



EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Office of Prestigious Awards

**THE COURAGE
TO HIT SUBMIT**



DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The Office of Prestigious Awards strives to be Tennessee's premier institution of higher education helping students to reflect, aspire, and reach great heights through the transformational process of applying for nationally and globally competitive awards. Our office opened July 2023. We have already advised and mentored students across campus to apply for many of the most nationally and globally competitive awards. In our first year of existence, ETSU celebrated its first Rhodes finalist in school history and first Truman Scholar since 1992. We have also had Critical Language Scholars along with several Gilman and JET winners.

I believe that every student that comes to ETSU has the potential to become an elite scholar. Our office, along with the help of staff, faculty, administrators, and scholarship committees across campus, works to identify and maximize the potential of talented and driven students by exposing them to a world of research, education abroad, and public service opportunities.

Certainly, we are proud of our students winning the world's most prestigious awards. However, we are equally as proud and doubly impressed by the multitude of the students we advise through the rigorous application process who applied and did not win an award—staying true to the adage that success often happens in the dark: we do not see these as losses but moments of growth in the scholar development process.

Whether a student wins an award or not, the rigorous process of applying for these awards—the courage to hit “submit”—empowers students to recognize and articulate their personal and professional goals through the act of critical reflection, ultimately creating confident graduates who are prepared for life after ETSU and have created a remarkable story.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CDM', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. Carson Medley
Director, Office of Prestigious Awards

MISSION

The Office of Prestigious Awards promotes an **inclusive campus culture** of award opportunities related to research, education abroad, and public service that develop competitive students—personally and professionally—for life beyond ETSU. We empower students to recognize and articulate their professional ambitions by advising them through the critically reflective application process, creating confident graduates who are **masters of their story**. Our efforts extend to curating a caring and engaged **campus community** of faculty, staff and scholarship committees with sustained outreach to expand the ETSU students' networks and provide them with optimal mentorship.

VISION

The Office of Prestigious Awards will become Tennessee's higher education **leader** in guiding students through the process of **applying** and **securing** nationally and globally competitive awards.



FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO
VISIT OUR WEBSITE



Pictured from left to right are ETSU President, Dr. Brian Noland; Board of Trustees member and Partner at Blackburn, Childers & Steagall, Melissa Steagall-Jones; Trent White; Assistant Professor in History, Dr. Jennifer Adler; Executive Director of Roan Scholars Leadership Program, Lt. Col. Scott Jeffress; Assistant Director of Roan Scholars, Dr. Matt Williams; and Louis K. Gump, son of Louis Gump who was a pillar to the community and founded the Roan Scholars Leadership Program. Pictured on page 5 is Trent White.

Trent White has been an exceptional leader since he arrived at ETSU, exhibiting a commitment to improving the lives of those in our region and beyond. White, former SGA president, Roan Scholar, and Mock Trial President can now add Truman Scholar to his accomplishments. As a graduate of Unicoi County High School and recent recipient of the town key to Erwin, White is proud to represent the Appalachian region as a recipient of one of the most competitive awards in the nation.

“The Truman Scholarship application process was a journey of self-discovery and discipline. It forced me to confront my career aspirations with clarity and commitment as I crafted and refined my story through countless revisions,” says White. “As I navigated the Truman Scholarship application, I found that the rigorous demands of the application became a powerful exercise in defining my narrative and sharpening my professional goals.”

White, inspired by ETSU’s first Rhodes finalist in school history last year, now has his eyes set on the Rhodes. White now finds himself in the same process as Shivam Patel did last year while working on his Rhodes application. Patel was in his first year of medical school at Johns Hopkins. Meanwhile, White is knee-deep preparing his law school applications and getting ready for the LSAT. Nevertheless, he enjoys the learning process of applying.

We are proud of White and look forward to the bright future ahead of him.

