

# ELLI ORTIZ

**SPRING 2026 - CLAS BIOLOGY GRADUATE NOMINEE**



Elli is the kind of student who reminds us why this work matters and why this university exists. Her story is one of extraordinary perseverance, genuine intellectual curiosity, and a deep, abiding commitment to the people around her. Elli is the only child of a close-knit Hispanic family with roots stretching back to Zacatecas, Mexico, where her grandfather immigrated as a teenager to build a life through hard work. That spirit of determination runs through her family.

The path to get here has not been easy. Elli's family has navigated financial hardship throughout her life, and she began working by the age of twelve to help support them. She graduated high school early so she could work more hours during a period when her father faced serious medical challenges, and midway through college she shifted to part-time enrollment to once again step up as a caregiver and provider. For years, she has balanced her own education while shouldering responsibilities that most of her peers have never had to consider.

As a teaching assistant in my Vertebrate Zoology course, Elli has been an exceptional presence. She is kind, patient, and deeply attuned to the struggles her fellow students face, because she has lived versions of those struggles herself. She advocates for students, creates space for honest questions and real dialogue, and leads by example. She has discovered a genuine passion for education and mentorship through this role, and she plans to carry it forward into a doctoral program. Elli is exactly the student this university was built to serve, and she is becoming exactly the kind of scholar and educator this field needs. She represents the best of what happens when a student is given access to opportunity and meets it with everything she has.

~ Nominated by Professor Kaily Taylor-Meek