The College of AGS Fall Academic Award Celebration

November 21st, 2025

National Weather Center

Program of Events

Welcome

AGS Assist. Dean, Dolly Na-Yemeh

Brief Remarks

AGS Dean, Bob Palmer

Presentation of Faculty and Student Awards

Brief Remarks, Outstanding Senior

Closing Remarks

AGS Assist. Dean Dolly Na-Yemeh

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Awards & Scholarships

Faculty and Staff Awards

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Oustanding Senior

Outstanding Junior

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Faculty and Staff Awards

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Outstanding Research Award

Excellent Research Award

Superior Research Award

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Outstanding Service Award

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Outstanding Research Award

Rachel Riley

Rachel Riley is a Senior Research Associate at the Oklahoma Climatological Survey and the lead PI of the Southern Climate Impacts Planning Program (SCIPP). SCIPP is an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional NOAA CAP/RISA team led by the University of Oklahoma. Riley holds an M.S. in interdisciplinary studies (communication and meteorology) from the University of Oklahoma and a B.S. in meteorology from Iowa State University.

Over the course of her career, Riley has conducted research on improving hazard mitigation planning and outcomes, evaluating climate decision-support tools, conducting climate needs assessments, and disaster response. She has presented at many regional and national conferences and workshops and has advised undergraduate and graduate students. She has also engaged with numerous local, state, regional, and national organizations to help ensure research results and data tools are useful and usable.

In 2019, Riley and two colleagues received a national Route Fifty Navigator Award for their involvement in developing the Simple Planning Tool for Oklahoma Climate Hazards. In the same year, she received another award for the Simple Planning Tool from the Oklahoma Chapter of the American Planning Association. In 2021, she and her co-author's journal article about flood mitigation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was named Editor's Choice in Natural Hazards Review.

Outstanding Research Award

Dr. Chengbin Deng

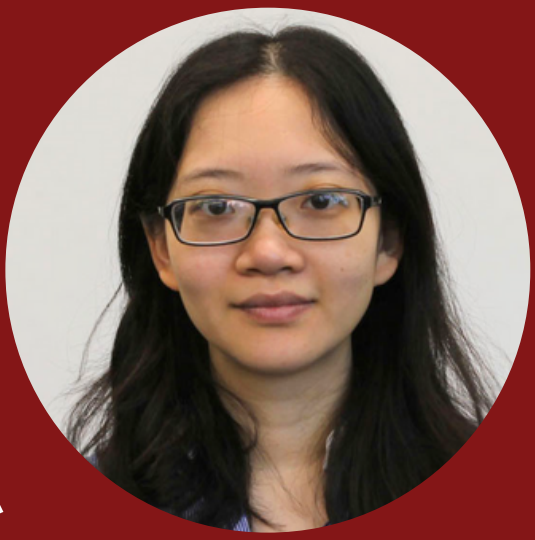
Dr. Chengbin Deng is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability and Director of the Center for Spatial Analysis at the University of Oklahoma. He holds a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and earned both his M.S. and B.S. in Remote Sensing and GIS from Sun Yat-sen University.

Dr. Deng has more than 15 years of experience advancing geospatial science research that supports communities, agencies, and decision-makers in addressing land-use change, climate variability, and disaster resilience. His work integrates remote sensing, artificial intelligence, and geospatial data science to develop practical, community-focused tools for monitoring environmental hazards and climate-related risks.

His research portfolio includes near real-time land change detection, forest and urban landscape dynamics, environmental resilience assessment, and the development of AI- and ML-driven geospatial analytical methods. His work has been supported by major federal agencies, including NASA, NSF, USGS, and DOE, with over $3.6 million in combined funding as PI and co-PI. He serves on the NASA Land Cover and Land Use Change Science Team and mentors NASA FINESST awardees.

As a dedicated educator and mentor, Dr. Deng leads interdisciplinary research teams and supports student success through hands-on training in remote sensing, GeoAI, and environmental data science. He has authored more than 40 peer-reviewed publications, including internationally recognized work on deepfake geography that received widespread global media attention.

