



The City College
of New York



Great Grads

2015

GreatGrads 2015

Meet some of the remarkable young men and women in The City College of New York Class of 2015. The students chosen for this year's Great Grads excel in the classroom, have personal stories that inspire us, and illustrate the transformative power of the City Experience. They were nominated by their professors and represent all schools and divisions of the college.

Among them are graduates poised to make great contributions to fields as varied as science and diplomacy, adults returning to college to start new careers, and a Mexican native who attended more than a half dozen schools before college and is now the Class of 2015 Valedictorian.

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Hillary Alcantara

BA, Business Management and International Studies
Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership

Raised by a single mother who worked in a hair salon in the South Bronx, Hillary Alcantara had the value of education instilled in her from a young age. After graduating at the top of her class at Frederick Douglass Academy III, she transferred from Mercy College to CCNY because “it was closer to home and it was affordable.”

She used that affordability to take five classes a semester, every semester, to graduate with a double major in business management and international studies. The decision to combine those majors was sparked by many visits to her ancestral homeland of the Dominican Republic, where seeing the economic disparities on the island stirred an interest in international economic and political development.

“The two majors go hand-in-hand,” she said. “There is an overlap between them.”

She even managed to work in one month of study abroad to teach English in Rabat, Morocco.

Alcantara spent her last semester working on her senior honors thesis, “A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Counterproductive Work Behavior in India and the United States,” a 21,000-word opus that she hopes to turn into a book.

She will start her master’s degree program in international business at NYU with an eye toward obtaining a PhD.

Her mother, who now owns her own hair salon in the Bronx, remains steadfast in support of her daughter’s ambitions.

“I want to meet my mother’s expectations,” Alcantara said. “The only way for me to give back to her is to be successful in my academic and professional achievements.”

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Hajat Avdovic

BS, Biomedical Science
Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education

Hajat Avdovic was three years old when his family found refuge in the United States from war-torn Bosnia in the early 1990s. Growing up as the son of refugees, he was influenced by his parents' strong sense of justice, humanity, and compassion.

At CCNY's Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education, Avdovic committed himself to a medical career so that he could best exemplify what he had learned from his parents.

The courses he took in the Sophie Davis School reinforced his decision to study medicine.

One of the required courses Avdovic took was a community health assessment course on population and medical statistics. It involved field work in his Astoria, Queens, community.

"It opened my eyes to the health disparities there and broadened my perception of medical care," said Avdovic. "Doctors are in such a unique position. They have the ability to positively change the course of someone's life."

A graduate of the Academy of American Studies high school in Long Island City, Queens, Avdovic hailed Sophie Davis's outstanding faculty.

"They are great at encouraging students and helping them succeed," he said.

For Avdovic, that included garnering honors such as the CUNY Vice Chancellor's Excellence in Leadership Award (2013) and a Sophie and Leonard Davis Scholarship (2014). Avdovic will enter Albany Medical College.

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Noshin Apurba

BArch, Architecture
Macaulay Honors College at CCNY

Noshin Apurba's talent for drawing was apparent from the age of four, when her mother placed her in an advanced art class in her native Dhaka, Bangladesh. She continued to draw when her family moved to Astoria, Queens, when she was six, and throughout her years at the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and the Performing Arts.

Noting their daughter's aptitude for biology, Apurba's parents initially encouraged her to become a doctor. Instead, she discovered an interest in architecture when her older sister, an architecture student, asked her to proofread her papers. A summer spent in the College Now program at City College confirmed to Apurba that she had found her calling. After graduating from high school, she enrolled in the architectural history program at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture.

During her career at CCNY, Apurba became a College Now teaching assistant. She assisted one of her professors in a research project on the history of Grand Central Terminal and, outside CCNY, tutored grade school age children in reading, writing, and communications skills.

In her fourth year in the program, Apurba became the first architecture student to enroll in the new Theory of Architectural History concentration. Taking all five required courses in one year, she also won the Carol J. Weissman Kurth Women in Architecture Scholarship, which is awarded to a high-performing female student.

Apurba looks ahead to an academic career of teaching and research.

