





Meet some of the most talented and motivated students from The City College of New York's Class of 2026. Nominated by their CCNY mentors, and representative of all schools and divisions of the College, the students chosen as Great Grads excel in the classroom, inspire us with their personal histories, and illustrate the transformative power of the City experience.

Every graduate featured in this issue of Great Grads represents the thousands of students who will graduate this May. When taken as a whole, City's history-making contributions to the world rest squarely on the shoulders of students just like this year's class.

Each Great Grad has done more than just achieve high grades. Many have overcome obstacles that have not deterred them from their determination to attain a college education. Many are immigrants, or first-generation Americans, or the first in their family to graduate from college. Whatever the individual circumstance, each Great Grad exemplifies the College's continuing mission of ensuring that people from all walks of life will have access to a college dedicated to the idea that a democratic society begins with educational opportunity for the whole people.

The value of higher education has been, throughout the history of public education in particular, called into question. Since our founding, the question of whom higher education is meant to serve has been asked. At City, it has been answered for almost 180 years: education is meant for all of us. How they respond to these challenges ahead of them as they embark upon the next chapter of their lives—as practitioners, educators, researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs and more—will test their resilience, their fortitude, and their commitment to doing remarkable things as graduates of The City College of New York.



ABDULLAH ABUBAKAR

PH.D., MECHANICAL ENGINEERING
GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

Frequent and prolonged power outages in his native Ghana while he was growing up sparked an intense curiosity in Abdullah Abubakar: How is energy generated? That would be a factor when selecting his master's thesis in chemical engineering in the Grove School, where he enrolled in fall 2018. When Professor Masahiro Kawaji put out a call for a graduate student to join his lab in high temperature gas-cooled nuclear reactor (HTGR) experimental research, Abubakar jumped at the opportunity.

"Primarily because of my pre-existing interest in energy but also to learn more about nuclear energy and the benefits it provided," he said.

Nearly eight years later, Abubakar is adding a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering to his resumé. His doctoral research focus was accident scenarios in advanced HTGRs, the type that offer improved safety and efficiency over traditional water-

cooled reactors.

His work has earned him a position with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, whose Nuclear Regulator Apprenticeship Network he will join to train as a nuclear regulator. His ultimate goal is to pursue research that will usher in the next generation of safe and advanced nuclear reactors.

Abubakar, who arrived at City with a B.S. in petrochemical engineering, said of his CCNY experience: "It taught me the importance of building a strong relationship with my peers, my professors, and with friends and family. The road to achieving our goals is often paved with hardship and setbacks. I experienced plenty of this myself in the course of my studies and what helped was leaning on the relationships I've built."

"My CCNY experience taught me the importance of building a strong relationship with my peers, my professors, and with friends and family."



DESTINY BRITT

**B.A./M.A., PSYCHOLOGY
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP
SEEK PROGRAM**

A proud SEEK student, Brooklyn-born and raised Destiny Britt is a first-generation American with deep family roots in Guyana. Growing up in New York City shaped her appreciation for community, resilience, and the vital role support systems play in personal and academic success.

Britt's journey at CCNY was marked by perseverance and transformation. During her freshman year, she faced significant personal challenges that led to academic probation and dismissal. Determined to reclaim her future, she returned to City College with renewed focus and rebuilt her academic standing, ultimately graduating with a 3.5 GPA. Her lived experiences, including aging out of the foster care system and navigating housing instability, deeply influenced her commitment to advocacy and public service. At CCNY, she channeled this passion into meaningful work through an AmeriCorps internship with New

Yorkers for Children, where she supported foster youth preparing to transition out of care by connecting them to housing, education, and mental health resources. She also completed more than 300 hours of clinical internship training at the TRI Center Substance Abuse Clinic, gaining hands-on experience in client intake, group facilitation, crisis response, and care coordination.

Inspired by faculty such as Professor and Chair of Psychology Robert Melara, Britt developed a strong interest in psychology and policy. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career in government and policy, with a focus on supporting children and families through agencies such as the Administration for Children's Services.

"During my time at CCNY, I've learned how to persevere through challenges while staying committed to my goals," she said.