Excellent Research Award



Dr. Anni Yang

Dr. Anni Yang is an Assistant Professor and the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability at the University of Oklahoma. She earned her Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Florida in 2019, where she trained in medical and health geography, spatial epidemiology, and disease ecology. Dr. Yang's research centers on the One Health concept, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. By approaching health challenges from this integrated perspective, she addresses complex issues that impact both ecosystems and human well-being, including infectious disease transmission and environmental impacts on human health. Her scholarship has been supported by competitive grants from NSF, NASA, EPA, and USDA, and she has contributed to large interdisciplinary projects examining emerging diseases and assessing environmental health impacts in the Southern Great Plains. Dr. Yang has published high-impact research across spatial disease ecology and health geography, including multiple first-authored papers in leading journals. She was selected as the Scialog Fellow for her contributions to combating zoonoses. In addition to her research, Dr. Yang is an engaged mentor and educator who supports undergraduate and graduate students through hands-on fieldwork, quantitative training, and interdisciplinary collaboration. She is also active in professional service, including serving on proposal review panels, reviewing manuscripts, and leading committees within the department and the scientific community.

Excellent Research Award

Dr. Thomas Jones

From 2010 to the present, Thomas has been employed as a Research Scientist at CIMMS/CIWRO as part of the Warn-on-Forecast (WoFS) project. He received his PhD at the University of Alabama in Huntsville in May 2006. His primary duty involves developing and testing methods to assimilate satellite data, with an emphasis on GOES-R products, into storm-scale numerical weather prediction models, such as the Warn-on-Forecast System (WoFS).

In 2020, a new project, in collaboration with GSL, began integrating HRRR-Smoke technology to enable short-term probabilistic forecasts of smoke generated by wildfires, resulting in WoFS-Smoke. He is also leading a fire weather "tiger team" within NSSL to coordinate fire-related research across divisions, including planning for future field products, fire-weather model coupling, and increased observations of active and post-fire conditions. In addition to research efforts, he has been involved in real-time support of the WoFS as part of the HWT. He was responsible for all satellite-DA aspects of the system, including real-time observation processing and monitoring, until 2022, when the system was transitioned to a cloud-based system. He led the development of synthetic satellite, convection initiation, tropical cyclones, and drought-related parameters for WoFS and has received positive feedback from NWS forecasters on their usefulness in real-time applications.

He currently serves as the CIWRO representative to the NWC library committee and has also served as a member of the CIWRO travel and best paper committees. He is currently an organizer for the CIWRO fire weather workshop occurring in February 2024. Finally, he has been involved with several University of Oklahoma-related activities. He was appointed as Adjunct Associate Faculty in 2019, and he has advised two OU Honors and OU Capstone projects. He served on the Master's committee for Joel McAuliffe, who graduated in May 2020, and on the Ph.D. committee of Sijie Pan. He also performed guest lectures on satellite DA for the Advanced Data Assimilation Methods class (METR-6313) and served as instructor for the Convective Seminar Series class from Fall 2019 until Spring 2020. As part of the fire weather project, he will be co-advising a student starting in 2025.

Superior Research Award

Dr. Chenghao Wang

Dr. Chenghao Wang is an assistant professor in the School of Meteorology and Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability at the University of Oklahoma. He obtained his Ph.D. degree in Civil, Environmental, and Sustainable Engineering from Arizona State University in 2019. He was a postdoctoral research fellow at Stanford University from 2020 to 2022, during which he was also an inaugural New Map of Life fellow at the Stanford Center on Longevity. Dr. Wang and his Sustainable URban Futures (SURF) Lab investigate the mechanisms of urban environments, their interactions with regional and global climate systems, and their interconnected impacts on energy use, emissions, and planetary health with advanced physics-based numerical models and data-driven analytical approaches. He is a recipient of the NSF EPSCoR Research Fellowship and the NASA Early Career Investigator Award. He currently chairs the International Association for Urban Climate (IAUC) Bibliography Committee and the American Meteorological Society (AMS) Committee on Meteorological Aspects of Air Pollution. He is a member of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) June Bacon-Bercey Scholarship Committee, AGU Edmond M. Dewan Scholarship Committee, AMS Energy Committee, and AMS Committee on Applied Climatology. He also served as a contributing author of the Sixth National Climate Assessment.

Superior Research Award

Dr. David Schvartzman

Dr. David Schvartzman is a researcher at the University of Oklahoma's School of Meteorology whose work has significantly advanced the application of phased-array radar technology for hazardous weather detection and forecasting. His research focuses on optimizing rapid-scanning radar systems and improving observations of severe thunderstorms, tornadic circulations, and other high-impact weather events. During his time at OU's Advanced Radar Research Center, Dr. Schvartzman played a central role in the development, testing, and analysis of cutting-edge experimental radar platforms. His work integrates atmospheric dynamics, radar engineering, and innovative signal-processing techniques. He has shared his findings through peer-reviewed publications and national scientific conferences. He has collaborated extensively with NOAA partners to evaluate how next-generation radar capabilities can strengthen operational forecasting and public safety.

Dr. Schvartzman is also recognized for his leadership and mentorship within the radar research community, supporting student researchers and contributing to multidisciplinary efforts aimed at improving atmospheric observation technologies.

Outstanding Teaching Award

Dr. Dawn Drake

Dr. Dawn M. Drake is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability at the University of Oklahoma, where she also serves as Director of Graduate Studies and Director of Online Programs. She joined OU in 2023 after more than a decade of faculty service at Missouri Western State University and Winona State University. She holds a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Tennessee, where she specialized in economic geography and geographic information systems.

Dr. Drake's scholarship spans economic and agricultural geography, rural landscapes, and the geography of manufacturing. Her academic record includes multiple books, an edited volume, peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and a wide range of invited and conference presentations. She contributes significantly to the discipline through her service on national committees, editorial and review work, and leadership roles within professional organizations.

At the University of Oklahoma, Dr. Drake teaches undergraduate and graduate courses across environmental issues, world geography, geospatial technologies, and professional development. Students consistently describe her classes as engaging, supportive, and well structured, and colleagues note the strength of her mentorship and instructional design. She has supervised senior capstone projects, served on master's and doctoral committees, and strengthened the online master's curriculum by refining the comprehensive exam and updating course content.

Dr. Drake's work reflects a sustained commitment to high-quality teaching, student support, and the advancement of geography through scholarship, service, and academic leadership.

Outstanding Teaching Award

Dr. Marcela Loria-Salazar

Dr. Loria-Salazar is an assistant professor at the School of Meteorology at the University of Oklahoma. She leads research at the University of Oklahoma's School of Meteorology focused on understanding and improving air composition. Her work encompasses urban emissions, wildfires, prescribed burns, agriculture, and dust, utilizing satellite data, field instrumentation, numerical modeling, deep learning, and big data assimilation.

She collaborates across disciplines and institutions to enhance air quality forecasting, exposure assessments, and understanding of aerosol transport. Her leadership in field campaigns and instrument development supports national and global efforts, including NASA's PACE Mission Early Adopter Program, NOAA's Pathfinders Initiative, CIWRO, and the SPARTAN Global Network.

Dr. Loria-Salazar is a contributor to a national initiative led by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to improve the prediction of fire and smoke behavior. Her work has been recognized with the NASA Earth and Space Science Fellowship and awards from the University of Nevada, Reno, and the University of Oklahoma.

Outstanding Service Award

Caylah Cruickshank

Caylah Cruickshank is a Research Associate at the Oklahoma Climatological Survey and is the Program Manager of the Southern Climate Impacts Planning Program (SCIPP). Cruickshank holds a Master of Public Administration from the University of Oklahoma (OU), as well as a Bachelor of Science in Business Management from Tulane University.

Cruickshank manages the overall National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant, which includes SCIPP's interdisciplinary research projects, timelines, and budget functions. She also generates SCIPP's annual reports and facilitates communication between NOAA, university partners, and stakeholders in the region. Throughout her career, Cruickshank has been involved in several synergistic activities that promote resilience action and has championed opportunities to serve students – namely, she designed and led SCIPP's Summer Internship Program for undergraduate students at OU's College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences.

