

## 2023-2024 Outstanding Thesis Award Winner Cassandra Cavazos



Cassandra Cavazos

Cassandra Cavazos won the Humanities, Education, Business, and Social Sciences category for her graduate thesis, *Serotonin 1A Receptor Modulation on Behavioral Flexibility in BTBR and C57BL/6J Mice*, written for her Master of Arts in Psychological Science. Her work shows that activating specific serotonin receptors may help alleviate some symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The Office of Graduate Studies is proud to recognize her meticulous research with the Outstanding Thesis Award.

Cavazos' work targeted higher order restrictive repetitive behaviors in ASD such as insisting on sameness, or inflexibility. Working with mice bred to exhibit ASD, she found that activating the Serotonin 1A receptor significantly improved behavioral flexibility when solving the T maze. Currently, there are no FDA approved drugs specifically aimed at reducing restricted repetitive behaviors available for ASD, so breakthroughs in this area may well lead to life-changing therapies.

Cavazos is an active participant in the world of academia. While pursuing her undergraduate and graduate degrees at CSUSB, she held research positions at the Behavioral Neuroscience Lab at UCLA and CSUSB, presented at six conferences, and has three peer-reviewed publications under her belt. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Psychology at Rutgers University and was awarded the Deans Fellowship and Presidential Fellowship. She says a big part of what drives her to succeed is the support she receives from friends and faculty at CSUSB.

"I still talk to people that have graduated in behavioral neuroscience and we are all amazed at the support we got from the faculty, like Cynthia Crawford, Leslie Amadeo, and Dennis Amadeo," she said. "That led me to a lot of opportunities to get those fellowships and things of that sort. I have a very supportive mentor at Rutgers as well."

Cavazos will receive her doctorate in 2028. She plans to return to the Cal State University system as a faculty member and inspire a new generation of researchers. "I don't think it's possible to succeed without the support of people who have been through it," she said. The Office of Graduate Studies extends its heartfelt congratulations and hopes she will one day return to CSUSB – as a faculty member.