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ROXANNA CARDENAS COLMENARES

B.A., ENGLISH
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES & THE ARTS

Brooklyn-based writer and published poet Roxanna Cardenas Colmenares's journey to graduation did not begin in a classroom, but in motion—crossing borders, learning a new language, and rebuilding a life from what little she could carry. What she brought with her was a fierce imagination and an unshakable drive to survive and create.

Arriving in the United States from Venezuela at age 22 under dangerous and uncertain circumstances, Cardenas navigated grief, displacement, and responsibility while working full time and steadily finding her way back to education. CCNY became not only a place of learning, but a place of belonging. She earned a B.A. in English with a creative writing concentration, completed the Publishing Certificate Program, graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and received honors including the Henry Roth Award in Fiction and the Esther Unger Poetry Prize. As editor-in-chief of *The Paper* and a senior editor at *Promethean*,

she cultivated spaces where undergraduate writers could grow, be seen, and be taken seriously. Her commitment to community extended beyond campus through internships at *Latinx in Publishing* and *Penguin Random House*, and recognition from *We Need Diverse Books*.

A writer of horror and speculative fiction, Cardenas explores themes of otherness, survival, and identity—often threading Spanish and Venezuelan cultural memory through her work. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career in children's publishing as an editorial assistant, hoping to amplify marginalized voices for young readers.

"If my time in college has taught me something, it is that I won't give up, no matter how much I've been through," she said. "I've earned my success, so I'll keep chasing it."

"If my time in college has taught me something, it is that I won't give up, no matter how much I've been through."



“One thing I’ve learned about leadership in general is that leaders help other people become leaders and help to empower others.”

AVA CONSTANTINO

**M.S.ED., SCHOOL BUILDING LEADER
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Growing up in suburban Buffalo, N.Y. and Columbus, Ohio, Ava Constantino had the importance of education instilled in her from an early age by her father and grandmother. But it wasn’t until her New York-based internship as a University of Pittsburgh counseling graduate student did the ancestral Brooklynite find her path in life.

Allured by depictions of the city in popular culture, she found herself overwhelmed by the reality. “You think you’ll move here and your life will become like a movie, with its own soundtrack,” she said. “Then you arrive, and that fantasy can quickly fade.”

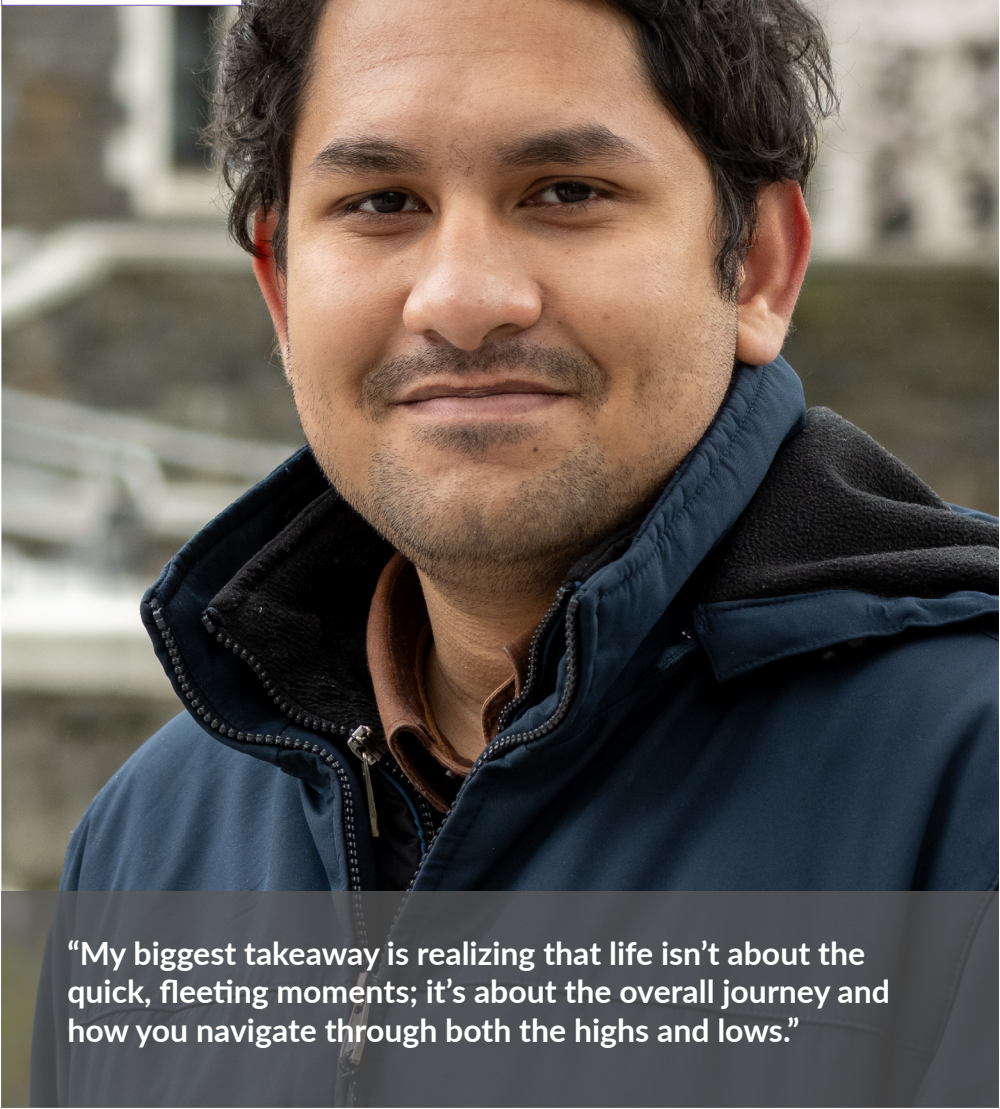
Fortunately, the internship grounded her by introducing her to her first group of students. Contrary to the stereotype that teenagers are “entitled, rude, lazy, and full of attitude,” Constantino found that her students “lifted me up when no one else could, and taught me countless things about

