Undergraduate Researcher in Fuglevand Neurophysiology Lab, Engineering Student Council President, math tutor, ambassador, to name just a few -- all while majoring in Mechanical Engineering and minoring in Dance and Mathematics! What is the source of your drive and energy?

I think the biggest source of my drive is that I'm genuinely passionate about everything I do from engineering research to dancing. I've always been someone who wants to explore my full potential, even knowing that it's something I may never fully reach. That pursuit is what makes life exciting, and I see that pressure to fulfill that potential as a privilege to help me grow. I like to think I'm a life-long learner, and I'm constantly motivated by new experiences whether that is exploring new places or building relationships within different communities. Those connections and shared adventures make the work I'm doing feel even more meaningful and push me to stay engaged and curious. I also think my lifestyle is very connected: my experiences growing up as a dancer, learning how to control my body, recover from injuries, and optimize my performance directly inspires my research interests in haptics, medical devices, and human performance. I'm fascinated by the human body from an analytical standpoint and from the lived, physical experience of movement. That dynamic intersection constantly reshapes the work I want to do.

You are also a visual artist. Is this something you would want to pursue more formally in the future or do you prefer to keep it as a form of relaxation and recreation for yourself?

Right now, I see visual art as something purely recreational. A lot of other areas in my life are more structured, competitive, and high-pressure, so it's important for me to have creative outlets that feel relaxed and personal. Being able to create without expectations brings me a lot of joy and is honestly so important to the expansion of any artform. Whether it is painting

for fun, decorating my apartment, sharing my art through little gifts and crafting with people I care about, that freedom is what makes visual art so meaningful to me and I want to preserve that.

How did ASA's unique "Arts + Smarts" approach to learning help shape where you are today in life? Was there an "A-ha" moment with a particular teacher or in a particular class?

ASA's "Arts + Smarts" approach really shaped how I envision my life and future career. It showed me that I didn't necessarily have to choose one path, and I could pursue both engineering and dance at a high level. It really taught me how to be intentional with my time to maximize my potential and make this lifestyle possible.

Having dance intertwined with my education eventually led to my research interests in biomedical engineering, a natural stem from my background in dance, movement, and performance. Even now, my work as a professional dancer influences my current research in medical devices, haptics, and human performance at Johns Hopkins.

I don't think I had one specific "A-ha" moment during my time at ASA, but looking back, I realize how much the faculty and staff went out of their way to challenge me and push me toward opportunities I might not have pursued on my own whether that was encouraging me to take AP classes or to get involved in clubs like robotics (Shout out Team Voltage!) or Model UN. Teachers like Mr. Lewkowitz, Mr. Clark, Ms. Layden, Ms. Brown, Ms. Wooley and Mr. Steinert truly care about our growth as students and as people. At the time, I didn't fully understand how intentional they were being, but now I can see how much they were preparing me for the path I'm on today. I'm incredibly grateful for that foundation as it gave me both the confidence and the vision to pursue a rigorous academic career without letting go of the creative side of who I am.



You are our first honoree who lost a portion of their high school experience to the pandemic, which was probably a little more difficult for a dancer. You have some life perspective between then and now, how do you think it affected you as an artist and a student?

The pandemic was definitely challenging, especially as a dancer, but it taught me a lot about adaptability. Finding new ways to stay engaged and creative, such as hosting Zoom club meetings, organizing a virtual food drive and fashion show for NHS, or choreographing and producing dance projects remotely, pushed me to be more self-motivated and disciplined without the usual structure. At the same time, it really showed me the importance of community. Being so isolated made me realize how much I value shared experiences, and when things started opening back up, I appreciated being in person so much more, whether

that was dancing in a studio or celebrating my final moments at ASA with senior sunset, prom, and graduation. It made those experiences feel more meaningful, and it reinforced how important connection is to both my personal growth and creative expression.

Aaliya is going to continue to wow us for years to come; check out all of her doings on LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok.