

Department of
Recreation, Sport and Tourism

RST

2024 Honors and Awards



College of Applied
Health Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Program

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Message from the Interim Department Head



Dr. Bill Stewart

On behalf of the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, I would like to congratulate you on receiving an award or scholarship this year. You stood out among your peers for the commitment to RST's mission that you demonstrated through your work in classrooms, laboratories and organizations on campus as well as organizations in Urbana-Champaign and beyond. I know I speak for the entire faculty and staff when I say I am tremendously proud of each and every one of you.

Through our educational, research and public engagement activities, RST strives to improve quality of life by enhancing the availability of opportunities that foster healthy lifestyles and promote social and economic development of communities. Your impressive list of accomplishments is inspiring to us all, and demonstrates your passion to advocate for, create and deliver meaningful opportunities across the lifespan and throughout a diverse society.

Congratulations on your achievements thus far. I have no doubt that as you move forward with your lives, you will continue to shine as dedicated stewards of recreation, sport and tourism programs and facilities, enthusiastic educators who ignite a passion for leisure studies in others, and creative scholars whose insightful research contributes to the betterment of our society. No matter where your future leads, know that you will always be a member of an academic community that holds you in high esteem and wishes you nothing but success.

Message from the Dean



Dr. Cheryl Hanley-Maxwell

Congratulations to those of you whose excellence has been recognized by the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism with 2024 awards. These honors acknowledge outstanding achievement in educational, research and public engagement activities, and in your pursuit of personal and professional goals through hard work, creativity and dedication. You are well-deserving of the accolades you are receiving, and I am deeply proud of you.

The importance of leisure to the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities has never been clearer. RST at Illinois leads the field in advancing both knowledge and practice in recreation, sport and tourism that are culturally- and age-appropriate and relevant. RST is committed to values that are held dear throughout the College of Applied Health Sciences—fairness, equity, justice and respect among them—and you have shown through your accomplishments that you embrace these values as well. Never lose sight of them. As future leaders in recreation, sport and tourism education, scholarship and practice, they will guide you through meaningful and fulfilling careers. I wish you great success!

Joan Braswell Scholarship

The Joan Braswell Scholarship is awarded to an undergraduate student in the department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism. Preference is given to students studying Recreation.



Payton Hopkins

“I’m passionate about serving others, and I believe tourism aligns with this passion. It is heartwarming to receive the support from alumni from the department. Their belief in my potential means the world to me, and I am deeply grateful for their investment in my future. I hope to return the favor someday.”

Hopkins is on track to complete his bachelor’s in recreation, sport and tourism in May with a 3.8 GPA and high honors. Being a Champaign native, he plans to stay in Illinois after graduation. He wants to work within the tourism industry or for a local municipality in hopes of redefining the downstate Illinois tourism landscape. He has a goal of inviting visitors to discover the hidden treasures beyond the city of Chicago. While excelling academically, he represented the University of Illinois and RST department by making his mark on the tourism industry for the city of Nashville, Tennessee, during two summer internships with the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp. and the Nashville Music City Center. During the pandemic, he also worked directly with underserved Illinois communities by providing accessible testing and resources during the academic year with SHIELD Illinois.

Charles K. Brightbill Memorial Scholarship

The Charles K. Brightbill Memorial Scholarship is the highest award given to an undergraduate student in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism. It is awarded to an RST major who has demonstrated outstanding academic merit.



Victoria Kopko

“I am extremely grateful to receive the support of friends and alumni of the department. Their generosity is something that I will always treasure. They serve as an amazing reminder to continue to work hard toward my goal of becoming an attorney, because I know there are people out there rooting for me even if I don’t personally know them.”

Kopko is planning to attend a Chicagoland law school starting in the fall 2024 semester. Her love of recreation, sport and tourism has combined with her passion to help others to pursue a career in entertainment law. She is also interested in doing pro-bono work for incarcerated individuals and immigrants to help relieve any legal burdens for individuals in these communities. In completing the RST internship course during the fall 2023 semester, Kopko had the opportunity to be a policy and research intern at the Education Justice Project: a comprehensive college-in-prison program. She has learned so much about the power and importance of education, as well as advocacy. Last year, she received the Joan Braswell Scholarship, and the year before that she was awarded the George and Mary Lowrey Scholarship. In September 2022, she was named an Edmund J. James Scholar.