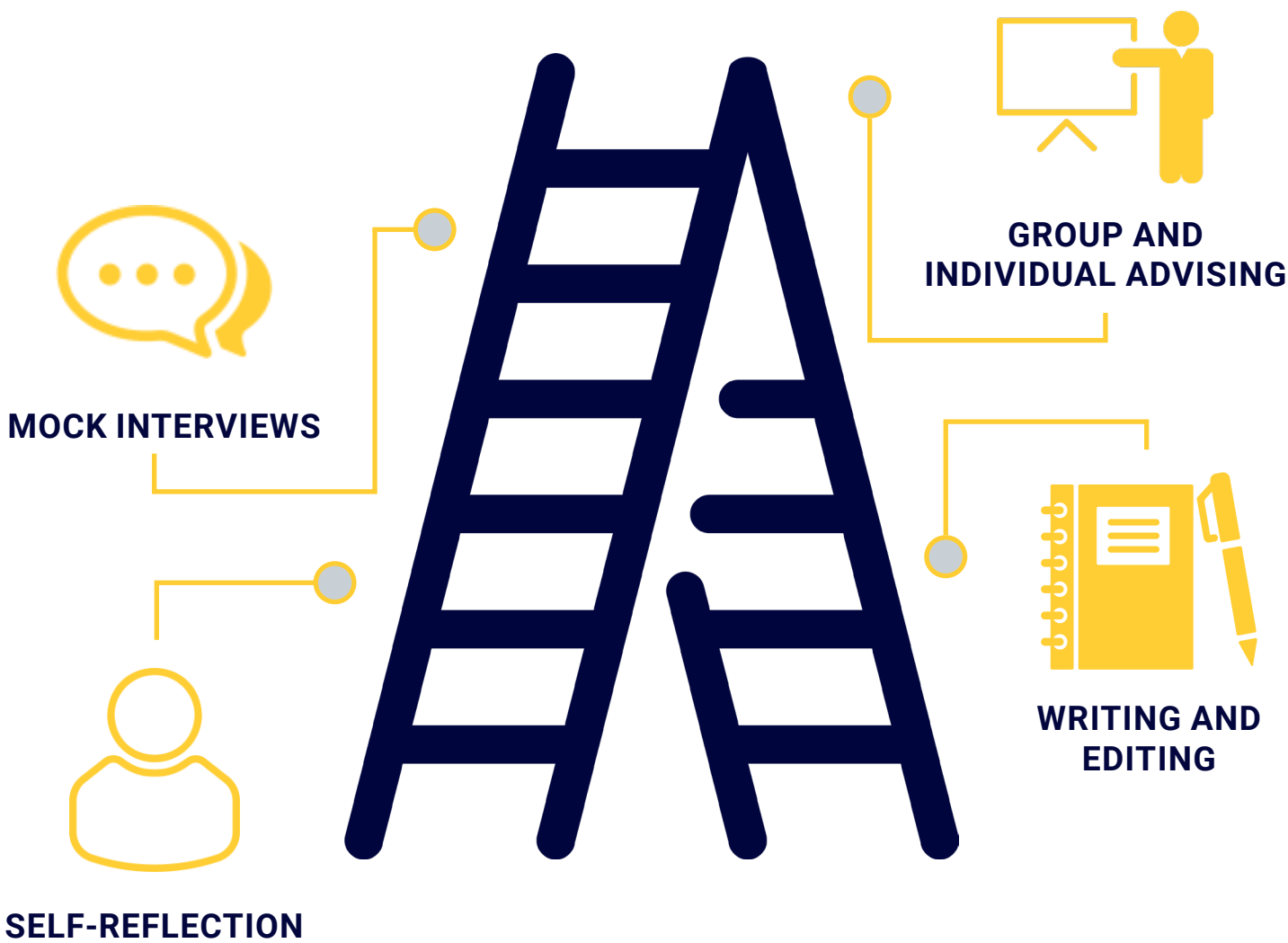
TRENT WHITE

Class of 2025



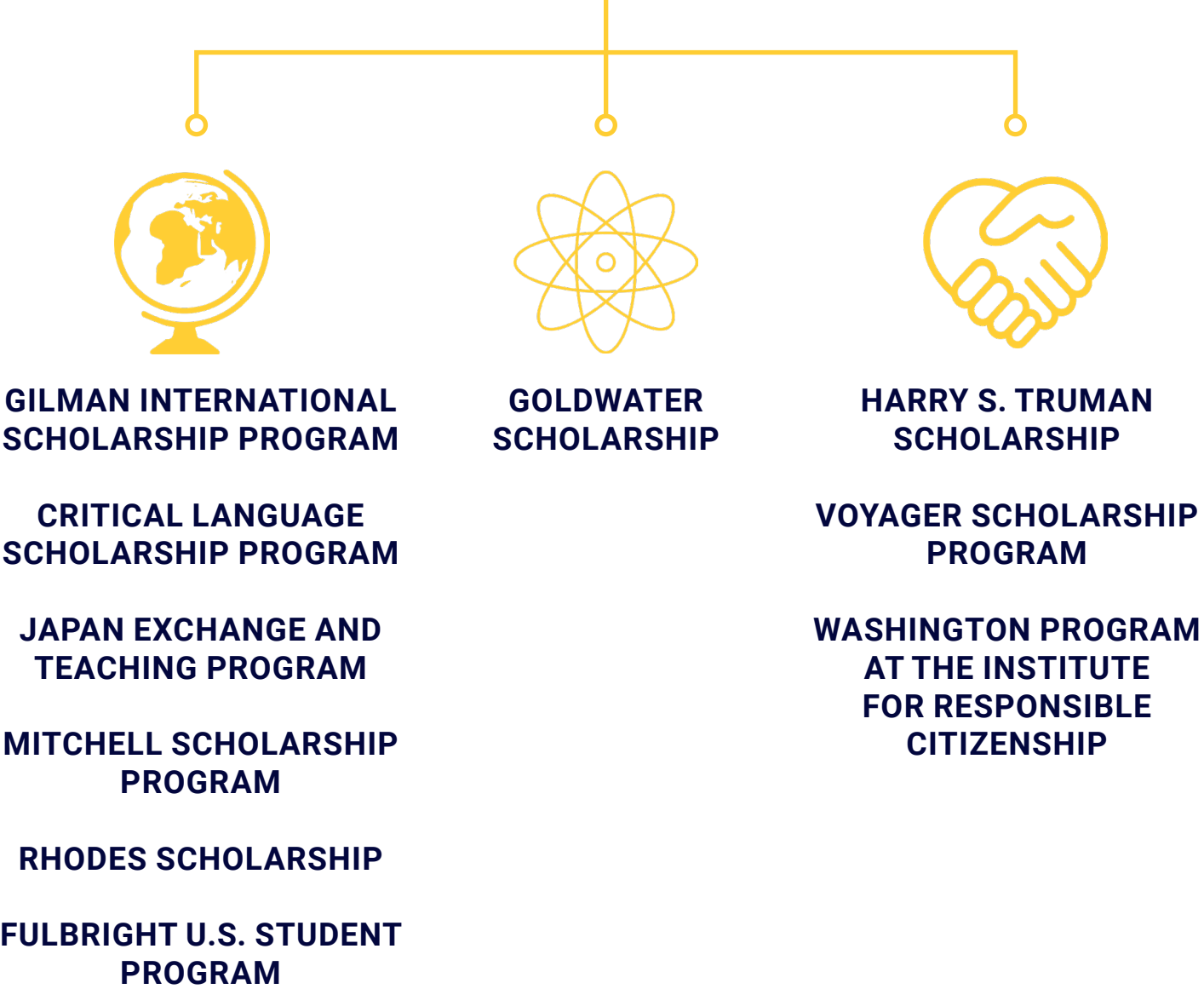
APPLICANTS AND AWARDS

35 APPLICANTS



48 INQUIRY FORMS

10 AWARDS APPLIED TO



THE I-40 PROJECT



ETSU students (from left to right) Trent White, Kendall Robertson, Sarah Mohammed, and Maryn Tucker excitedly wait to board the TSU Honors College float in the annual homecoming parade.

