



## SPOTLIGHT ON:

# GFOA's 2021 Scholarship Recipients

BY GENEVIEVE CARTER

Each year, GFOA is proud to award more than \$100,000 in academic scholarships to students from across the country who are interested in pursuing careers in government finance. These students are at all stages of their education and careers, but they share a passion for local government.

This year, we asked our 2021 academic scholarship recipients a few questions about their goals for the coming year. Here's what they had to say.



**JUSTIN CASANOVA-DAVIS**

The recipient of the \$20,000 Goldberg-Miller Public Finance Scholarship is Justin Casanova-Davis.

Justin has been the assistant town administrator for the Town of Brookline, Massachusetts since October 2018. Before that, he was a principal budget analyst for the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Budget Department. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Boston College and a Suffolk Graduate Certificate in Local Government, Leadership, and Management. Justin is seeking a Master of Public Administration degree at Suffolk University and will graduate in winter 2021.

### A CHAT WITH JUSTIN

#### **Why did you choose to study public administration?**

I am passionate about public service. Suffolk has a tremendous program,

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I'm passionate about the work that I do, and I have been preparing for the next step in my career—becoming a city or town manager.”

– JUSTIN CASANOVA-DAVIS

and I want to continue developing and acquiring additional skills that will help me be a better leader and public servant during my career.

#### What are your career goals?

I'm passionate about the work that I do, and I have been preparing for the next step in my career, becoming a city or town manager. I ultimately want to become an ICMA Credentialed Manager, which in my estimation, exemplifies a high standard of integrity and capability as a manager. Most importantly, I want to serve as a mentor, encouraging people to pursue careers in municipal government. I'm passionate about this mission, particularly about working on efforts to increase diversity within our profession.

#### How will the scholarship you received help you achieve those goals?

I am profoundly grateful and honored by the investment in my professional development by the Girard Miller Foundation and GFOA. This scholarship will allow me to complete my Master's in Public Administration this fall and help me achieve my career goals. Part of any academic program has a financial burden. This scholarship will help me further my education and allow me to continue to grow and enhance my skills to be an even better public servant.



#### EMMA BRANDT

Emma is one of two recipients of the Frank L. Greathouse Government Accounting Scholarship; she will receive \$10,000.

Emma is the finance officer for the Lapeer County Road Commission in Lapeer, Michigan. Before that, she was the assistant finance officer for Lapeer County Health Department, and she's also been the records clerk for the Lapeer County Sheriff's Office. Emma holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in business administration from Baker College and is pursuing a Master of Business Administration degree with an accounting emphasis from the University of Southern Indiana; she will graduate in June 2021. Since July 2019, Emma has volunteered as a coordinator for the Sheriff's Office Victim Service Unit, where she helps respond to families that have lost a loved one to an unexpected death in Lapeer County.

#### A CHAT WITH EMMA

##### Why did you choose this field?

I chose this field when I was a freshman in high school, after my first finance class. I am passionate about accounting and management.

##### What are your career goals?

My future career goals right now are to become CFO of Lapeer County. I also have my eyes on management.

##### How will the scholarship you received help you achieve those goals?

It will help me finish my current master's degree, and with the

scholarship, I plan to get a Master of Public Administration degree. Not only does this scholarship help me reach my career goals, but I will graduate 100 percent debt-free!



#### CONNIE HO

Connie received the \$10,000 Minorities in Government Finance Scholarship.

Connie Ho has been senior public affairs specialist at the Irvine Ranch Water District in California since April 2017. Connie is also a 2020 Popular Annual Financial Reporting Fellow. Connie holds dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and International Studies through the University of California at Irvine, and she is pursuing a Master of Public Administration degree from California State University at Long Beach, with plans to graduate in June 2022.

#### A CHAT WITH CONNIE

##### Why did you choose to pursue an MPA?

I am looking forward to taking classes related to public administration and government finance. These courses will focus on strategy, innovation, and leadership, providing students with an opportunity to discuss ways in which new ideas can be generated, evaluated, and implemented. The program's guiding principles are serving the public good, advancing democracy, promoting social justice, and promoting diverse communities.