myself and what is really important in life.”

Devoted to her students, she found the devotion returned. “They were really supportive of me,” she said. “I was still very young. They had more confidence in me than I had in myself.”

Now a math teacher at Bronx Collegiate Academy High School, she hopes to apply her latest degree and the life lessons she learned throughout her career in a number of ways—perhaps by combining her administrative and interpersonal skills with her professed love of teaching.

“One thing I’ve learned about leadership in general is that leaders help other people become leaders and help to empower others,” she said. “I think that aspect of leadership has just made me a better teacher [and] I can instill some of those things in the students that I teach.”



“My biggest takeaway is realizing that life isn’t about the quick, fleeting moments; it’s about the overall journey and how you navigate through both the highs and lows.”

ARJUN S. DIBYA

**B.S., BIOCHEMISTRY
DIVISION OF SCIENCE**

Four years after arriving in the United States alone on his quest to become a neurosurgeon, Arjun Dibya has taken a major leap forward by graduating magna cum laude with a B.S. in biochemistry.

The son of a noted neurosurgeon in Bangladesh, Dibya grew up fascinated by his father’s work. As a child, he would tag along to the hospital and watch through the operating theater window as his father performed surgeries. “That experience sparked my interest in medicine, particularly neurosurgery,” he said. “I admired the way he helped people, and that’s when I knew I wanted to pursue a career in this noble field.”

That determination brought him to CCNY, where he excelled in research in neural network dynamics, exploring computational models of the brain. Dibya contributed to major research projects, including cancer biology studies at Columbia Irving Medical Center and neuroscience research at

the Columbia University Zuckerman Institute. His CCNY journey was supported by prestigious scholarships, including the Simons Foundation Undergraduate Neuroscience Scholarship and The City College Fellowship.

Dibya seeks to bridge the gap between research and clinical practice, with the goal of advancing medical science and improving lives through innovative healthcare solutions. He aims to integrate his knowledge of neuroscience and psychology to improve patient care and revolutionize neurological treatments. He plans on taking a gap year before entering medical school.

Of his time at CCNY, Dibya said: “My biggest takeaway is realizing that life isn’t about the quick, fleeting moments; it’s about the overall journey and how you navigate through both the highs and lows.”



“I want other immigrant students to know my story and identify with it, to understand that their background is not a limitation, but a source of strength.”