The I-40 Project (named after the interstate highway that connects the Appalachian Highlands and Nashville) aims to dismantle perceived differences and foster a deeper understanding of similarities and serve as a guiding example for other schools facing similar circumstances. The I-40 Project is not only an academic endeavor but also a transformative cultural immersion. The exchange is centered on capturing the different college experiences of students from seemingly different worlds and campuses.

Tennessee State University (TSU) students come from a diverse set of backgrounds and most likely have never been exposed to the geography and history of the rural Appalachian space. The same holds true for ETSU students entering the geography and history of the big-city space.

At TSU, ETSU students experienced homecoming festivities, a leadership lecture, and a Jamaican Sunday brunch. When TSU students and Honors College Dean, Dr. Coreen Jackson

journeyed to Johnson City, we had a round table discussion with founder of the “Why not Win?” Institute, Larry Thornton, a historic tour of Jonesborough, and square dancing at the Down Home.

The exchange sparked reflection and bonding among peers as each group evaluated their unique backgrounds yet similar experiences. A prominent point of discussion was the recent news of TSU being significantly underfunded by the state of Tennessee. For Trent White, this became the basis for his policy proposal to his Truman Scholarship application as he considered the role of higher education to rural and underserved populations. Experiences like the I-40 project are crucial as they urge students, like White, to critically engage with the world as thoughtful scholars.



ETSU and TSU students cheering and waving to the crowds in the annual homecoming parade.

SHIVAM PATEL

Class of 2022



Only year one into creating a culture of prestigious awards on the ETSU campus by educating students, faculty and staff about the seemingly infinite horizon of nationally competitive awards has not been easy. Not for lack of willing ears, rather the vast selection of awards to choose from, awards which must align with the student's chosen discipline, personal goals, professional ambitions and holistic achievements on campus and in the community.

One award, though, stands out above all others, the oldest (first awarded in 1902) international program and the most prestigious: the Rhodes Scholarship. Rhodes Scholars feature Nobel, PEN/Faulkner and Pulitzer Prize winners, heads of state, university presidents, vice chancellors, high court judges, leaders of major organizations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Oxfam. And almost everyone seems to know that Bill Clinton was a Rhodes Scholar.

In October 2023, one of our own nearly joined the elite group of 32 American Rhodes scholars selected each year. Shivam Patel, a College of Public Health graduate and Roan Scholar now in his second year of medical school at Johns Hopkins, became the first Rhodes Scholar finalist at our institution. Patel undoubtedly possesses the leadership instincts and moral force of character required of a Rhodes Scholar—but he had that something extra and his potential was recognized and shaped with the four years of mentoring he received at ETSU.

Most of our students who succeed at ETSU in the way that Patel has might dream of leaving Appalachia for a so-called “better life”—understandable considering the health disparities sweeping our region. When Patel—wait-listed at Harvard Medical School—announced he received admittance and accepted the offer to fulfill his dream of studying medicine at one of the world's most prestigious medical programs, Johns Hopkins, one might think those who had mentored and conducted research with Patel would don the laurel wreath crown and drum our chests in triumphant pride. Patel, with such humble roots—the underdog first-generation Appalachian-Indian student from the tiny hamlet of Hamblen County, Tennessee—hurdled what seemed insurmountable odds. However, the army of supporters that helped Patel did not think like that. Patel believed. We, too, believed.

No one was surprised when Patel received the Gilman International Scholarship followed by admission to a Fulbright UK Summer Institute. Nor was anyone surprised when he was a semifinalist for the Fulbright ETA Program in Turkey (our only surprise was that he did not receive the award). We all expected, yet never took for granted, this kind of greatness from Patel.