John Bruce Capel Memorial Scholarship

The John Bruce Capel Scholarship is presented to a sophomore or junior in Recreation, Sport and Tourism who has demonstrated outstanding ability and potential. Capel graduated in 1966 from the Department of Leisure Studies and was killed in Vietnam on May 2, 1966.



Jeremy Santiago

“Receiving this award truly showcases all the hard work and efforts I have put forward during my time on campus, but also those who have helped paved my path doing so. It is truly a wonderful feeling and honor to have such an amazing support system with friends and alumni of the department.”

Santiago is from Bolingbrook, Illinois, and chose RST as well as the University of Illinois ultimately due to the great academic standard and accomplishments students and alumni have had during their time on and off campus. During his free time, he really enjoys working out and hanging out with friends. Santiago also enjoys playing rec sports as well as taking long nature walks. To all the donors, alumni and staff within the department, he is excited to receive this award and can't wait to continue his future endeavors within the sports industry.

Chicago Knight Life Charities Scholarship in Recreation, Sport and Tourism

The Chicago Knight Life Charities Scholarship is presented to two undergraduate students majoring in Recreation, Sport and Tourism who have demonstrated outstanding academic ability, entrepreneurial drive and spirit, RST community involvement, and potential as a future RST professional.



Gavin
Christopherson

“To be successful in this industry, you need to go above and beyond and work to separate yourself. RST has provided many amazing opportunities to grow relationships with faculty and connect with successful alumni. I am incredibly thankful to be receiving this award; I wouldn't be where I am if not for the love and support of my family, my friends and this department.”

Christopherson started at Illinois undeclared and took off on his RST journey after taking RST130: The Foundations of Sport Management with Teaching Associate Professor Michael Raycraft. Christopherson works two part-time jobs on campus: he is an event manager at the Ice Arena where he oversees events like hockey games and public skates, as well as a student video manager with Illini Football. Most recently, Christopherson served as tournament director for the inaugural Illini Get Pickled Charity Pickleball Tournament. That event went on to raise over \$3,300 for Cunningham Children's Home. Christopherson will continue to organize inclusive events that encourage people to come together and play for meaningful causes. He will be applying for law school this summer and hopes to eventually build a platform that petitions for funding and support for non-competitive recreational sports. Last year, Christopherson was the recipient of the Jesse “Tony” Clements Scholarship.

Jesse “Tony” Clements Scholarship in Campus Recreation

Campus Recreation and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, in partnership with the Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism, proudly established the Jesse “Tony” Clements Scholarship to recognize his extraordinary personal contributions and professional accomplishments; to perpetuate the impact of his unyielding commitment to supportive relationships; and to honor his unique legacy at the University of Illinois, in Champaign Urbana, and around the globe. Recipients of the Clements Scholarship should be employed by or have a leadership role at Campus Recreation and be majoring in recreation.



Natalie Ryan

“After I graduate, I hope to explore various opportunities in the RST industry. Whether it’s managing recreational facilities or even starting my own venture, I am so excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. Your support has given me the confidence to make a meaningful impact in the world of RST. Thank you again for your belief in my potential!”

Ryan is currently pursuing her B.S. in Recreation, Sport and Tourism with a minor in sustainability, energy and environment. She plans to graduate in May 2026. With a focus on eco-conscious events and community engagement, Ryan aims to contribute to the intersection of recreation, sport, tourism and environmental stewardship. She has spent the past year and a half working for the Member Services Department within Campus Recreation. Through this role, she has developed strong communication, leadership and organizational skills, which will be invaluable as she pursues her goals. While being at Illinois, Ryan also became a part of the RST student ambassador program and has had the opportunity to promote the major. She has earned Dean’s List honors every semester and has been named a James Scholar this semester.