FATIMA ROSE ESQUIVEL

B.A., ADVERTISING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS, MINOR IN JOURNALISM
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES & THE ARTS

Despite working two part-time jobs with the Archdiocese of New York as a secretary and executive assistant, Mexican-born, first-generation college graduate Fatima Rose Esquivel maintained a 3.75 GPA. Her dedication earned her a place on the Dean’s List every semester, a testament to her discipline and determination. Without a traditional blueprint for college success, Esquivel turned challenges such as facing an unfamiliar education system, learning a new language, and feeling as if she didn’t belong into milestones, and uncertainty into motivation.

Esquivel was selected for the Dow Jones Fellowship through the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership and the Inner Circle Journalism Fellowship, experiences she once thought were unreachable. She further distinguished herself by enrolling in graduate-level courses as an undergraduate, demonstrating

both academic rigor and confidence in her abilities.

Under the mentorship of Professor Barbara Nevins Taylor, director of the Journalism program, Esquivel reported on stories about politics, society, and entertainment for the CCNY publication *The Harlem View*. In her senior year, she project managed an Advertising and Public Relations Workshop team in collaboration with the Provost’s Office and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

“I want other immigrant students to know my story and identify with it, to understand that their background is not a limitation, but a source of strength,” she said.

Esquivel intends to pursue a master’s degree in business management, while entering the field of real estate investment.



“I wasn’t sure about coming back to school after seven years of working and pursuing a field I had no previous experience in, but my classmates and professors made the transition back into academic life smooth and welcoming.”

MICHAEL FRANCE

M.ARCH., ARCHITECTURE
THE BERNARD AND ANNE SPITZER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

After seven years as an audio engineer, Michael France decided to pursue a Master of Architecture degree at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture. Compelled by his interests in affordable housing, sustainable building practices and community development, he hopes to redress current crises of urban poverty and homelessness.

“I wasn’t sure about coming back to school after seven years of working and pursuing a field I had no previous experience in [but] my classmates and professors made the transition back into academic life smooth and welcoming,” said France, who grew up in Ohio.

In his Studio I course, under the guidance of Professor Kaja Köhl, he designed a permanent home for the Climate Museum and proposed an expanded neighborhood scale that reused and recycled building

materials. In another studio, led by Professor Jerome Haferd and the Place, Memory, and Culture Incubator, France co-designed a new marketplace to replace the vertical big box structure at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue that currently houses Whole Foods and other national retailers.

“Professor Paul Ruppert inspired me the most,” said France. “Taking his studio gave me greater confidence in my ability to visually represent my thinking, and it has been a constant inspiration in challenging myself to continue to learn and grow as a designer.”

After graduation, France hopes to stay in New York City and work at a firm that has a strong culture of mentorship and collaboration while he works toward gaining his license.



“I really want to work with children because of the impact I could make.”

ALYSSA GARUFI

B.S., BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE
SOPHIE DAVIS SCHOOL OF BIOMEDICAL EDUCATION

As the “oldest everything” of her Long Island Sicilian family, Alyssa Garufi discovered her passion for caregiving at a young age, be it applying bandages to one of her 22 younger first cousins’ boo-boos or consoling them after a tumble.

“I knew, growing up, that I was going to want to go into something where I could take care of others, whether that was as a teacher or a doctor or a nurse,” she said. She indulged that desire as a Valley Stream North High School student, where she interned at the Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research, focusing on lupus in the brain.

That experience, in addition to volunteering at the local hospital, sparked a love of science. “I am really interested in neurology,” she said. “That’s the path I want to go down.”

Awarded first place for brain metabolism research in Dr. Elisa Tatti’s neuroscience lab at the CUNY School of Medicine, Garufi is contributing to a

manuscript in preparation, “How Stress and Aging Alter Brain Metabolism.” Garufi also works as a peer biochemistry tutor and SAT tutor. She babysits and volunteers with pediatric patients at Northwell Health, and participates in community outreach through Walk With A Doc.

Graduating with a 3.975 GPA, Garufi aims to combine her passions for a career as a pediatric neurologist.

“I do not believe that children deserve any sort of illness or harm,” she said. “They are completely innocent and, therefore, they deserve the most amount of care. I really want to work with children because of the impact I could make.”



“I thought I came into college knowing exactly what I would do. And I have been exposed to so many different experiences and opportunities, and now I want to continue working on all those things.”

