

2019

## Alexander Salazar Honors Portfolio

Alexander Ronald Salazar  
*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/honors\\_capstone\\_portfolios](https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/honors_capstone_portfolios)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Salazar, Alexander Ronald, "Alexander Salazar Honors Portfolio" (2019). *Honors Capstone Portfolios*. 48.  
[https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/honors\\_capstone\\_portfolios/48](https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/honors_capstone_portfolios/48)

This Portfolio is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstone Portfolios by an authorized administrator of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

# Alex Salazar

HOME HONORS

## HONORS PORTFOLIO

Hello and welcome. My name is Alex Salazar and I am close to completing my senior year at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I am an Ecology major and a member of the university's Honors Program. It is my plan to attend a graduate school after I finish my undergraduate degree to get a PhD. Ultimately, I plan on conducting research on evolutionary and ecological questions.



### MISSION

My mission is to spread compassion. Too often people are given a cold shoulder and an indifferent stare. Whether it be friend or stranger, I want to provide support and hope for the future.

---

### CONTACT

Email: [alexsalazarthomley@gmail.com](mailto:alexsalazarthomley@gmail.com)

Phone: 507-208-8882

## HONORS PROGRAM MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MANKATO

### MISSION

"The mission of the Honors Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato is to create future leaders, researchers and global citizens by providing high ability and motivated students with exceptional learning opportunities, mentoring relationships, and a community of scholars that foster their development as future leaders in a global society."



---

### Leadership

Upon graduation, honors students will have demonstrated the ability to utilize personal leadership values and guide groups toward a common goal.

### Research

Upon graduation, honors students will have demonstrated the ability to exhibit information literacy skills, synthesize and integrate ideas, produce original research or creative works, and contribute to knowledge.

### Global Citizenship

Upon graduation, honors students will have demonstrated the ability to exhibit second language and communication competencies and exhibit cultural competency and awareness.

# Alex Salazar

HOME HONORS



## LEADERSHIP

Leadership used to be something that had to be foisted upon me. I was not naturally confident or self-assured, at least not when interacting with other people. This was, in part, because I didn't know what I could bring to the table, or how I could lead. This was exactly what I learned in my **Honors First Year Experience class**. Using the StrengthsFinder test, I learned that I am strong strategist but poor at relationship building and creativeness. I am adept at building up others' ideas but am not as skilled at coming up with my own.

Using what I learned about myself, I joined my floor's **Community Council (CC)**. First as the Events Coordinator Freshman year, and then President during my Sophomore year. Unfortunately, both years my fellow CC members were not particularly active. Thus, the onus was on me to plan events for the floor, facilitate communication between the floor and our Community Advisors and Area Directors. In this capacity I had to work a lot harder to overcome my weakness in creativity and relationship building, and I came to realize that even if I am not in my comfort zone, I can still be an effective leader.

When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, I realized that I needed to do **something to help**. I reached out to the Chicano Latin-American Student Association to set up a means to raise awareness and funds to support the territory. I had previously worked almost entirely independently in my CC, but now I had to change my role in a new group setting. Unfortunately, I went from one extreme to another. I relied too much upon others and spread my plans too thin. Inevitably, people grew busy or had other commitments take precedence. Thus, I achieved less than I had hoped for. Multiple plans for fundraising and outreach turned into a single event. As disappointing as this was, I did learn something. Leadership, like most things, is best when cushioned in the middle between extremes, not too autocratic nor abdicatic.

I strongly believe that the cornerstone of good leadership is bringing up those around you to a higher level. This was reinforced when I joined the **Zoology club**. Initially just a member I watched as our President showed up with lectures finished only hours earlier that added little to our discussions or club goals. Once given the opportunity, I thrust my way into a leadership role; initially as the Club Secretary and then as Vice-President. In these roles I made sure to create events that created an atmosphere where our members could discuss topics of interest and grow as scientists. Leadership can take on many different shapes from a local and boisterous leader to one that prefers to work behind the scene. Regardless of their leadership style, a leader's main goal is to raise those around them and help them achieve their goals by growing into them.



# Alex Salazar

HOME HONORS



## RESEARCH

I initially came to Mankato as an Aviation student to be an international pilot for an airline. Leadership and global citizenship are basically requirements for this, but research? Lucky for me, Aviation fit me as well as a suit does a monkey. During the next several semesters I focused on deciding what I wanted to major in; I eventually chose Biology, largely due to an interest in biological research. I soon after had my first chance to work on my research competency.

Summer after sophomore year I went to **Dartmouth College** for a research internship. There I worked on my own independent project examining how certain pond characteristics affects the pond's macroinvertebrate community. This was my sink or swim introduction to Information Literacy and Synthesis. This was the first time I had to read published biology research and do something with it. Before I could do any research, I had to first discover what the current body of knowledge on the topic said and what questions I could ask to add to the conversation. This initial "research" guided my independent project and eventually formed the introduction of the poster I presented at the Leadership Alliance National Symposium.