Margaret K. and Edward W. Harvey Scholarship in Parks and Recreation

The Margaret K. and Edward W. Harvey Scholarship in Parks and Recreation is awarded to an undergraduate student in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism who graduated from a high school in the State of Illinois. Preference is given to students who have a concentration in Parks and Recreation Management.



Door Nguyen

“I feel that I am one step closer to achieving my goals and pursuing my passion in the industry. I cannot express enough gratitude for the support of faculty, friends and alumni of this program. Their generosity makes a huge impact for students, like myself, and I hope that one day I can give back in a similar way.”

Nguyen recently transferred to recreation, sport and tourism and is exploring the recreation and tourism concentration. They are also studying a minor in hospitality management to gain more insight and experience in the tourism and hospitality industry. After completing their B.S. in RST in May 2026, they plan on exploring more career opportunities and hope to pursue a career in recreation centers, resorts or sustainable tourism. During fall 2023, Nguyen had the honor of becoming a FOCUS Scholar under the FOCUS program. They worked with Pankaj Desai, mentors and fellow peers to navigate and enhance their career competencies. Nguyen is playing a key role in Scott Hall Council by working closely with Rob Flowers to provide guidance, enhance the community experience and develop social events for residents. Nguyen has earned Dean’s List recognition and is working on maintaining a 4.0 GPA.



Natalie Ryan

Margaret K. and Edward W. Harvey Scholarship in Parks and Recreation

“This award means so much to me because it validates my dedication and commitment to the field of RST. It shows me that my passion is not only personally fulfilling, but also recognized by others. This award is not just a milestone; it is a reminder of the impact I can make!”

Ryan is currently pursuing her B.S. in Recreation, Sport and Tourism with a minor in sustainability, energy and environment. She plans to graduate in May 2026. With a focus on eco-conscious events and community engagement, Ryan aims to contribute to the intersection of recreation, sport, tourism and environmental stewardship. She has spent the past year and a half working for the Member Services Department within Campus Recreation. Through this role, she has developed strong communication, leadership and organizational skills, which will be invaluable as she pursues her goals. While being at Illinois, Ryan also became a part of the RST student ambassador program and has had the opportunity to promote the major. She has earned Dean’s List honors every semester and has been named a James Scholar this semester.

Burriss F. Husman Scholarship

Dr. Burriss F. Husman completed a bachelor’s degree in the College of Education and a masters degree in Physical Education from the College of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Illinois. Dr. Husman retired as a professor from the University of Maryland, where his research interests included fitness and physical education programs. This scholarship was established to assist undergraduates in the College of Applied Health Sciences.



Sirui (Andy) Hou

“Winning this award means a lot to me. Not only is it a recognition of the effort I put in, but it’s also an encouragement for me to push harder. Financially, it will support me with more opportunities and my continued education. In the end, nothing feels better than being recognized and supported by my own department.”

Hou is an international student from China in his junior year pursuing dual degrees in RST and organizational psychology. He hopes to become a soccer coach or work in the professional soccer industry. Hou works for the Fighting Illini Women’s Soccer Team as a student manager and data manager. He is also a youth coach at Soccer Planet and Illinois Futbol Club, serving his contribution to the community. Besides soccer, Hou is a member of the RST Student Advisory Council and a student ambassador. He is also the RST representative on the AHS Student Council Executive Board. In his free time, he likes to play soccer, watch movies, travel around the world and explore restaurants.

George and Mary Lowrey Memorial Scholarship

The George and Mary Lowrey Scholarship is awarded to three undergraduate students in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism who demonstrate outstanding scholarship, service and merit. Outstanding scholarship is determined by the overall GPA and demonstrating enthusiasm and commitment to classroom participation and projects. Service can include active involvement with student associations or involvement with national, state or campus associations and activities engaged in the delivery of leisure services. Merit implies that this award is presented to a student who has demonstrated strong moral and ethical behavior. The award will be presented to one student from each of the three concentration areas (recreation, sport and tourism).