"Looking into ancient buildings tells us about civilizations that existed before," she said. "Architecture tells us about the society we live in."

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Bahar Cetinsoy

MS, Educational Theater
School of Education

Bahar Cetinsoy was ambitious from an early age.

When she was 11, the Izmir, Turkey, native knew that she wanted to learn English and to become an educator. Unable to afford the expenses for full-time study in England after graduating from Izmir Girls High School, she found an English family that needed an au pair for a year.

Returning to Izmir, Cetinsoy earned her degree as well as her international certification in teaching English to non-native speakers. She later moved to an Istanbul private school where she was assigned to run the English drama club. That assignment changed the course of her life.

“I saw the difference between the children in the classroom and the ones in the drama club,”

she said. “The ones in the drama club were more expressive.”

That experience compelled her to devote her career to educational theater. Searching online for a suitable graduate program, she found CCNY.

“I thought, ‘this is it!’” she said, noting the program’s balance of artistry and pedagogy.

“The main purpose of educational theater is to engage students physically, emotionally, and intellectually,” she said. “It is not only for the sake of art, it gives them thinking and creative skills.”

Cetinsoy will spend the year after graduation with a cultural or theatrical organization. She plans to use her training to integrate theater into school curricula and to use theater to effect social change.

“The main purpose of educational theater is to engage students physically, emotionally, and intellectually.”



Violeta Contreras Ramirez

BS/MS, Biology; BS, Psychology
College of Liberal Arts and Science

Violeta Contreras Ramirez's memorable City College experience began after she attended a handful of schools in Mexico and the United States, the last one being Mamaroneck High School in Westchester County, N.Y. At CCNY, she not only found a strong anchor but a diverse and engaging place that enabled her to flourish academically.

"I moved around a lot when I was younger and attended a total of eight schools before coming to City College," said the Mexican-born Class of 2015 Valedictorian. "But I never felt as deep a connection to any of my schools as I have to City College."

The connection extended to faculty that she said inspired her exceedingly and expanded her interest in neuroscience. This led to her research

on the development of connections in the visual cortex in the ferret that earned her a 2014 FASEB Travel Award.

The award was one of several top honors earned by Contreras Ramirez, who completed a combined BS/MS program in biology and a BS in psychology. The first in her family to attend college, she graduated with a 3.99 GPA.

According to Contreras Ramirez, City College's renowned diversity was another hugely positive aspect of her five-year experience at the institution which was founded in 1847.

"The diversity is tremendous and one that had a big impact on me," she said.

Contreras Ramirez plans a career as a neurologist, combining both medicine and research.

"I never felt as deep a connection to any of my schools as I have to City College."



Eriugen Gjoka

BE, Chemical Engineering
Macaulay Honors College at CCNY

Two years after arriving in the United States, Eriugen Gjoka graduated from Beacon High School in Manhattan and was admitted to the Macaulay Honors College at CCNY. The Albanian immigrant has not looked back since in his quest to become a chemical engineer.

Gjoka was part of a research group that explored the recycling of radioactive nuclear waste by using ionic liquids. His scholarship earned him two of the top honors in City College's Grove School of Engineering. These were the Jimmy Mann Scholarship and the Alumni Scholarship, both offered by Scientific Design Company.

Renowned as a licensor of chemical process technologies globally, Scientific Design has hired Gjoka as a process engineer.

He was also a Colin Powell Fellow for two years. "This was a good experience as I gained deep insights into the policy-making process in the U.S. with aspirations to become a more active citizen and contribute my skills to the common good," said the Bronx resident.

Having arrived in the U.S. at age 17, Gjoka concedes that his academic success was aided by the smooth and gradual transition he was able to make into the cultural life of New York.

"I couldn't have asked for anything more from City College," Gjoka added. "Great mentors, scholarships and internships, and the diversity also helped me fit in."

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Kossi Hator

- BA, International Studies
- Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership

Kossi Hator's dream of a diplomatic career was sparked by a chance meeting as a high school student at Lycee Technique Eyadema in Lome with the foreign minister of his native Togo. Years later, after stops in Ghana and Italy, it would take what Hator calls his "SEEK family" at City College to help bring his dream to fruition.

A SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) student, Hator graduated magna cum laude with a BA in international studies from CCNY's Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership.

Now an advisor to the Togolese Mission to the United Nations on the General Assembly's Third Committee, which addresses human rights, social, cultural and humanitarian issues, Hator has a foot in the diplomatic world for which he has long yearned.

It would not have been possible, he emphasized, if it were not for CCNY's SEEK program and his mentors there.

"They pushed me and motivated me as I worked at a gas station and at other jobs to support myself while pursuing a college degree," said Hator. "SEEK is a family that supports you, and all the success I've had is due to the SEEK program."

The multilingual Bronx resident speaks French, Italian, and Spanish and feels that he is ready for the diplomatic service.

"I'd like to make use of my language skills and share with my peers the cultural diversity that I've acquired through the years."

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Lin Li :: MS, Biology
:: Division of Science

Lin Li did not speak much English when she enrolled at William Cullen Bryant High School in Astoria, Queens, after arriving in this country from Hebei province, China, with her family.

She mastered the language within two years, aided by American television shows such as CSI and Criminal Minds. Those shows also spurred her fascination with forensic science. She took that fascination to City College, where she learned basic DNA extraction techniques in one biology lab before being assigned a side project to explore parasitoid-host interactions. That experience made a big impact on her and stimulated her interests in the field.

Subsequently enrolling in the master's degree program in biology, Li conducted extensive field

research in the Costa Rican rainforest, studying the impact of forest succession on the community structure of wood-boring beetles.

She accomplished all of this while training an entire cohort of undergraduates and post-baccalaureates, completing her analyses and writing and, in her final semester, holding a full-time internship at the New York Botanical Garden.

After graduation from CCNY, where she spent nearly one third of her life, Li will remain at the Botanical Garden to research the effects of climate change on vulnerable species. Ultimately, her goal is to develop methods to save those species.

"CCNY definitely helped me to grow up," Li said. "It educated me. It gave me a career."

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Amber Jackson

• MPS, Branding & Integrated Communications
 • Division of Humanities and the Arts

Midwest native Amber Jackson left the University of Kansas, where she majored in journalism and strategic communications, intent on a more challenging, fast-paced and diverse pursuit.

She found it at City College.

Jackson is in the first cohort of Branding & Integrated Communications (BIC) majors to graduate from CCNY. Portfolio-driven, the two-year master's program combines theory and practice in an interdisciplinary, multi-tracked curriculum.

Jackson loved it and BIC's motivational faculty.

"Infectious" is how the Kansan, a graduate of Piper High School in Kansas City, summed up the program's faculty. "You can feel their passion, their intensity and love for what they are doing for the students, and because of that, I grew as a student and professional."

As a student, Jackson's credentials earned her honors such as the LAGRANT Foundation Scholarship, a national accolade for ethnically diverse exceptional students in advertising, public relations and marketing. She was also selected to participate in the exclusive ADCOLOR program that invests in dynamic students nationwide who will make an impact in the communications industry.

Professionally, Jackson was hired by Grey Advertising, a global firm with some 1,000 employees in Manhattan alone. She works on the Pantene hair care account and thanks her education at CCNY for that.

"That's the impact the BIC program and City College have had on me and that's why I love New York and City College," added the Brooklyn resident.

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Evan Mastronardi

MPA, Public Service Management
Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership

Evan Mastronardi spent a good portion of his life on the CCNY campus. He attended the High School of Math and Engineering in Baskerville Hall and received his BA in political science from the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, from which he also earned his master's degree in public administration.

His involvement with the college extends beyond academics. He worked as a financial associate in the Colin Powell School dean's office and also served as vice chair of legislative affairs on the Graduate Student Council, a delegate for the University Student Senate, graduate whip in the Government and Law Society, and a member of the MPA program's Public Service Management Club. He also hosted the WCCR radio show, "The Take with Evan Mastronardi."

