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## College Academic All-Stars already changing the world

By Tracey Wong Briggs, USA TODAY

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Here are the members of USA TODAY's 18th annual All-USA College Academic First Team. The 20 undergraduates' accomplishments range from leading Hurricane Katrina relief efforts to helping NASA understand the geological history of Mars.

The All-USA College Academic Team was selected from almost 600 students nominated by their schools. The receive trophies and \$2,500 awards as representatives of all outstanding undergraduates:

### The First Team



**Daniel Armanios, University of Pittsburgh**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Marietta, Ga.  
**Majors:** Mechanical engineering, political science  
**GPA:** 3.968, graduating in April  
**Career goal:** Professor, government consultant

**Accomplishments:** Son of Coptic Egyptian immigrants who grew up appreciating multiple viewpoints, he created Session: Middle East, an intercollegiate Model United Nations-type simulation in which students take up the viewpoint opposite of their own beliefs; National Science Foundation research internships at Cornell (materials research on silk), Washington State (mechanical engineering research on biomaterial as bone scaffolding), and Virginia Tech (engineering on hydrogen fuel cells), resulting in numerous presentations and co-authorship of silk research published in Biomacromolecules; economic case study published in the International Journal of Technology, Policy and Management; research positions at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in musculoskeletal research and orthopedic surgery; Rhodes, Truman and Goldwater Scholar.

Yes  No

Yes  No



**Keriann Backus, Brown University**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Seattle  
**Majors:** Chemistry; Latin American Studies  
**GPA:** 4.0, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Professor, medical researcher, health policy adviser

**Accomplishments:** Researching at Rockefeller University, she created a fluorescent probe to help understand cell division that might lead to cancer prevention; studied at Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador and conducted independent ecology research in the Amazon basin; Brown Outdoor Leadership Training group leader; toured China as bassoon player with Brown University Orchestra; raised \$6,000 for Habitat for Humanity in a Bike and Build by biking 4,000 miles from Providence to Seattle; synthesized triazole molecules to analyze their properties while bound to metals; chemistry department undergraduate group president; departmental award in organic chemistry; Rhodes Scholar.

Yes  No

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**Mary Beth Day, Hamilton College, Clinton, N.Y.**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Seneca Falls, N.Y.  
**Major:** Geoarchaeology  
**GPA:** 3.9, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Geologist



**Accomplishments:** Interning at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, she helped design a process to improve radiocarbon dating, which she presented at the Geological Society of America meeting; first author of publications on the structure of water octamers in International Journal of Quantum Chemistry and the low energy geometries of water clusters in the Journal of Physical Chemistry; Hamilton orchestra principal flutist and piccolo player; field assistant for a geology expedition in Namibia; teaching assistant in geology and archaeology departments; resident assistant; Hamilton Action Volunteer Outreach Coalition volunteer; Goldwater Scholar.



**Cynthia DuBois, Louisiana State**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Ponchatoula, La.  
**Majors:** Political science; agricultural business  
**GPA:** 3.936, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Public service

**Accomplishments:** Working with her old high school, which received an influx of Katrina evacuees, she organized "We've Got Your Back," a drive that eventually provided 46,000 backpacks of school supplies to hurricane-displaced students; 2003-04 state FFA secretary; student government senator, 2005 outstanding assembly member and chair of academics committee; Leadership LSU; Agriculture Student Association; Americans for Informed Democracy chapter founder and president; co-authored and presented paper on Louisiana patent production and the role of knowledge stocks on economic growth to Southern Regional Science Association meeting; American Quarter Horse Youth Association world champion calf roper; schoolwide outstanding sophomore and junior; Truman Scholar.