Sirui (Andy) Hou

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Hou is an international student from China in his junior year pursuing dual degrees in RST and organizational psychology. He hopes to become a soccer coach or work in the professional soccer industry. Hou works for the Fighting Illini Women’s Soccer Team as a student manager and data manager. He is also a youth coach at Soccer Planet and Illinois Futbol Club, serving his contribution to the community. Besides soccer, Hou is a member of the RST Student Advisory Council and a student ambassador. He is also the RST representative on the AHS Student Council Executive Board. In his free time, he likes to play soccer, watch movies, travel around the world and explore restaurants.



Nik Johnson

“I have made an intentional effort to engage and excel in multiple different facets of the university during my time here on campus, and this award gives me validation that I’ve put myself on a great path toward success. Thank you to the family of George and Mary Lowrey for bestowing me with such an incredible honor.”

Johnson is a senior majoring in recreation, sport and tourism, and pursuing a minor in business. A native of Champaign, he is currently living out the final chapter of his lifelong childhood dream to be a student at the University of Illinois. In addition to his achievements in the classroom, Johnson has worked for the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics in both the Corporate Sponsorships and Marketing departments. He was also the president of Illinois Sports Business Conference this past year and is a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity. In his future, he hopes to continue working in collegiate athletics or professional golf. Above all, he would like to extend a sincere thank you to his parents, Dave and Cherie Johnson, for all of their love, sacrifice and support toward helping him live out this childhood dream of his. Thank you, Mom and Dad! I-L-L!



Alexa Kwapisz

“As a first-generation American and college student, receiving this award is a source of immense pride to demonstrate to my mother that her sacrifices were not in vain. This recognition validates the dedication and effort I’ve poured into my academic pursuits. Moreover, it serves as a powerful motivator, inspiring me to persistently seek out and embrace new opportunities and experiences.”

Kwapisz grew up in Park Ridge, a suburb of Chicago. There, she was raised by a single mother who came to America from Poland looking for a better life. Because her mother was working all of the time to make something for herself and her family, Kwapisz was with her grandfather a lot. Her grandfather taught her how to cook, play and be kind. Her businesswoman mother taught her how to be assertive, decisive and confident. After graduating this May, Kwapisz intends to pursue a career in the hospitality and tourism sector, focusing on downtown Chicago. Following her initial experience there, she aims to explore various destinations to study the effects of tourism on communities and contribute to the sustainability and success of destination marketing organizations. When she has free time on a nice day, Kwapisz loves going to the arboretum with her dog, Maui.

Karen Martin Luetje and Robert E. Luetje Applied Health Sciences Scholarship

This scholarship was established by Karen Martin Luetje, who graduated in 1958 from the College of Physical Education with a major in recreation and her husband, Bob Luetje, who graduated in 1959 with a degree in metallurgical engineering, in honor of the significant role the University of Illinois played in their lives. With this scholarship, they hope to inspire and instill pride in future generations of Illinois students.



Madeleine Larson

“I am honored and extremely grateful to receive this award. I extend my gratitude to all those who have contributed to bringing me to my current position and for the ongoing support I anticipate during my time at Illinois. I commit to putting forth my best effort, growing as an individual both in and out of the classroom and leaving a meaningful and positive impact wherever my journey takes me.”

Larson accelerates academically and professionally at the University of Illinois. She has earned James Scholar standing by completing Leadership I-Programs each semester and achieving a 3.8 GPA or above. Larson works professionally with the Illini Athletics communication department and Big Ten Network. She works with multiple Illini varsity teams live tweeting, creating templates/graphics and writing post-game write-ups. She has recently been promoted to head of Fighting Illini TikTok. Larson was a tournament coordinator for the Illinois Junior Golf Association this past summer. She assisted with the planning and execution of 40 tournaments. She has also worked with Northwestern University as a broadcast and live events Intern, creating hype videos and editing hype shots and graphics for the jumbotron. In 2021, she worked as a promotions and entertainment intern for Chicago Dogs Baseball, where she planned and executed in-between-inning entertainment by instructing and engaging with fans.