In 2024, Cruickshank and colleagues led the inaugural South Central Climate Resilience Forum, which later received a Texas Impact Enterprise Award for "making progress toward holistic, forward-facing solutions to some of [Texas'] biggest challenges". Above all, Cruickshank is passionate about connecting people to science that enhances their abilities to address weather and climate challenges.

Outstanding Service Award

Dr. Kathy Pegion

Dr. Kathy Pegion is an Associate Professor in the School of Meteorology at the University of Oklahoma and holds the Williams Chair in Earth System Prediction. She earned her Ph.D. in Climate Dynamics from George Mason University, along with M.S. and B.S. degrees in Meteorology and a B.S. in Computer Science from Florida State University.

At OU, Dr. Pegion has taken on key service roles, including a two-year term on Committee A, chairing the School of Meteorology Director Search Committee, and serving on several additional faculty search committees. She also contributes to the college's efforts to strengthen research computing infrastructure and previously served as the Faculty Advisor to the CIO. Her commitment to community building is evident through her mentoring of early-career faculty and her organization of schoolwide gatherings and activities.

Beyond the university, Dr. Pegion is a recognized leader in subseasonal-to-seasonal prediction. She leads the Subseasonal Experiment (SubX), serves in national and international working groups, and contributes to NOAA, NCAR, and US CLIVAR initiatives. She is an Associate Editor for the Journal of Climate and will serve as Editor of Weather and Forecasting.

Veteran Student Awardees

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Student Veteran Awardee

Steven Anderson

Steven is majoring in Geospatial Information Systems with a minor in Environmental Sustainability. His background is military intelligence. Steven joined the United States Air Force in April 1995 and completed initial intelligence training (earning the Imagery Analysis Apprentice designation) in November 1995. Over his 24 years of service, he has had a very non-traditional career.

Steven transitioned to a Geospatial Intelligence Analyst role, working across multiple intelligence mission sets. His first deployment in the mid-1990s was to stand up and conduct the very first Air Force Unmanned Aerial Reconnaissance in direct support of NATO's multinational mission, "Operation Joint Endeavour". From there, he went on to other assignments and deployments such as USSTRATCOM (3 tours / Nuclear Deterrence / 911 direct support), 352nd Special Operations Group (four years direct support of numerous Special Operations missions, including deployment to "Operation Iraqi Freedom"), Defense Intelligence Agency, and other units/deployments. Steven earned the rank of Mast Sergeant and served in roles including Flight Chief, Branch Chief, Additional Duty First Sergeant, and Family Liaison Officer for several fallen service members and their families.

Steven retired in 2019 and took some personal time before moving forward. While already having two associate degrees, He enrolled at the University of Oklahoma in Fall 2024. Steven's long-term goals are to earn a bachelor's degree and carry on the next chapters of my Geospatial career with either the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency or the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Student Veteran Awardee

Lt. Col. Brandon McClung

Lt Col Brandon McClung is a PhD Candidate in the School of Meteorology, College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK. His current research focus is on lightning prediction using deep learning and AI to deliver highly accurate lightning prediction tools to space launch operators. Previous research includes data assimilation studies of ionospheric plasma bubbles in space weather models at the Air Force Institute of Technology, followed by wind-driven wildfires in Northern California at the University of Washington.

Lt Col McClung entered the Air Force in May 2009 through the ROTC program at the University of Oklahoma. He completed the Weather Officer Course in November 2009, followed by becoming the Senior Duty Officer, where he oversaw CONUS surface analysis, model analysis, TAF production, and watches, warnings, and advisories for all DoD installations in the western United States. This assignment was followed by time in Korea, where he conducted weather operations for 9 operational readiness exercises and provided critical weather forecasts as the Lead Weather Unit for Red Flag Alaska. Lt Col McClung continued his operational focus during his deployment in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Here, he managed three geographically separated, mission-focused, weather teams delivering thousands of forecasts to U.S. and international forces dedicated to combating extreme terrorism in Iraq and Syria. Upon return to the U.S., he managed a team of 20+ members developing software for Air Force Weather Web Services as the Flight Commander at the 557th Weather Wing on Offutt AFB.