**What is your current job like, and where do you hope to work in the future?**

I have worked with the finance team at a special district to ensure that the website's finance center webpage has the most up-to-date information about audits, statements, and financial reports. As a graduate student, I helped a local city government develop its popular annual financial report and learned how to research demographic information and numbers related to the local area to provide readers with more context on the essential work done during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these roles, I have been able to put to practice GFOA's Code of Professional Ethics to strengthen trust with the public, modeling the values of integrity, honesty, and openness while displaying an appreciation of new information or ideas that continue the safety and vitality of the organization.

**What are your career goals?**

A short-term goal is to receive a master's degree to enhance my public administration and business administration skills. Long-term goals would be to work in a project management role, focusing on community partnerships to make the most impact with staff and the community, and to work on rebuilding trust in local government.

**How will the scholarship you received help you achieve your goals?**

I appreciate GFOA's support and am so honored to be recognized in this year's scholarship recipient cohort. Looking to the future, I plan to use my graduate coursework, along with my work experience, to help improve on the processes and procedures in government communication to continue cultivating and maintaining the public's trust in government. Clear communication is a continual process with evolving possibilities, and I am excited for what the future holds.



**MEGAN LEE**

Megan Lee is one recipient of the three awards for the Jeffrey L. Esser Career Development Scholarship; she will receive \$5,000.

Megan is senior district office administrator for the North of River Sanitary District in Bakersfield, California. She is seeking a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Columbia Southern University and expects to graduate in 2024.

**A CHAT WITH MEGAN**

**Where are you working now, and where do you hope to work in the future?**

After completing my degree, my goal is to become a chief financial officer for a special district or local government agency.

**What are your career goals?**

With my BBA and my eight years of government finance, I plan to search for a finance manager or administrative manager position, leading to my ultimate goal of being chief financial officer of a government agency.

**How will the scholarship you received help you achieve those goals?**

It will help tremendously with the financial burden that college tuition creates and relieve the financial pressures, allowing me to focus exclusively on my studies.



**KALINA MENDEZ**

Kalina was one of two recipients of the Frank L. Greathouse Government Accounting Scholarship; she will receive \$10,000.

Kalina has been the supervisor of finance for the Waukegan Park District in Waukegan, Illinois since September 2017, and she's been with the park district since January 2015. Kalina holds both an Associate of Science degree in business administration and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Robert Morris University. She is seeking a Master of Science degree in accounting and financial management from DeVry University's Keller Graduate School of Management and will graduate in May 2022.

**A CHAT WITH KALINA**

**Why did you choose this program?**

It includes prep courses to help become a Certified Public Accountant, which I have always aspired to earn.

**What is your current job like, and where to you hope to work in the future?**

I have worked for my local park district for six years, and I love it. I look forward to staying in the parks and recreation world. It is very rewarding to work within your community, so I plan to stay for as long as I can.

**What are your career goals?**

After receiving my master's degree, I plan to sit for my CPA exam, if I can't take the different CPA exam sections immediately after the correlated prep course. Upon graduation, I look forward to moving into a management role within my local park district.

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– KALINA MENDEZ

### How will the scholarship you received help you achieve your goals?

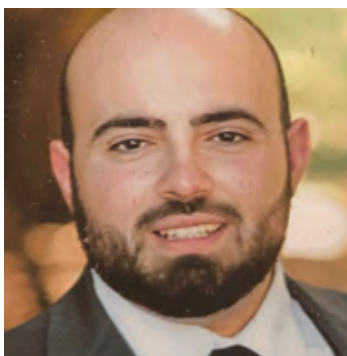
I am proud to receive one of the two Frank L. Greathouse Government Accounting Scholarships. It will help me immensely with my tuition, considering I am still paying toward my associate and bachelor's degrees. Aside from the financial factor, the scholarship's three-year GFOA membership, three complimentary trainings, and invitation to the Virtual Conference in July 2021 will provide me with significant opportunities for continued professional growth through training and networking.