**David Fajgenbaum, Georgetown University**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Raleigh, N.C.  
**Major:** Human science  
**GPA:** 3.835, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Oncologist, public health official

**Accomplishments:** In memory of his mother, Anne Marie Fajgenbaum, who was diagnosed with brain cancer two weeks before he started at Georgetown, he created Students of AMF (Ailing Mothers & Fathers) Support Network to help grieving college students, now a non-profit organization with 23 campus chapters in development ([www.StudentsofAMF.org](http://www.StudentsofAMF.org)); won \$5,000 grant to research college student bereavement; co-founded Boot Camp 2 Beat Cancer in Raleigh, which has raised \$28,000 in two years; varsity football quarterback; university Board of Governors; physiology research accepted for publication in Georgetown Journal of Health Sciences. *Photo by H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY*



**Sean Genis, U.S. Naval Academy**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Sharon, Pa.  
**Major:** Physics  
**GPA:** 4.0, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** U.S. Navy submarine officer

**Accomplishments:** As an elite Trident Scholar, he co-authored research on developing ways to make acoustic detection of landmines more efficient, published in SPIE-International Society of Optical Engineering Proceedings journal; Academy Regimental Commander; cycling team; glee club member; rock a cappella group co-founder; lead role in campus production of H.M.S. Pinafore; used Spanish fluency while sailing aboard a Spanish tall ship owned by the Spanish Naval Academy; Rhodes Scholar.



**Valerie Gribben, University of Alabama at Birmingham**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Montgomery, Ala.  
**Major:** English  
**GPA:** 3.95, graduating in May 2008  
**Career goal:** Physician, novelist

**Accomplishments:** A premedical student and novelist who found reading aloud to her mother helped her mom cope with cancer treatments, she started Healing Words, a volunteer organization of college students who read to hospital patients; wrote the second two books in her children's Fairytale trilogy, which will be published by Junebug Books this year; UAB ambassador; Early Medical School Acceptance Program executive council member; student newspaper staff writer; official photographer for Mark Twain conference in Elmira, N.Y.; pre-health Honor Society historian; college-wide essay winner; departmental chemistry awards. *Photo by Irene Wong*

**Yoonhee Patricia Ha, Ohio State**



**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Proctorville, Ohio  
**Majors:** Microbiology; finance  
**GPA:** 3.91, graduating in August  
**Career goal:** Public health physician

**Accomplishments:** As a policy intern at American Cancer Society in Washington, D.C., she helped efforts in lobbying for the bill that became the D.C. smoking ban by researching the efficacy of ventilation technologies and preparing testimony for the ACS chief medical officer; Ohio State University Board of Trustees student trustee; Global Health Initiative co-founder; won six grants to volunteer in Kenya with Kibera Integrated Community Self Help Programme; Ohio Academy of Science, trustee and Student Advisory Council director; conducted pre-clinical evaluation of novel therapeutic antibody for acute myeloid leukemia; chaired Martin Luther King Jr. day of service; Golden Key Honour. Society president; university-wide Outstanding Student Organization Leader Award; Marshall and Truman Scholar. *Photo by Kevin Fitzsimmons*



**Kevin Koo, Harvard College**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Nashua, N.H.  
**Major:** Biochemical sciences  
**GPA:** 3.63, graduating in June  
**Career goal:** Public health researcher

**Accomplishments:** As a World Health Organization intern in Geneva, he evaluated the implementation of the International Classification of Diseases, the global standard for measuring health data, and developed a quality-adjusted completeness index and wrote a paper presented at a WHO meeting in Tokyo; Harvard Dialogue and Diversity Initiative director; Harvard Science Review co-president; Harvard Asia Pacific Review editor in chief; New Hampshire State Council on the Arts Elected Artist. as a folk dancer; presented research on peer-to-peer education program he started in high school at a childhood education meeting in Oslo; trilingual translator at Sharewood Free Health Clinic.



**Andrew Lee, Claremont McKenna College**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Westminster, Colo.  
**Major:** Philosophy, politics and economics  
**GPA:** 3.75, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Making government accountable, public service

**Accomplishments:** With two computer science majors and a graphic designer, he founded and is executive director of Fantasy Congress ([www.fantasycongress.com](http://www.fantasycongress.com)), an online fantasy/sports league-type game to teach students about the political process; co-student manager at the college's Rose Institute of State and Local Government, where he has studied preservation of public lands and redistricting reform and is helping to start the nation's largest California politics archive; internships at the Environmental Protection Agency and Government Accountability Office in Washington, D.C.; op-ed piece on gays and Social Security privatization published in San Francisco Chronicle; Ken Salazar for Senate researcher and field volunteer; resident assistant; Little League umpire; Truman and Udall Scholar. *Photo by Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY*