Why?

Because we knew, know, the unimpeachable character and prodigious expectations that Patel by his own design demanded of himself.

Did we catch lightning in a bottle with Patel's Rhodes success? Hardly.

Enter our office's vision: To become Tennessee's higher education leader in guiding students through the process of applying and securing nationally and globally competitive awards.

And we are in the process of becoming.



Patel in Chicago, IL before his finalist interview for the Rhodes Scholarship.

FULBRIGHT HUNGARY COMMISSION PARTNERSHIP

The Office of Prestigious Awards was invited by the Fulbright Hungary Commission to participate in a program to build study abroad programs in Hungary for Appalachian students. The Fulbright Hungary Commission cited two primary goals: (1) to encourage student advisors to recruit first-generation students to consider Hungary as an alternative destination for study abroad opportunities and (2) to inform in-bound advisors and program directors in Hungary about the special needs and design considerations regarding students from first-generation, rural and non-traditional institutions from Appalachia.

ETSU representatives included Dr. Carson Medley, director of the Office of Prestigious Awards; Dr. Stokes Piercy, professor in Media and Communications and filmmaker; Dr. Leah Adinolfi, dean of Student Engagement; Dr. Scott Koterbay, interim director of Mary B. Martin School for the Arts; Olivia Adinolfi, student in the Changemaker cohort of the Honors College; and Holden Medley, student at University School. Fulbright Hungary provided an itinerary that created multiple collaborations and opportunities for ETSU students and faculty with a visit to Liszt Academy, Department of Folk Music; Eszterhazy Karoly University in Eger, Viticulture and Tourism Department; University of Miskolc, a former coal mining and heavy industry area; and the University of Debrecen, Agriculture, Tourism Departments.

Dr. Medley, at a recent presentation to campus administrators, said that “Believe it or not, the universities, the cities, the countryside, the nonprofits, the businesses, the parks, the palinka distilleries, the concerts, the museums, and, yes, even the thermal baths, were methodically planned for several months with the Fulbright Hungary Commission to ensure comprehensive efforts by our team to identify Hungarian partners and find opportunities for your colleagues, colleges, departments, units, and students whom you serve. I believe we found something for everyone.”

Next summer, Dr. Medley and Dr. Adinolfi will be leading a group of students back to Hungary for similar experiences through an ETSU Hungary Fulbright program. Finally, the trip also created prestigious awards opportunities. Dr. Piercy has been tapped to apply for a Fulbright Faculty award. Dr. Adinolfi has been asked to bring her knowledge and experience back to Eger to serve as a Fulbright Specialist; and a student from Dr. Koterbay’s Fine and Performing Arts program is applying for the Fulbright U.S. Student research grant.



Pictured at the top are representatives from Fulbright, ETSU, and other Appalachian universities; pictured in the bottom left is Honors College student, Olivia Adinolfi; pictured in the bottom right is Dr. Stokes Piercy, professor and filmmaker.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS & GAINING MOMENTUM

From our office’s beginning, we recognized many hurdles in our students’ paths to success. First and foremost, hardly anyone knew what “prestigious awards” were, let alone feeling confident in applying for them. With determination, our team piloted programs taking feedback from students as well as our committees to always be improving.

Over the 23’-24’ academic year, our team collaborated with units including the Education Abroad Office, Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities, the Pride Center and the Multi-Cultural Center to offer targeted programming with a focus on underrepresented populations. Beyond student focused outreach, we also placed emphasis on training faculty and staff in the benefit of awards as students’ mentors are integral to the support network needed for successful applicants. Thus, our team convened three committees of faculty and staff.