KATHRYN GIOIOSA

**B.A., POLITICAL SCIENCE, MINORS IN COMMUNITY CHANGE STUDIES, PUBLIC HEALTH JUSTICE, AND WOMEN AND GENDER STUDIES
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

Kathryn Gioiosa was, literally, born to attend The City College of New York. The Forest Hills, Queens, native’s mother was a Taiwanese-born teacher who earned a master’s degree from CCNY, and young Kathryn decided to “follow her there” after high school.

“I just knew that City College had such a great reputation of providing so many opportunities and being around similar communities that I had been in growing up,” she said.

A Macaulay Honors student, Gioiosa was a Moynihan Center Public Service Fellow and a Climate Policy Fellow. The first CCNY student to earn both a Harry S. Truman Scholarship and a Udall Undergraduate Scholarship, she is the Colin Powell School’s 2026 valedictorian, graduating with a near-perfect 3.97 GPA.

Gioiosa co-founded and serves as co-executive director of TREEage, a youth-led climate justice organization that has more than 3,000 active high school and college members across

all five New York City boroughs and CUNY campuses. For that, she was named as one of Forbes magazine’s 30 Under 30 for Social Impact.

She also sits on the steering committee, and co-leads the organizing committee, of New York Renews, a coalition of over 390 environmental, justice, faith, and labor organizations statewide.

Gioiosa first became interested in public policy in the areas of infrastructure and climate change as a high school student, experiencing first-hand how some Queens public schools are afflicted with problems such as lead-tainted water or faulty heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems.

“I thought I came into college knowing exactly what I would do,” she said. “And I have been exposed to so many different experiences and opportunities, and now I want to continue working on all those things” as she pursues a joint master’s degree in public policy and urban planning.



“CWE is a beacon of higher education for communities whose relationship to opportunity is far more complex than my own.”

JAMES KIM

B.A., SOCIAL JUSTICE AND URBAN LIFE THE CENTER FOR WORKER EDUCATION AT THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

The proud first graduate of CWE’s new major in Social Justice and Urban Life, and a child of Korean immigrants, James Kim’s academic journey reflects perseverance, intellectual curiosity, and a deep commitment to equity in urban communities.

Before returning to school as a mature student, Kim built a successful career in New York City’s art world, working at the intersection of fine art and commercial production. His experience included assisting renowned artists, documenting major cultural moments such as Simone Leigh’s Venice Biennale presentation, and collaborating with leading institutions. While fulfilling, this work ultimately sharpened his desire to make a broader impact beyond cultural spaces and into the everyday lives of city residents.

At CWE, Kim distinguished himself as an exceptional student, earning consistent praise for his beautifully written, analytically rigorous work

and his ability to connect personal experience with theory. His capstone project examines small business industry clusters in a rezoning area, combining GIS mapping, interviews, observation, and photographic documentation to produce a nuanced, evidence-based analysis.

Kim credits CWE’s mission, designed for working adults, as central to his success. Balancing full-time work with rigorous academic study allowed him to support himself while earning his degree and clarifying his future path. He is currently preparing for the LSAT and plans to pursue law school, motivated by a desire to advocate for communities most affected by systemic inequality.

“CWE is a beacon of higher education for communities whose relationship to opportunity is far more complex than my own,” he said.



DEBORAH LAGUERRE

B.S., BIOLOGY
DIVISION OF SCIENCE

Jasmin Salcedo, associate director of CCNY's Gender Resources Center and Deborah Laguerre's mentor, describes the biology major as embodying the very essence of what it means to be a City College student: resilient, driven, community-centered, and deeply committed to using her education as a tool for impact.

In her time at CCNY, Laguerre not only excelled academically, but also distinguished herself as a transformational student leader. As a Colin Powell Racial Justice Fellow, she demonstrated a deep dedication to equity and advocacy. Through the Science Mentoring Program, she embraced mentorship and academic excellence within STEM, and her study abroad experience in Costa Rica reflected both intellectual curiosity and a global perspective. There, Laguerre studied marine biology and broadened her understanding of the natural world through hands-on global learning. Born and raised

in Queens, the daughter of Haitian immigrants has made it her mission to embrace every opportunity for growth, leadership, and service, creating a college experience marked by purpose and impact.