Ariana I. Miguel

“My friends and family are my highest supporters; without them and the alumni of the department, I wouldn’t have the motivation I have. I am so greatly determined to succeed in life so I too can give support to others and help them believe in themselves.”

Miguel hopes to work in the professional baseball or softball industry in the future. Having softball be a huge part of her life taught her lessons she would need on and off the field. She is constantly seeking out opportunities and jobs that will help her advance and reach her future goals. She asks for help from those around her who can and are willing to help her and works on constantly being grateful and keeping those connections. She is eager to learn as much as she can in the professional world, and she does not shy from a challenge; she sees it as an opportunity to use her skill set. She has volunteered with the Special Olympics as well as being a student manager for the university’s softball team. She made the Dean’s List in the fall 2023 semester and is receiving the seal of biliteracy in Spanish.

Paragon Marketing Group Scholarship

The Paragon Marketing Group Scholarship is presented to an undergraduate student who is a sophomore or junior in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism. The recipient shall (a) have financial need, (b) maintain a minimum GPA of 3.0, (c) demonstrate a commitment to values of diversity and inclusion, (d) exhibit and consistently demonstrate strong leadership abilities and upstanding character, and (e) be a full-time student.



Jarmal Jones

“This award means so much to me. I’m pleased to have been selected from among a very select group of students that attend Illinois; more than any one professor or adviser can ever know, RST has contributed more to my sense of belonging. I’m constantly reminded of my position in the department and institution by this honor.”

After completing his undergraduate studies in sport management in May 2024, Jones will continue to work within event management in the sports field. His career goal is to become the director of special event operations for the WNBA. His career desires consist of directing and managing the WNBA’s All-Star weekend as well as the WNBA draft. Jones is working as a manager for the women’s basketball team, where he contributes to helping the women, on and off the court, to have a successful season. He has been a part of the program for a complete season and says it was a great opportunity for him. He is also working as an event management student ambassador by assisting with game-day operations and making sure the sporting event runs smoothly. Jones serves as the director of events for BBN, which was built and designed to create professional opportunities for minority students through social, professional and developmental/ philanthropic events.

Allen V. Sapora Research Award

The Allen V. Sapora Research Award (for Undergraduate Students) is awarded to an undergraduate student in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism to support a research project in the RST field that is not simply a class project. Examples of acceptable projects include ones conducted as part of James Scholar Projects, Independent Studies, START, SPARK or any other research project initiated by the student. Include a brief research proposal with budget and references limited to two pages as part of the award application.



Vanessa Ramos

“Receiving this award brings me great joy and pride. I was a transfer student, and research was one of the first things I got myself involved with on campus. It has given me a space to grow academically and build my research skills. This award will help me develop professionally and continue to expand my knowledge.”

Ramos is on track to complete her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in spring 2026; her major is recreation, sport and tourism with a minor in Spanish. She is a research assistant alongside RST Associate Professor Mariela Fernandez. Their projects consist of community planning for racial equity, and Ramos is working on her project that is based on youth sports participation in communities of color. Aside from her major, she is heavily involved in multiple student organizations and councils. Ramos is on the Student Council for Recreation, Sport and Tourism and is the executive vice president of the United Greek Council. She is an active member of Hermandad de Sigma Iota Alpha Inc. and is recruitment, fundraising and community service chairwoman. Through her sorority, she empowers and helps lead other Latina women on campus; plans and executes fundraisers for local, national and international charities; and brings awareness to issues the immigrant community faces.

Triple S Scholarship

This scholarship was established by Sarah B. Nemeth to honor her three favorite professors (Dr. Kimberly Shinew, Dr. William Stewart and Dr. Monika Stodolska, whose last names all start with "S") in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism in the College of Applied Health Sciences. This scholarship will be awarded to a junior or senior pursuing a concentration in recreation and will be selected on the basis of financial need and merit, which may be evidenced by outstanding ability, potential and commitment to the field of recreation.