The SPARKS committee, comprised of student success champions across colleges, accompanied

us to the National Association of Fellowships Advisors biennial conference and met once monthly for the year. Additional committees for Trent White’s application to the Truman Scholarship, and the Fulbright U.S. Student Program committee for our 24’-25’ applicants provided crucial support to students. These outstanding groups of leaders offered invaluable insights as we navigated the landscape of fellowships advising.

To commemorate our office’s launch and the hard-earned success of students and key stakeholders, we hosted our first annual Spring Celebratory Reception in April 2024. Our team, award applicants and Dr. Brian Noland all shared the impact of awards on the institution as well as students’ personal and professional development.

Our team is excitedly building on the momentum gained in our first year to help ETSU students reach their boldest ambitions.

LEVI HOLCOMB

Class of 2024



Holcomb in Japan on his JET placement.

Levi Holcomb is a two-time prestigious award winner who embraced the scholar development process and relentlessly pursued his dream.

I first met Holcomb, a community-college transfer student, in my Foundations of Research class. Holcomb started visiting me during office hours, talked to me about his dreams of studying in Japan. However, he feared this dream would never become a reality: a transfer student with limited financial means, working full-time at Walmart and commuting two hours each way to ETSU; juggling his commitments as an Honors student and conducting

research for his thesis; and taking a full-course load. He came from an impoverished area in rural Appalachia where few young men went to college let alone studied abroad. Nevertheless, he was determined to overcome what seemed insurmountable odds.

I encouraged Holcomb to apply for the prestigious Gilman International Scholarship. Not only did he apply but he won the award and represented the United States as a cultural ambassador in Japan. The process of applying for the Gilman—a process that required him going through multiple drafts that probed and deepened his reasons and aspirations for immersing himself in Japanese culture and the rigors of studying Japanese—revealed to me his commitment and genuine intention(s) for choosing to study in what he now calls “his second country.” When he returned home from Japan, he expressed amazement that the Japanese students he taught and mentored thirsted for the same cultural exchange and experiences he yearned for as a child in rural Appalachia; this enlightenment inspired him even more and justified his reasons for wanting to participate in the JET program. Two years ago, Holcomb told me, the JET would have seemed impossible but after winning the Gilman seemed within reach. Nevertheless, the JET remains one of the most competitive awards: several thousand applications are received each year, half of all those invited to an interview, and only the top candidates selected to participate. Holcomb embraced this and put in the hard work to make himself a competitive JET candidate.

All Gilman winners are required to carry out the Follow-on Service Project upon their return home to increase the awareness of both the study abroad experience and the opportunities afforded via the Gilman. Holcomb fulfilled and transcended his Gilman promise to continue acting as a cultural ambassador by tutoring and mentoring non-native speakers from Japan, South Korea, Venezuela, and Ukrainian refugees. He also worked endlessly on his Japanese fluency. I would often see him eating in our dining hall with these students and speaking not only English with them but also teaching them Japanese. Well, it paid off.

We are happy to report that Holcomb’s dream came true. Last spring, he became one of just 2,885 Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) JET winners. Our office is also excited to have had four ETSU students receive the JET, including Holcomb.