Laguerre was twice elected vice president of campus affairs for the Undergraduate Student Government, a reflection of both her dedication to the student body and her ability to lead with consistency and care. She also served as president of the Epsilon Tau Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, a chapter that has maintained a presence on the CCNY campus since 1965. In this role, she worked to advance the values of scholarship, service, sisterhood, and social action through chapter leadership and campus engagement.

Echoing her mentor, Laguerre said her CCNY experience had taught her "how important resilience, community, and taking initiative are."

"My biggest takeaway from my CCNY experience has been learning how important resilience, community, and taking initiative are."



“City College has prepared me, not only with the knowledge to teach, but also with the purpose behind why teaching matters.”

AALIYAH MARTINEZ

B.S., CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

As a first-grade student teacher, Aaliyah Martinez caught a glimpse of her younger self while helping an English language learner practice reading and speaking.

“In that moment, I realized that my journey had come full circle,” she said, reflecting on her experience as an ELL whose teacher wanted to hold her back a year. Fortunately, her fierce mother, who had brought her then five-year-old daughter from the Dominican Republic to ensure that she received a good education, would have none of it.

“She went to the school and advocated for me, explaining that I was not incapable of learning. I simply needed support, patience, and the right resources. She felt that my teacher had begun to give up on me instead of helping me succeed.”

That refusal to give up—on herself and on her students—

fueled her desire to become an educator herself. Volunteering at CCNY’s Project Sunshine and at Montefiore Hospital fostered her connections with children, allowing her to “bring them happiness and be able to spend one-on-one time with them.” She also served as an afterschool counselor and was president of Teachers for a Better Tomorrow, all while managing to graduate with a 3.86 GPA.

“The tools that I learned at City College changed the path of my education and taught me a lesson about the power of believing in a child when others might not,” said Martinez. “City College has prepared me, not only with the knowledge to teach, but also with the purpose behind why teaching matters.”



“The diversity in background and lived experience is profound.”

SHABNAM PAHRAND

B.A., PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE
CLASS OF 2026 VALEDICTORIAN

Growing up in an Afghan immigrant household, New York-born Shabnam Pahrand was influenced by her father and mother, who sacrificed everything to come to America.

Witnessing the denial of education to Afghan women became a powerful motivator, so Pahrand dedicated herself not only to academic achievement but also to service. She mentors newly arrived young Afghan refugees, helping them to navigate the college application process and to adjust to American life.

“While I’m limited in how I can help those back home, I do everything in my power to make their transition into America smoother,” she said.

Committed to making the most of the privileges she has been granted, Pahrand enrolled in the Macaulay Honors College at CCNY. Three years later, she graduated with a

double major in philosophy and political science, and as the 2026 Valedictorian. Her achievements led philosophy professor and author Nickolas Pappas to rank her among the top five students he has taught in his more than 30 years at CCNY.

Pahrand was as a Colin Powell School International Human Rights Fellow and a Stanford Summer Research Fellow. As part of her unique Macaulay experience, she conducted research on civic engagement and on the role of poetry and legacy within activist movements. Reflecting on her time at CCNY, she describes the university as “a safe haven,” noting that “the diversity in background and lived experience is profound.”

After graduation, Pahrand plans to pursue a law degree and build a career in human rights law and nonprofit organizational work.



“City College can change your life if you choose to change your life.”

JOSELYN PEREZ VELAZQUEZ

B.A., POLITICAL SCIENCE, MINOR IN BUSINESS
ADMINISTRATION AND LEGAL STUDIES
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Joselyn Perez Velazquez came to the United States from Atlixco, Mexico at age five, brought by her mother, who wanted a better life for her family. After high school, she earned a Dream US Scholarship, which provides full scholarships to undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children, to attend CCNY. Arriving on campus at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was still lingering, she found it difficult to find her place and to socialize with her fellow students. Demonstrating the resilience that brought her to CCNY in the first place, she adapted.

“I think that people in commuter schools feel like they can just go to class and just call it a day and go home right after,” she said. “But there’s so much potential at City College to make friends, be a part of organizations, and be a part of clubs, because there are so many opportunities here. Attending one

meeting or one info session could possibly change your life.”