**Frank Leibfarth, University of South Dakota**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Yankton, S.D.  
**Majors:** Physics; chemistry  
**GPA:** 3.928, graduating in May 2008  
**Career goal:** Materials chemistry

**Accomplishments:** As a National Science Foundation undergraduate intern at IBM's Almaden Research Center., he studied modeling molecular interactions that control ring-opening polymerization, co-authoring articles in Macromolecules, Organic Letters and Biomacromolecules; presented research on synthesizing "molecular wires" from contorted aromatics at the American Chemical Society meeting; varsity football placekicker and Academic All-America Football First Team; Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity president; homecoming king; played the prince in a hometown 2004 Nutcracker production; student ambassador; university scholarship committee; Athletic Board of Control; departmental chemistry award; Goldwater Scholar.



**Tianhui Li, Princeton University**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Portland, Ore.  
**Major:** Computer science  
**GPA:** 3.88, graduating in June  
**Career goal:** Professor

**Accomplishments:** His efforts to bridge the gap between pure science and practical applications include math research on webpage-ranking algorithms, which led him to a proof exposing a loophole in Google's algorithm; his findings were presented at the Computer Science Affiliates Conference; research on measures of risk of financial investments; wrote software converting

mathematical proofs to computer code to help make programs more reliable; co-chair, Undergraduate Research Symposium Steering Committee; math tutor to computer science majors, underclassmen and disadvantaged high school students; research on wave-driven plasmas at Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory; Marshall Scholar. *Photo by Eileen Blass, USA TODAY*



**Jeffrey Marlow, Washington University in St. Louis**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Englewood, Colo.  
**Majors:** Earth planetary science; chemistry  
**GPA:** 3.92, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Professor, NASA researcher

**Accomplishments:** As an Athena Team Student Collaborator on the Mars Exploration Rover mission, he helped scientists interpret the geological history of Gusev Crater and Meridiani Planum and prove the past existence of liquid water on the surface, and produced a polar map used to help guide the selection of a landing site for the next mission; undergraduate representative to the Washington University board of trustees; Science Outreach group leader, doing science demonstrations for middle school students in St. Louis; College of Arts and Sciences Council treasurer; co-president of marathon team for Lou Gehrig's disease charities; environmental sustainability research in the Mojave Desert, Hawaii and Spain; Marshall and Goldwater Scholar.



**Christopher Marsh, U.S. Naval Academy**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** New Alexandria, Pa.  
**Majors:** Systems engineering  
**GPA:** 4.0, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Naval aviator, astronaut

**Accomplishments:** Working at Los Alamos National Lab, he developed a control system to regulate reactivity and temperature of a lunar surface nuclear reactor design, being developed to power a future manned outpost on the moon; varsity sprint football quarterback; second regimental commander and battalion commander; helped organize program educating men on how to help a rape survivor, presented to more than 1,000 midshipmen; watchstander at crypt of John Paul Jones. *Photo by Tim Dillon, USA TODAY*



**Rebecca Mitchell, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities**

**Age:** 22  
**Hometown:** Chippewa Falls, Wis.  
**Major:** Biology, society and the environment  
**GPA:** 3.706, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Physician, master of public health

**Accomplishments:** After volunteering at a Kenyan orphanage and being nominated to its board of directors, she founded and is executive director of Student Project Africa Network ([www.studentprojectafricanetwork.org](http://www.studentprojectafricanetwork.org)), connecting college students with volunteer organizations in Africa; assisted with research characterizing stem cell lines for transplant-ready conditions; vice president, parliamentary debate society; currently doing obstetric hemorrhage research in sub-Saharan Africa for the University of California-San Francisco's Women's Global Health Imperative; studied abroad in Italy; Truman Scholar. *Photo by Everett Ayoubzadeh with the University of Minnesota*



**Joe O'Shea, Florida State**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Dunedin, Fla.  
**Majors:** Philosophy; social science  
**GPA:** 4.0, graduating in May 2008  
**Career goal:** Social entrepreneur

**Accomplishments:** He spent the summer of 2006 in New Orleans starting a free health clinic in the Lower Ninth Ward (L9hc.org.), working with the Common Ground Collective to solicit funding and supplies, coordinating residents and other volunteers for the clinic, which opened Aug. 28 and is projected to see 10,000 patients annually; student government senator, deputy chief of staff and director of the office of social justice; Progressive Student Assembly president; student judicial board; Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity pledge class president; worked to develop a free dental clinic program for indigent adults and organized the Leon County Community Healthcare Coalition, which campaigned for a half-cent sales tax increase to fund health care for 31,000 working families.