KENDALL ROBERTSON

Class of 2026

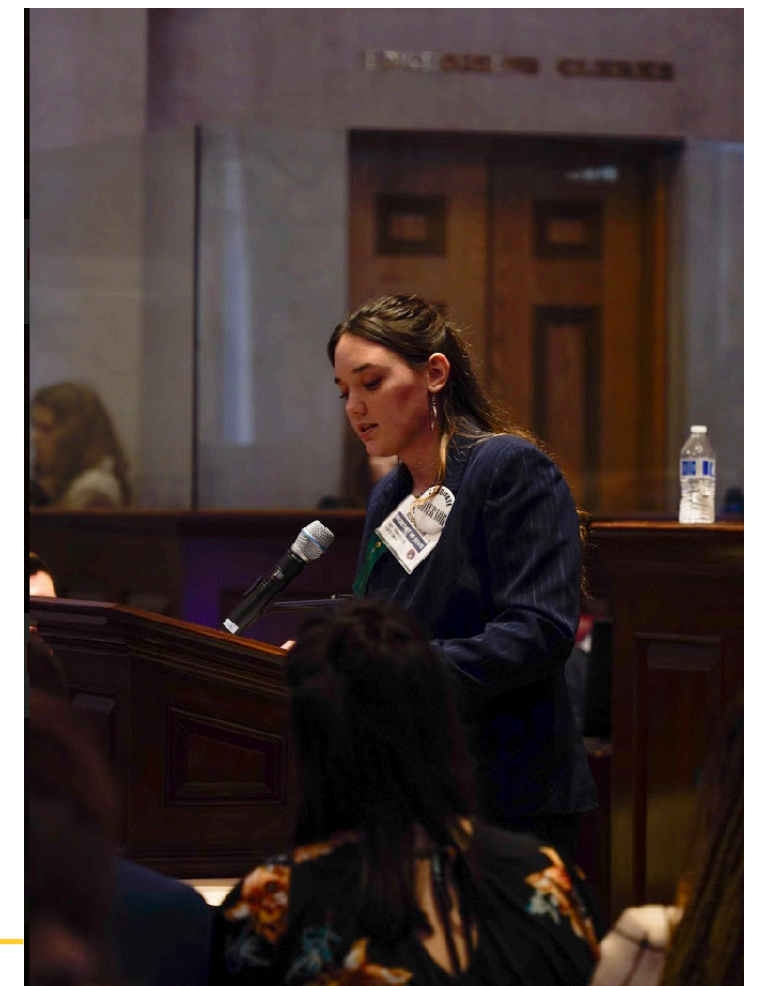


Kendall Robertson, Global Citizen Scholar junior, exudes the drive juxtaposed with talent with good-old fashioned hard-work and integrity thrown into the mix. Robertson, who helped lead the I-40 Project and has taken the lead on the Metro-to-Mountains Project exchange with Kennesaw State University this September, was a finalist (winner) of the prestigious U.S. Department of State Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Spark award to study Russian this summer. Robertson was one of only 20 scholars picked for the award. However, after careful consideration, Robertson declined the award; she was notified of her standing a day after being on-boarded for a coveted paid internship with the Tennessee Department of Transportation working in the Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation, housed within the Headquarters Multimodal Division in downtown Nashville, TN—an experience that also ties in with her thesis research.

Please know that Robertson’s decision to serve in her internship rather than seeking CLS Spark was difficult; she is the type of person, though, that finishes what she commits to and did not feel it would be professional or morally just to abandon her internship. She put it in perspective, saying, “Applying for a competitive award takes courage. You have to sit with yourself and stop believing that the opportunity is not for you. It is difficult putting hours into an application when you don’t know the outcome, but you learn quite a bit about yourself and your goals through the process. Even when you don’t get the response you want, it is still satisfying to know that you put your best work out there. More often than not, when it feels like an award opportunity closes, another will open.”

We are hoping that the next opportunity is around the corner as Robertson now has her eyes set on the Truman Award.

Robertson gives a campaign speech in the Tennessee State Capitol Building as part of the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature.





STAFF PROFILES



Dr. Carson Medley
Director

Dr. Carson Medley, originally from Jackson, Mississippi, earned a Bachelor of Arts in history from the University of California at Berkeley, an M.A. in English and M.A. in counseling and guidance from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and a doctorate in higher education from Sacramento State University. Before his role as assistant dean in the Honors College and director of Prestigious Awards, Dr. Medley worked for various startup companies during the golden age of the dot-com industry. He then transitioned into research and teaching for the next 20 years at Tulane University, Cuesta College, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo and Chico State University. Dr. Medley has also published a work of fiction, nonfiction, and written several screenplays. His greatest passion in higher education is to provide transformational opportunities for students that involve research, education abroad, cultural-immersion programs and public service—passions that dovetail nicely into the world of nationally and globally competitive awards. Dr. Medley has a big family (Medley 6) that includes his wife, Julia; twins Daphne and Julian, 5; daughter Eve, 9; and son Holden, 12. They all attend University School. Dr. Medley's greatest passions outside of his family and higher education include basketball, books, movies and music.