Throwing herself into campus life, she served as president of both the CCNY Dream Team and the Mexican Student Association, which she founded, and worked part time at the Immigration Student Center. In her junior year, she was a fellow of the Braven Accelerator, a leadership and career-readiness program, which she credits for helping her grow personally and professionally.

“I can say, 100 percent, that City College can change your life if you choose to change your life,” she said.

Her next step is law school, preferably at CUNY, on her journey to becoming an immigration attorney.



“I’ve had many truly fantastic mentors at City College, and throughout CUNY, who have really pushed me to tackle problems and pursue experiences I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

CHRISTIAN CLARENCE RASMUSSEN

**B.S., COMPUTER SCIENCE
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE
GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING**

As a junior computer science major, Christian Clarence Rasmussen co-authored and presented a paper entitled “Time-Aware Re-Synthesis for Secure Quantum Systems” at the IEEE International Symposium on Hardware Oriented Security and Trust (HOST). His research presence quickly expanded to other high-profile gatherings, including presentations at the International Conference on Computer-Aided Design (ICCAD ’24) and the Great Lakes Symposium on VLSI (GLSVLSI ’25), while continuing collaborative work on quantum circuit compilation methodologies with the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Beyond his research, Christian represented CCNY as an Intelligence Community Centers for Academic Excellence (IC CAE) Scholar, serving as a subject matter expert in U.S. Central Command action during the 2024 ODNI Central Command Simulation in Washington.

His academic and extracurricular achievements have been widely

recognized, earning him the Macaulay Honors College Provost Award for Academic Excellence, a National Science Foundation travel grant to the 2024 HOST symposium, first place at the NYC Quantum Hackathon, the Best Poster Award at ICCAD ’24, and medals with the CCNY cross country and track and field teams at multiple CUNYAC championships.

Upon completing his B.S. degree, the Staten Island native will remain at CCNY to pursue his Ph.D. in the SEcure & Reliable Systems Laboratory (SERS), researching distributed and heterogeneous quantum computing systems, aiming for a career bridging academia and industry. Reflecting on his undergraduate experience, Rasmussen noted, “I’ve had many truly fantastic mentors at City College, and throughout CUNY, who have really pushed me to tackle problems and pursue experiences I wouldn’t have otherwise.”



“My biggest takeaway from CCNY is the openness of opportunity by all the professors and staff to anyone who seeks it.”

SAYYID YOBHEL VASQUEZ RODRIGUEZ

B.S., BIOLOGY
DIVISION OF SCIENCE
CLASS OF 2026 SALUTATORIAN

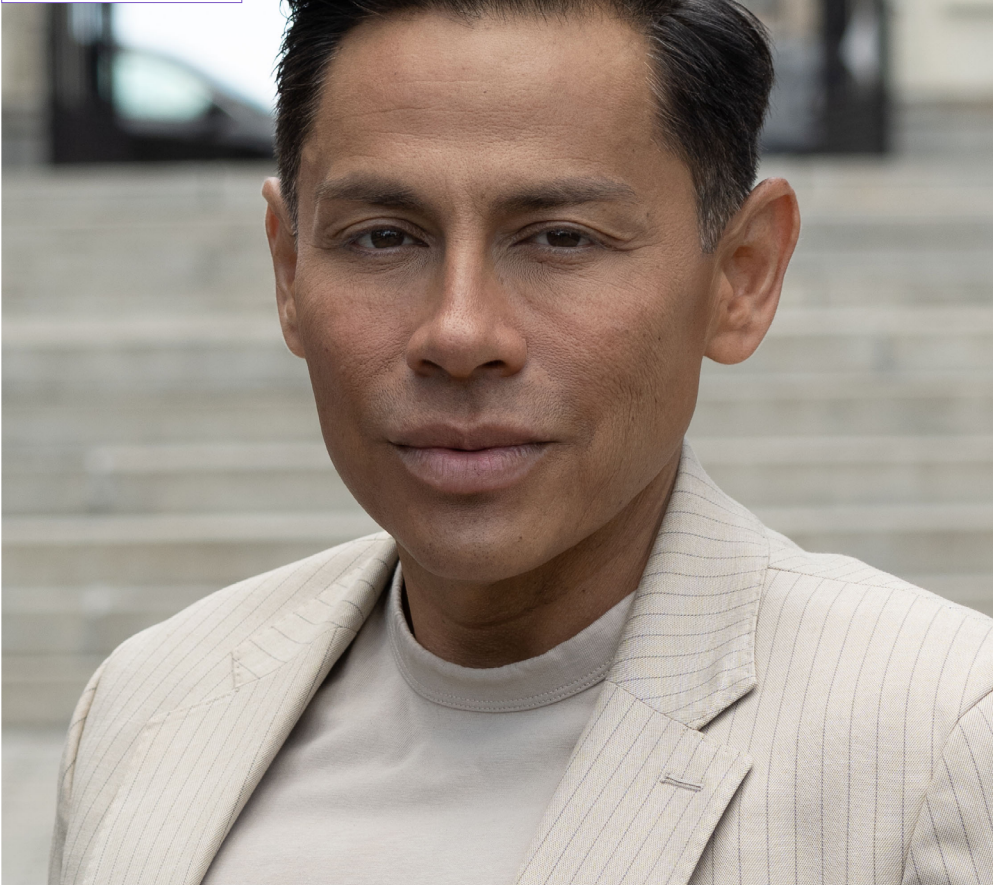
The son of a Peruvian surgeon and Venezuelan orthodontist, a medical career for Vasquez Rodriguez was likely in the genes from his birth in New York. He grew up in Mexico City, where his parents relocated for work, instilling in him an early commitment to service and medicine. He lived in the Mexican capital until graduating from high school.