**Ashley Rhodes-Courter, Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, Fla.**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Crystal River, Fla.  
**Majors:** Communications; theater



**GPA:** 3.84, graduating in May 2008  
**Career goal:** Public policy, politics, public relations

**Accomplishments:** A former foster child who was placed in 14 different homes in 10 years before being adopted, she has written a memoir, *Three Little Words*, to be released in 2008 by Simon & Schuster; frequent public speaker on foster care at professional conferences and motivational speaker for varied audiences; 2004 Adoption Youth Advocate of the Year by the North American Council on Adoptable Children; Child Welfare League of America Kids-to-Kids Grand Prize essay award; resident adviser; intern director for Palmetto Productions, coordinating campus entertainment; club rugby player turned assistant coach after knee injury; service learning trip to South Africa.



**Jessica Richman, Stanford University**

**Age:** Undisclosed  
**Hometown:** San Diego  
**Majors:** Economics; science, technology and society; with a masters in management science and engineering  
**GPA:** 3.85, graduating in June 2008  
**Career goal:** Social entrepreneur

**Accomplishments:** A former high school dropout who started a bookstore and book wholesaling business, she started volunteering with the Women's Institute for Financial Education while at community college and helped found its Money Clubs to support women in gaining financial independence, writing the program curriculum and serving as director for public outreach; Associated Students of Stanford University executive cabinet and chair of academic improvement; FUSION Future Social Innovators Network external relations director; campus radio show weekly student guest; technical consultant on open-source technology to Grameen Bank Microfinance initiatives; Acceleration Studies Foundation director of special projects; earned Spanish language certificate in Costa Rica and completed summer course at London School of Economics.



**Lori Scardino, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Age:** 30  
**Hometown:** Eau Claire, Wis.  
**Majors:** Comprehensive chemistry; liberal arts biology  
**GPA:** 3.85, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Professor

**Accomplishments:** Returning to college as a single parent of two, she developed protocols to characterize a series of fluorescent cellular probes, resulting in a patent application and three international presentations; co-authored research on the metal-binding capacity of methanobactin in the *Journal of Inorganic Biochemistry*, which she'll present at the Experimental Biology meeting in Washington, D.C., in April; American Chemical Society student chapter president, tutoring coordinator and chemistry demo show coordinator; officer in three different honor societies; student advisory council to the Dean of Arts and Sciences; Girl Scout leader and PTO officer at daughters' elementary school; McNair Scholar and Kell Container Corporation scholar, UW-Eau Claire's top scholarship.



**Maya Shankar, Yale University**

**Age:** 21  
**Hometown:** Cheshire, Conn.  
**Majors:** Cognitive science  
**GPA:** 3.95, graduating in May  
**Career goal:** Professor

**Accomplishments:** Generating research projects in two different Yale cognition labs, studying visual perception in primates and adult humans, she did parallel studies to draw similarities about how visual perception works; numerous conference presentations and first author of article submitted to a cognitive science journal; co-founded FIVE magazine, a campus human rights and social justice journal; co-campus coordinator, United Students Against Sweatshops; co-president, Yale College Council for CARE; founded Downtown Development Volunteer program; Campus Progress Student Advisory Board; researched universal grammar and language acquisition at Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, Germany; Rhodes Scholar.

## The judges

- Daniel Baer, 2000 All-USA College Academic First Team member, The Boston Consulting Group
- Frank Balz, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- Susan Chilcott, American Association of State Colleges and Universities

- Robert Dubill, former executive editor, USA TODAY
- Penelope Earley, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- Christine Garton, 2001 All-USA College Academic First Team member, University Chic Media
- Arhonda Gogos, American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Rae Goldsmith, Council for Advancement and Support of Education
- Tim McDonough, American Council on Education
- Rebecca Sullivan, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges
- Chia-Jung Tsay, 2004 All-USA College Academic First Team member, Johns Hopkins University medical student and Peabody Conservatory faculty member

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