Despite my experience at Dartmouth, I did not recognize the direct and applicable benefits of research. At least I did not until I completed an independent research project while **studying abroad** in Norway. Using previously collected data, I ran analyses to determine the most efficient sample size needed to run a dietary analysis of brown bears. Dietary analysis was conducted on fecal samples that had to be collected amongst the mountains of Norway and Sweden. This meant many hours and kilometers of hiking. My research could directly impact this, reducing the hours required to conduct dietary analyses and saving precious research funds. At the end of this project I needed to create both a PowerPoint presentation and a paper. While the paper was not submitted to any journal, I was still taken aback by the time and effort needed to write it. A scientific research paper is a different beast from any other paper and requires a different perspective to finish.

The next summer I had the opportunity for another internship, this one at **Miami University, Ohio**. I attempted to understand how the cellar spider, *Pholcus manueli*, was successfully invading and displacing the established cellar spider, *Pholcus phalangoides*. This experience more than any other has helped me practice disseminating the results of my research. From my previous experiences, research conducted at internships or for credit normally have an "end of project" presentation and guarantees little more. However, I took my research from this internship and underwent the process needed to present it at independent conferences. I requested funding, submitted an abstract, and presented my research at the Midwest Ecology and Evolution Conference. This helped me better understand the lengthy process that goes into disseminating research.

All of these experiences lead to what feels like my first *real original research project*. My previous experiences were always time sensitive. They were either a semester long project or a three-month long project. This meant that I needed to become up to date on the research already being conducted in the lab and produce a question I could conduct research on, in short order. Now I am working on a project that was predetermined to last longer than a year, and I can really stretch my legs and strike out on my own. In Dr. Ruhland's lab on MNSU I am attempting to elucidate the relationship between lignin concentrations in cell walls and the plant's rate of photodecay. While most of his work is concentrated on crops, I decided to investigate how lignin concentrations might differ and thus affect photodegradation in the needles of different types of coniferous trees. This illuminates an aspect of climate change that has not experienced a lot of research.

While these experiences have prepared me for a career in research, they have also done much more due to a simple truth. Research is more than just sitting at a lab bench and fiddling around until something interesting happens. Central to research is learning to think critically. These experiences have certainly taught me how to approach and conduct research, but moreso, they have also taught me how to think and experience the world. On balance, I find the latter to be ultimately more valuable.

# Alex Salazar

HOME HONORS



## GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

The Global Citizenship competency is focused on becoming aware of the cultures around you and how they impact you. In a way, I have been moving towards this competency my whole life. The son of a Costa Rican immigrant, I grew up hearing Spanish and English in my house. This was brought to a whole new level when we **moved abroad**. During a five-year span, I lived in Mexico, Venezuela, and Kazakhstan. This gave me a more in-depth Spanish tutelage that I could ever have had in the US. For not only did I learn the language, but I came to understand some of the intricacies of the language. While living in Mexico and Venezuela I was exposed to different styles of Spanish from what I was accustomed to hearing from my father, and I could see how these styles were reflective of the cultures they came from. However, aspects of this didn't become clear to me until years later when I could reflect upon these experiences.

That time began during my first semester at MNSU when I took the **FYEX** course. FYEX is meant to open our eyes to the competencies that are at the core of the Honors program and help us to begin meeting them. It was during this class that I realized that though I had lived in several different countries with vastly different languages and cultures I had never before reflected on this. As a child growing up in a new place I learned to adapt. I couldn't focus on what made me different. I need to construct bridges, to do that I needed to focus on what I had in common with those around me.

However, as an adult, differences are much more prevalent in the mind, and reflecting on this is much easier. I learned this while studying abroad in **Norway** during my Junior year. While living in Norway I was able to compare their lifestyle and culture to those I had experienced before, and I came away amazed by the differences and similarities. Their industrialization and architecture reminded me of Minnesota, and their relaxed nature reminded me of Costa Rica, and their reservedness of Kazakhstan, but their outdoor lifestyle was like nothing I had experienced before. While it is an easy assumption that nation living in mountains would hike and ski a lot, there is much more to it. Being outdoors in the fresh air is so Norwegian that they have a word for it, *friluftsliv*, and a law protecting their right hike or walk nearly anywhere.

Despite, or perhaps due to, my many experiences, it wasn't until this year that I really reflected on the cultural contexts that shaped my life. In my humanities class, **Human Diversity and Humanities Traditions**, we read a multitude of stories of immigrants as they either came to America, lived in America, or returned to their home nations. Reading these stories made me reflect on my story. And I realized that not only was I a second-generation immigrant in America, I had also lived as an immigrant for a third of my childhood. The effects of this is manifested in all aspects of my life, from my favourite sport of soccer and favourite dessert of *arroz con leche* to odd ways I occasionally structure my sentences.