Nicole Dudek

“Getting this award is an incredibly full-circle moment for me, as it was Dr. Shinew who first introduced me to the field of RST in RST100 and inspired me to switch majors to further delve into this community. RST has become my home away from home and is nothing short of a second family here on campus and across the globe.”

A lifelong Illini, Dudek is a student in the RST 4+1 program and plans to receive her B.S. and M.S. in RST by May 2026. She is thrilled to be entering a field that has the capacity to do so much good in the world. After caddying for over six summers, Dudek worked with WT Group as an accessibility intern during summer 2023. There she audited various recreational facilities and trails across Illinois and Colorado and compiled accessibility findings and reports. Dudek has previously received the 2023 Margaret K. and Edward W. Harvey Scholarship in Parks and Recreation and the 2024 Illinois Park and Recreation Foundation Student Scholarship. Dudek works with RST as a grading assistant and is recognized as an AHS James Scholar. She hopes to explore her many interests, delving especially into community-building, mental and physical well-being, accessibility and sustainability.

Recreation Sport and Tourism Alumni Scholarship

This scholarship, made possible by generous support of alumni and friends of the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, supports outstanding current students in the program.

Edmund J. James Scholars

The Edmund J. Scholars Program, named for the fourth president of the University of Illinois, is the honors program within the College of Applied Health Sciences. The program recognizes undergraduates who have achieved academic excellence and provides them with unique learning opportunities. The following students in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism are 2023-24 James Scholars.

Josephine Hoffer

Photo and bio unavailable

Sirui (Andy) Hou
Shayaan Baki
Nathaniel Beebe
Morgan Brown
Yipeng Cao
James Cuevas
Reeziah De Guzman
Karly Dolin
Nicole Dudek
Josephine Hoffer

Jackson Kiedaisch
Victoria Kopko
Dylan Kosh
Madeleine Larson
Aidan Maher
Lauren Ratajczak
Braeden Trotter
Weston Venamore
Natalie Woch
Xiaorui Zhang

Charles K. Brightbill Memorial Scholarship

The Charles K. Brightbill Memorial Scholarship is the highest award given to a graduate student in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism. It is awarded to a Recreation, Sport and Tourism graduate student who has demonstrated outstanding academic merit.



Byron Juma

“I am deeply grateful to be a recipient of this prestigious award. It is an incredible honor to be recognized for my academic commitment. This award validates my hard work and inspires me to push even harder and reach new heights in my academic pursuits.”

Juma is on track to completing his Ph.D. in May 2025 under the guidance of Assistant Professor Jules Woolf. His goal is to become a faculty member where he can contribute to the community through research, teaching and service. Juma is researching the unintended consequences of anti-doping sanctions among athletes. He aims to inform the policy on anti-doping support and rehabilitative programs through this research. Juma’s work has already garnered recognition in the academic community. He has published articles in various scholarly outlets and has presented academic papers at eight conferences in Europe and North America. Moreover, he has been awarded the highly coveted Graduate College Dissertation Travel Grant worth \$4,805, a testament to his research and academic excellence.



Zack Russell

“This scholarship is an honor to receive. It is humbling to be recognized for all the hard work I have put in during my Ph.D. program. This recognition is additional motivation for me to keep working hard in my research to facilitate a positive environmental change.”

Russell plans to pursue a career in academia upon completion of his Ph.D. His research is aimed at fostering a harmonious balance between community development and environmental stewardship. His research is focused on reducing light pollution through the development of dark sky tourism experiences. Russell has engaged in numerous community research projects during his doctoral program. In these projects, he has worked with park districts to improve resident quality of life, community partners to help increase tourism resilience to disruptions, and county board members to help develop an outdoor recreation tourism product in Southern Illinois. Russell has served as a volunteer coordinator at the Travel and Tourism Research Association Conference, where he also won an award for the Best Illustrated Paper in 2023.

Christine Ziebarth Howe Graduate Student Award

The Christine Ziebarth Howe Graduate Student Award is awarded to recognize a doctoral student who demonstrates academic excellence. Financial need or “extenuating circumstances” may also be considered as criteria for selecting the award recipient.



