

**NMSU Alumni Association Outstanding Graduate
Graduate School -- College of Arts & Sciences
Samantha Valencia**

Carrollton, TX, native Samantha “Sam” Valencia found out about NMSU literally by doing her research. While an undergraduate at Stephen F. Austin State University, she learned about the work being done by NMSU Assistant Professor Eric Magrane in cultural geography and creativity and “was fascinated!”

Samantha is graduating with a Master of Applied Geography and a 3.9 GPA. She didn’t have a research topic in mind when she began her program, but in addition to geography, she has always loved music, and played flute in the marching band in both high school and college. An article she read during Dr. Magrane’s Geohumanities class prompted her to combine her interests and develop an idea for a research project, which eventually became her thesis topic: whether music created in response to U.S./Mexico immigration policy affects individuals’ perceptions of the borderlands landscape or how they think about that landscape. She found participants’ views did expand in nuanced ways as, through the music, they connected their own experiences to perceptions about traversing unforgiving terrain.

One refreshing outcome of her research was the many professional connections she made, particularly with a subgroup of scholars that studies music geography—she received a warm welcome from other researchers who were excited to hear about the work she was doing. Indeed, in support of her work, Samantha received a Southwest and Border Cultures Institute grant plus the opportunity to present at the 2023 American Association of Geographers annual meeting, the most prestigious academic conference in the discipline. Not only did she present, but Samantha chaired one of a series of sessions on music geographies organized by established scholars in the field. According to Dr. Magrane, this “highlights the potential of her work and its academic accomplishments.”

Samantha credits her colleagues and department for her exceptional graduate experience, especially enjoying interdisciplinary discussions in her Geohumanities class and learning the many ways to use Geographic Information Systems. When it comes to leadership, Samantha is a natural. She proudly served for two years as the geography graduate instructor for the TRIO Upward Bound Program for high school students, getting them involved in citizen science projects and introducing them to all aspects of geography: “I loved seeing the delight in their eyes about geography and enjoyed them enjoying learning!” She also was a teaching assistant for Geomorphology and led the revitalization of the Graduate Geography Club as its president, organizing hikes and other events.

According to Dr. Magrane, “Sam’s work is making strong contributions to the geohumanities, political geography of the borderlands, and music geographies in particular.” She currently

works as the acting long-range planner for the City of Las Cruces Planning and Implementation Program, and her long-term goal is to obtain a Ph.D. and teach at the college level.