Admitted to CCNY, Vasquez Rodriguez deferred enrollment for a year to complete basic training at the U.S. Navy’s Recruit Training Command boot camp in Great Lakes, Ill. He later specialized as a Corpsman at Fort Sam Houston, Tex., and qualified to work as a field medic alongside U.S. Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Throughout his service, he graduated with honors and earned accelerated advancement for exceptional performance.

At CCNY, Vasquez Rodriguez pursued a B.S. in Biology, graduating summa cum laude. He served as a research

assistant in the Computational Biophysics Laboratory, researching computational models of protein–membrane interactions. He co-authored three research articles, two published in leading scientific journals. “How many have produced three first-author papers in their undergraduate studies?” said his mentor and co-author, Professor of Theoretical and Computational Biophysical Chemistry Themis Lazaridis. “This is extremely rare, not only at CCNY, but in the entire country.”

Vasquez Rodriguez has volunteered as a medical scribe and Spanish interpreter in a clinic in Queens and is applying to M.D./Ph.D. programs, aiming to become an oncologist and cancer researcher. Reflecting on his experience at CCNY, he said, “My biggest takeaway from CCNY is the openness of opportunity by all the professors and staff to anyone who seeks it.”



“My professional work has focused on helping emerging creative talent build visibility, partnerships, and sustainable business strategies within industries that often rely on legacy networks and informal access to capital.”

ANDREW SERRANO

B.A., INTERDISCIPLINARY LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCES
DIVISION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AT THE
CENTER FOR WORKER EDUCATION

Native Californian Andrew Serrano came to New York City to study fashion marketing at Parsons School of Design. With more than a decade of experience in the industry, his time as a mentor with aspiring fashion designers and industry executives inspired him to return to college.

“I returned to university after successfully working inside these industries, seeking a deeper intellectual framework for understanding the systems shaping opportunity within them,” said Serrano. “My professional work has focused on helping emerging creative talent build visibility, partnerships, and sustainable business strategies within industries that often rely on legacy networks and informal access to capital.”

At the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies at the Center for Worker Education, Serrano got to engage with subjects such as philosophy, media, and cultural analysis while continuing to work. He also served on CCNY’s LGBTQ+ Student Center Advisory Board.

“My advisor, Jason Chappell, immediately made me feel that the CWE’s Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts & Sciences program was the right fit—especially for someone like me, who wanted to expand my perspective as a critical thinker—bridging my professional experience with deeper academic inquiry,” he said.

Serrano plans to continue supporting emerging designers and creative entrepreneurs—from BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities—find their voice and access the capital needed to sustain and grow their businesses. He will begin his M.B.A. at Cornell University’s SC Johnson College of Business this summer.

“Professors Marlene Clark and Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken’s guidance helped shape not only how I think, but how I lead—with intention, curiosity, and a commitment to growth,” said Serrano, who is graduating summa cum laude.



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