During his time as a staff officer at the Pentagon, he developed readiness metrics to ensure that weather Airmen were poised to support the National Defense Strategy. Additionally, he drove solutions to the joint space-based environmental monitoring requirements, including transferring NOAA's GOES-13 to the United States Space Force to mitigate a projected lack of coverage over the Indian Ocean. Finally, he led Air Force Weather's AI strategy and investments by incorporating AI into DoD policy and integrating datasets into responsible AI pipelines with inter-agency partners (i.e., MIT, NASA, NOAA).

Student Veteran Awardee

Alec Rodriguez

Alec grew up in Arvada, Colorado, and played ice hockey from age four until his early twenties. As he got older, he sought to get into firefighting and EMT work like his dad. While in high school, he was taking and earning EMT certifications.

As high school came to an end, his friend asked him to go with him to see a Marine Corps recruiter. Alec joined and shipped shortly after graduating, and went to boot camp at MCRD San Diego on July 14, 2014. He joined as an 0811 Artilleryman and, during his time, became a Section Chief as a Corporal. He went to South Korea, volunteered with Oscar Mike and helped with their events, and coached hockey for a few years. He served six years in the Marines before getting out.

Alec moved to Norman, OK, where his older sister lived, and where he eventually met his wife. Shortly after moving to Norman, he joined the Army for what would be his last four years. He switched to 19D Cav Scout and was immediately sent to Romania and other parts of Europe. Not too long after being there, the Afghanistan withdrawal happened, and his team was actively engaged in different support operations for that. Later, Alec was in Bulgaria when Russia invaded Ukraine. The rest of his time out there was spent preparing and facilitating various missions in light of it.

After returning, Alec was proactive in finding and working more with counter-thermal equipment due to drone usage. He had the unique opportunity to work with Relv Camo. Once he got out, he came back home to Moore to be with his wife and son. He has since been able to get on the Oklahoma Warriors veterans hockey team. And, along with his wife, he started their own private practice, You Belong. Alec also started a small screen-printing business called Hold The Rope LLC. What got him into OU was ultimately his wife; she was a graduate of OU and had convinced him to look at the aviation program instead of other schools. Because of Alec's experiences — more so in the Army — doing more CFF and AAA, working with Relv, and TACPs, he really started to enjoy working with aviation assets. Alec transferred to OU for the Air Traffic Controller degree, which had to be changed quickly due to his age, and I am now pursuing the aviation management non-flying degree.

Outstanding Student Awards

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Oustanding Senior

Liam Thompson

Liam Thompson is a senior meteorology and environmental sustainability student in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability and the School of Meteorology. Liam enjoys the heavy math and science he is exposed to in the meteorology coursework, but he also enjoys seeing the many applications of meteorology in the environmental sustainability coursework. His future goals include serving as a university faculty member and, perhaps, as a political appointee in scientific administration.

Outside of the classroom, Liam enjoys serving as the President of the Student Chapter of the American Meteorological Society and the National Weather Association, the Undergraduate Vice-chair of the Student Affairs Committee, Vice Chair of Reviews on the University of Oklahoma Integrity Council, and a student chair on a couple of American Meteorological Society committees. The experiences Liam receives outside the classroom are easily brought into the classroom and incorporated into his academic accomplishments.

While Liam is heavily involved in academic and professional capacities, he takes plenty of time to enjoy his hobbies, such as long-distance running (as a friendly jab towards Dolly, Liam's resting heart rate is lower than hers). He loves cooking and has recently acquired a new copyright for the term "Liam bread." He also really enjoys photography and, as such, is always looking to increase the number of compiled location stamps in his 30,000+ photo library of various adventures.

1st Alt. Oustanding Senior

Ralph Keen

Ralph Keen is from Omaha, Nebraska, an alumnus of Elkhorn South High School, and is currently a senior at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, which is headquartered in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Mr. Keen is currently studying for a B.S. in Aviation - Aviation Management (Flying). He holds a perfect 4.00 GPA through 113 college credits earned and was recently named the first alternate for the College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences (AGS) Outstanding Senior Award. He has also been named to the AGS Dean's and OU President's Honor Roll, two of the highest honors an undergraduate can receive at the University of Oklahoma. In addition, Mr. Keen has received the OU Spirit Community Engagement Award every year he has been in college, the University College PACE Award (given to the top 1% of all first-year students at the University of Oklahoma), and was a semi-finalist for the Rita H. Lottinville Prize. Ralph plans to become an airline pilot after college, with a focus on giving back to his native community by offering scholarships and flight training to other Native Americans who wish to pursue a career in his field. Currently, Mr. Keen is a member of the Oklahoma RUF/NEKS, the oldest all-male spirit organization in the United States, works at the University of Oklahoma as a flight instructor, serves as the vice-president for the OU Chapter of the National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA), and is the president of the University of Oklahoma Speech Team