Seung-Jin Cho

“Winning this award is a big achievement for me, and it wouldn’t have been possible without the amazing support from faculty members, especially Drs. Sharon Zou and William Stewart, and my colleagues. The incredible support and unforgettable memories I have experienced here have truly made it a place I am proud to call my academic home.”

Cho, mentored by Assistant Professor Sharon Zou and RST Associate Professor Toni Liechty, is on his journey to becoming a faculty member. He possesses a strong passion for teaching and a profound interest in exploring the irrational aspects of tourist behavior through the lens of behavioral economics theories. Cho goes beyond traditional statistical methods; he is keen on transcending these boundaries by applying machine learning algorithms to glean deeper insights into the complexities of tourist behavior, thus facilitating a shift toward a more data-driven and predictive model in tourism research. Cho’s academic potential has been acknowledged with the Future Scholars Award from The Academy of Leisure Sciences (TALS) and the International Graduate Scholarship in Leisure Studies from the University of Alberta. Furthermore, his commitment to community service has earned him four different awards from both governmental authorities and his university in South Korea, recognizing his volunteerism and efforts in promoting tourism.



Casey Moran

“I am incredibly honored and gratified to receive this award, which enables me to spend more time on my research without sacrificing community engagement and student mentorship. I am profoundly grateful to the department and its supporters for their generosity and look forward to supporting our community in turn.”

Moran plans to complete her Ph.D. in 2025 under the supervision of RST Professor and interim Department Head Bill Stewart. Her research interests relate to gender, heritage tourism and the impacts of tourism on local communities. She is invested in increasing the social equity of tourism development with a focus on rural communities, particularly those in the American South and Appalachia. Her goal is to work as a faculty member with both teaching and research responsibilities. In her time as a student at Illinois, Moran has presented at the International Travel and Tourism Research Association Conference twice and won their dissertation completion award. She is a co-instructor for a course within the department and enjoys helping her students think critically about the RST field, develop their future interests and become successful community members. She looks forward to continuing to mentor students as they pursue their academic and professional goals.

Mary and Duke Regnier Scholarship

The Mary and Duke Regnier Scholarship will be presented to outstanding online and on-campus masters students in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism studying leisure or recreation. Scholarships will be awarded to students who are in good standing and can demonstrate need for financial assistance.



Damien Cavanaugh

“I am incredibly humbled and honored to have received the Mary and Duke Regnier Scholarship. This award is a representation of the strong support I have received from the Recreation, Sport and Tourism Department that embodies passionate mentors and genuine friends. I am grateful for the generous contributions of Mary and Duke, that allow students like me to pursue their dreams and ambitions.”

Cavanaugh is on track to complete his doctoral studies in August 2024 in RST under the guidance of Professor Laura Payne. Cavanaugh’s career goal is to be a professor and researcher at an academic institution, producing translational research in helping individuals improve their quality of life and socioemotional health. Before pursuing an academic career, Cavanaugh was fortunate enough to gain a range of experiences during 15 years working as a certified therapeutic recreation specialist. He has worked with several populations and held numerous leadership positions as a director and consultant. As a graduate assistant in RST, Cavanaugh has gained extensive experience associated with teaching. He has been in a teaching role 13 different times, with seven of those being the instructor of record. Cavanaugh has been recognized and ranked “excellent” by his students for the seven courses he has taught by the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning.



Olivia Crickman

“I am honored that my department feels that I am worthy of receiving this award, and I am immensely grateful that my hard work does not go unnoticed. I adore academics and I have so much gratitude for those who want to make it more financially accessible for people like me to pursue their degrees.”

Crickman plans to graduate with a master’s degree in RST in May 2025. She received her bachelor’s degree in earth, society and environmental sustainability at Illinois and is hoping to intertwine the knowledge she gained with what she learns in her master’s program. Crickman has worked as an event coordinator and resident advisor at Newman Hall for the past three years and is a teaching assistant for RST230 and grader for RST100. Crickman’s research interests revolve around management and coordination of resorts and hotels or state and national parks. She is studying how recreation and leisure—specifically related to biophilia—affect health and quality of life. Crickman wants to use this information so she can assist in providing people with an opportunity to recreate effectively on vacation and in their free time to create lasting memories and a healthy lifestyle.