When Mastronardi was in high school, he dreamed of being an automotive designer, but his interests eventually shifted to the social sciences, particularly politics. Thinking that law school was the next logical step after college, he accepted an internship at the New York State Attorney General's Bureau of Labor. That internship, in which he helped workers to claim their unpaid back wages, caused him to reassess his career path.

"I liked the subject of law, but I wasn't sure that the profession was for me," he said. "The MPA is a very versatile degree. It will allow me to analyze public policy from a substantive and fiscal perspective."

"I want to do my part and make an impact in the community."

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Eli Sands

MLA, Landscape Architecture
Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture

Eli Sands has always been creative. That creativity evolved over the decade he spent as a freelance stagehand in theatrical productions, a technical director at Fashion Week, and a layout designer and production manager for New York's largest annual photography event.

Seeing the painstakingly constructed sets and stagings discarded immediately prompted Sands to think about applying his creativity to making something more lasting.

Those thoughts harken back to his Kansas youth, in which the graduate of Blue Valley High School in Overland Park would roam over pastures to get to his nearest friend's home. Finding enjoyment in New York City's parks led him to the landscape architecture program at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture.

There, he found an affinity with his fellow students, "none of whom had architecture

backgrounds, and all of whom were older and looking for a career change," he said.

CCNY also allowed him to pursue his studies while still working as a freelance technical director for the Fashion Week shows.

"For two weeks at the beginning of each semester, I told my professors that I will be a little behind, but that I will catch up," he said. "I had understanding professors."

Sands also served as a project associate on a coastal resilience study in Jamaica Bay, using software to model and analyze flood and storm surge scenarios. The results of the study were featured in Landscape Architecture Magazine.

Sands plans to work for a public agency or for the federal government.

"My interest lies in working for the public good," he said.

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Da Wi Shin :: BE, Biomedical Engineering
:: Macaulay Honors College at CCNY

Born in South Korea and raised in China, Da Wi Shin credits City College for giving him more than a high quality and affordable education. The Class of 2015 Salutatorian with a 3.99 GPA thanks CCNY's diversity for enlightening him.

"I came to the United States in 2005 and graduated from Jericho High School on Long Island, but only at CCNY did I come to interact with people of different colors, creeds and cultures," said Shin. "I became more open minded and it helped me grow as a person."

His social learning experience took place not just in the classroom, where he pursued a B.E. in biomedical engineering in the Macaulay Honors College at City College, but also in the dorms on campus where he lived for a time.

"My interactions with students and faculty on campus from around the globe broadened my scope of values," explained Shin. "I learned to treasure not only different cultures, but also various personal characteristics."

The Douglaston, Queens, resident, whose honors included the Biomedical Engineering Department's Academic Excellence Award four years in a row, said CCNY taught him that diversity is an asset, especially in the medical field he plans to pursue.

"With the values I learned here, I look forward to becoming a physician who will treat patients not only with the mentality of a healer, but of a companion, consoling patients at their most difficult moments."

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Leonard Speregen

: BA, Interdisciplinary Arts and Science
 : Division of Interdisciplinary Studies at the Center
 : for Worker Education

By his own admission, Leonard Speregen was a “troubled youth” growing up in the Brighton Beach of the 1970s. When his family moved to Manhattan Beach, closer to the water, he maintained his older brother’s diving equipment and soon took up the sport himself. It turned out to be a good outlet for his energies, as he became a certified diver at 16.

After dropping out of high school, Speregen worked as a scuba instructor, commercial diver, tour operator, stunt diver and marine coordinator. Along the way, he became a husband and a father of two. He earned his GED and began his college education in 2002 at CCNY.

His vocation and his education came together when a CCNY anthropology professor called him a “tomb raider” for bringing discovered articles

up from his dives. Seeking to understand these issues in greater depth and finding himself two credits short of his degree, Speregen undertook an independent study project on underwater archeology.

“I gained respect for the history around the artifacts,” he said.

After 13 years as an undergraduate, Speregen graduated with a 3.95 GPA. He plans to pursue a graduate degree in earth sciences and to become a high school teacher.

“After spending 30 years in New York Harbor rebuilding, inspecting and being a safety diver, I want a job that will change the future,” he said. “I believe that teaching students will accomplish that.”

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