Pictured top left is 2023 CLS recipient, Jess Rodriguez Potter in Tanzania where she studied Swahili; pictured top right is Budapest, Hungary; pictured in the middle are ETSU participants in the I-40 Project at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, TN; pictured bottom left is a mountain view taken by Jess Rodriguez Potter; pictured bottom right is Levi Holcomb eating traditional food in Japan.



Cassidy Blackwell
Advisor

Cassidy graduated from ETSU with a Bachelor of Arts in English and began this position in fall 2023. Before joining the team fulltime, Cassidy held several marketing and sales internships and worked as a freelance writer for Johnson City News and Neighbor and the Business Journal. During her undergraduate education at ETSU, she was involved as a features writer for the East Tennessean, Expedition Leader, and University Honors Scholar. In her current role, Cassidy served as a panelist for the Gilman Scholarship in October 2023 and March 2024, and as a reviewer for the Critical Language Scholarship in November 2023. This summer, she earned Adobe accreditations in Visual Design using Photoshop and Print and Digital Media Publication using InDesign. Cassidy values connecting with students and traveled on the I-40 Project to Nashville in October 2023, and recently accompanied Honors College staff and Global Citizen Scholars to Paris and Lyon, France. She is also co-instructing an ETSU 1020 course this fall. In her spare time, Cassidy enjoys attending local events and volunteers for FoodRecovery.org. She also loves to cook, read and spend time with loved ones.



Danielle Olmo
Advisor

Danielle Olmo, originally from San Diego, is an experienced professional with a diverse background in student services and education. She graduated from ETSU with a Bachelor of Science. She spent much of her undergraduate studying sports and leisure management, concentrating in parks and recreation and art. Her career began in Outdoor Adventures with the CPA leading both small and large groups, honing her leadership skills and passion for experiential learning. Danielle expanded her professional growth working in Housing, where she developed a strong foundation in student support. Her journey continued as a registrar at ELS Language Centers and then as an international student advisor (DSO and RO) at ETSU, roles that allowed her to guide and support students from around the world. Danielle's commitment to student development is evident in her current role, where she has served as a panelist for the Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship and reviewed applications for the Education Abroad Scholarship for multiple years. Growing up in a household with a strong focus on mental health, Danielle excels in fostering self-discovery and confidence in students. Her genuine enthusiasm for meaningful discussions and student growth makes her a valued member of the team. Outside of work, she enjoys playing board games and video games with friends, eating Birria tacos, cooking and eagerly anticipating Halloween.

Pictured top left is 2023 CLS recipient, Jess Rodriguez Potter in Tanzania where she studied Swahili; pictured top right is Trent White, Truman Scholar and former SGA President and Hunter Turgeon, current SGA President; pictured in the bottom are ETSU participants in the I-40 Project on TSU's campus.



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Office of Prestigious Awards

Special Thanks To

ETSU Office of the President

Why Not Win? Institute

Richard “Dick” Clarke, ETSU Alum (*Class of 1971*)

Enterprise Rent-a-Car

Thank you to our donors for supporting special programs like the I-40 Project that equip ETSU students with impactful experiences that truly have the potential to alter one’s trajectory. We appreciate your dedication to our office’s mission.

Over the year, our office also applied to secure grant funding for various projects. We reached the second phase in the 2024 IDEAS grant competition under the U.S. Department of State’s Increase and Diversify Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) Program, and will be applying again in October 2024 to support a program in Hungary doing service with Roma Gypsy youth. Our office also applied for the Tennessee Board of Regents SERS grant to support a study abroad program for first-generation and Pell recipient students, but were unfortunately denied.