J. Robert and Linda L. Rossman Graduate Research Scholarship

The J. Robert and Linda L. Rossman Graduate Research Scholarship (for Graduate Student Research) supports graduate students within the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, specifically for their dissertation and thesis research. Preference shall be given to students researching the antecedents of recreation, sport and tourism experiences, the phenomenology of participating in them and the short-term and long-term outcomes of them for individuals and society.



Latashia Key

“I am very honored and appreciative to have been selected among my peers for this prestigious award. The guidance and encouragement from cherished mentors, friends and family play an indispensable role in my journey and for that I am forever grateful. I am committed to the ongoing pursuit of excellence in my research and throughout the rest of my academic journey.”

Key didn't plan on pursuing a Ph.D. until her longtime mentor told her, “You have the gift of gab, and you light up when you are on stage.” Fast forward 25 years, and when you meet Key, she is energetic, vibrant, loves to smile and truly enjoys sharing her experiences and knowledge with others. She plans to graduate in May 2025 with a Ph.D. After 25 years working in the sport, fitness and wellness industry, Key returned to academia because she loves teaching with a sprinkle of research weaved in. One of her desires is to facilitate collaboration between academia and the community. Finally, her research focuses on African American girls and swimming. Using 35 years of teaching swim lessons and water safety, she is creating a culturally responsive-sustaining program. Her goal is to present this body of work to both researchers and practitioners.

Allen V. Sapora Research Award

The Allen V. Sapora Research Award (for Graduate Student Research) will be awarded to one masters student and one Ph.D. student in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism to support original research in the leisure field not undertaken as a class project. This does not have to be dissertation/thesis research; it can be any research project for which the student has a leadership role.



Sungjai Hong

“Receiving this award greatly bolsters my enthusiasm and drive to pursue further research. With this financial assistance, I can ensure funding for gathering data crucial to my dissertation. This award serves as a vital resource for doctoral candidates facing financial hardships, providing much-needed support. I am deeply thankful for this recognition and the opportunities it affords me.”

Hong is a dedicated and motivated Ph.D. student with a passion for sport marketing and community engagement through sports. He deeply values the guidance and support provided by his adviser, RST Assistant Professor Mikihiro Sato, and his committee members. Hong's research focuses on understanding how consumers with diverse cognitive and emotional traits respond to celebrity athlete endorsement tactics in sport marketing. His ultimate aim is to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the celebrity endorsement process that can offer valuable insights for marketing practitioners. Hong aims to earn his Ph.D. and pursue a career as a professor at academic institutions. He holds a strong conviction in the power of education and is confident that his teaching will serve as an essential resource for students, helping them acquire social skills and achieve success in their future careers.



Kshitij Tewari

Additional Recognition

Allen V. Sabora Research Award continued

“I am certainly overjoyed, humbled, and honored to be among the recipients of such a prestigious recognition for my research in leisure and recreation. This award is a personal milestone and an encouragement to continue my research. I hope to inspire and mentor future generations of researchers in my field. Thank you again for this award and your support.”

Tewari is a second-year Ph.D. student on track to completion by May 2026, working under the guidance of RST Associate Professor Mariela Fernandez. Tewari plans to pursue an academic career and focus on his research. His research focuses on DEI and explores the constraints, motivations and impacts of leisure and recreation for individuals of underrepresented groups. He is part of the JEDAI laboratory and serves as a graduate student representative on the College of AHS DEI and BIPOC committees, wherein he contributes to making the college policies just, inclusive, diverse and equitable. He was nominated as the graduate student representative on the Board of Directors for The Academy of Leisure Sciences. He has two manuscripts under review in two top-tier journals and is working on several DEI-related projects, primarily focusing on the LGBTQ+ community.

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