2nd Alt. Oustanding Senior

Reagan Mendeke

Originally from Corinth, TX, and the youngest of three siblings, Reagan Mendeke brings a spirit of service and global engagement to her academic and research pursuits. Reagan Mendeke is an undergraduate researcher at the University of Oklahoma College of Atmospheric & Geographic Sciences, whose professional experience spans operational forecasting, field deployment, and environmental education. Reagan currently serves as an Undergraduate Research Assistant at the Cooperative Institute for Severe and High-Impact Weather Research and Operations (CIWRO), where she analyzes tropical cyclone precipitation structures and landfall evolution using radar composites and satellite datasets. Her work involves close collaboration with experts at the National Severe Storms Laboratory and the School of Meteorology, contributing to cutting-edge research in tropical meteorology.

Reagan's technical expertise is further demonstrated through her role with NOAA's Global Systems Laboratory and CIRES, where she verified HRRRv3 and HRRRv4 model forecasts using METAR wind data. Her application of statistical metrics and ramp-event analysis has informed renewable energy operations, culminating in a peer-reviewed publication in Wind Energy Science. Reagan also mentored high school students in New Orleans through the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development, designing curriculum and leading seminars on climate impacts and water systems. Her research has been showcased at multiple American Meteorological Society Annual Meetings. Reagan co-authored three major conference presentations and one journal article, reflecting a strong commitment to scientific communication and collaboration.

Outside of her research and time in the classroom, she performs with the OU Steel Drum Band and the Brazilian Percussion Ensemble, and has served as Public Relations & Media Director for Encounter OU. She volunteers as a Kindergartener Sunday School teacher and serves on the college Leadership Team at Wildwood Community Church. Reagan has participated in multiple international relief trips and taught English at overseas language camps, experiences that have shaped her commitment to education and cross-cultural collaboration.

These accomplishments are supported by prestigious national scholarships from the AMS and NWA, recognizing Reagan's academic excellence and leadership in atmospheric sciences. Her work exemplifies the College's mission to advance understanding of severe weather and environmental systems through rigorous research
and meaningful outreach

Oustanding Junior

Kundainashe Zhuwau

Kundainashe Zhuwau is currently pursuing a double major in Geographic Information Science (GIS) and Environmental Sustainability at the University of Oklahoma. As a passionate student in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability and the College of Atmospheric and Geographical Sciences, she is dedicated to applying spatial analysis and environmental research to address global sustainability challenges, particularly those affecting developing regions.

Beyond the classroom, she serves as a DGES Peer Mentor, a Math Transformative Tutoring Initiative (TTI) Tutor, and a Peer Tutor for GEO 2021, where she enjoys helping other students strengthen their academic confidence and analytical skills. Her research interests include remote sensing and GIS applications, sustainable resource management, and climate resilience.

Receiving the Outstanding Junior Award is a great honor that motivated Kundainashe to continue striving for academic excellence, leadership, and meaningful environmental impact. She is deeply grateful to the faculty and staff for this recognition and for their continued mentorship and support throughout her academic journey.

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On behalf of the OU Foundation and College of Atmospheric Sciences, we thank you for your generous and continued support!

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who contributed to making this event possible. We appreciate the support of the Dean's Office staff, especially Natalie and Lee Anne, for their help with event logistics and planning.

Thank you to the Scholarship Committee and the Faculty and Staff Awards Committee for their thoughtful review and commitment to recognizing excellence across our college.

A special thank you to Brooke Gaines, our undergraduate student employee, for helping to put together the digital program and PowerPoint presentation for this year's reception.

We are grateful to all faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, and friends who continue to support the AGS community.

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