#### ANDRE MORRISON, JR.

Andre received one of three Jeffrey L. Esser Career Development Scholarship awards; he will receive \$5,000.

Andre has worked with the City of Warrensville Heights, Ohio since 2015. He is seeking a Bachelor of Science degree in public administration from Southern New Hampshire University and plans to graduate in 2021.



#### ALEXANDER ROCHER

Alexander was one of four recipients of the Government Finance Professional Development Scholarship; he will receive \$10,000.

Alexander is an accountant at the City of Plantation, Florida, where he's worked since 2018. Before that, he worked for Broward County Parks and Recreation. Alexander holds a Bachelor of Art degree in business management from the University of Central Florida, and he is pursuing a Master of Science degree in Public Accounting from Nova Southeastern University, which he will complete in winter 2021.

#### A CHAT WITH ALEXANDER

##### Why did you choose public accounting?

I knew that I wanted to remain in governmental accounting for the rest of my professional career.

##### What are your career goals?

I would like to use my degree and experience to someday become a finance/accounting director or comptroller of a city.

##### How will the scholarship you received help you achieve your goals?

This scholarship will allow me to finish my program, which will afford me the additional training and knowledge needed to progress in my professional career.

#### ELIZABETH WHITT

Elizabeth received one of three Jeffrey L. Esser Career Development Scholarship awards; she will receive \$5,000.

Elizabeth has worked with Northwest Local School District in Ohio as an accounting supervisor since 2014. She will complete a Bachelor of Business Administration degree at Liberty University in December 2021. Elizabeth participates in several finance organizations including GFOA and the Ohio GFOA.

#### A CHAT WITH ELIZABETH

##### What are your career goals?

After I complete my degree, I will be obtaining my school treasurer's license. My career goals are to become an assistant treasurer and eventually transition to a school treasurer position.



#### BRANDON SAUNDERS

Brandon is one of four recipients of the Government Finance Professional Development Scholarship; he will receive \$10,000.

Brandon has been an assistant regional supervisor and senior exam staff for the Texas Office of Consumer Credit Commissioner since May 2016. He has more than a decade of experience in highly regulatory environments and government, supporting risk, compliance, and audit functions. Brandon holds a Bachelor of Science degree in finance from Southeastern Louisiana University.

and has certificates in Management Development and Project Management from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. Brandon is pursuing a Master of Business Administration degree with a project management specialization from Louisiana State University, and he plans to graduate in 2022.

#### A CHAT WITH BRANDON

##### **Why did you choose to specialize in project management?**

I've always had a natural ability and interest in ensuring that projects run efficiently. Project managers help organizations improve efficiency, and in times where we are asked to do more with less, effective resource management is paramount.

##### **Tell us about your job.**

Each day in my role is different, from developing new staff members to assisting in agency planning. I embrace the challenge and growth from every new task within my role.

##### **What are your career goals?**

My future career goals include continuing to serve as an organizational resource while managing projects and people in financial regulation, compliance, and consumer protection. I'm confident that my government experience thus far will help me accomplish my professional goals.

##### **How will the scholarship you won help you achieve those goals?**

It will reduce the financial burden of the current graduate program I am taking, as well as allowing me to have the money needed to obtain and train for other developmental certifications.



##### **BRENDA WILLIAMS**

Brenda Williams is one of four recipients of the Government Finance Professional Development Scholarship; she will receive \$10,000.

Brenda has served as deputy treasurer in the Unclaimed Property Division for the North Carolina Department of State Treasurer in Raleigh, North Carolina since 2013. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications from UNC-Chapel Hill and a certificate in Public Executive Treasury Management from the National Institute of Public Finance. Brenda will complete her Master of Business Administration from the University of North Carolina, Kenan-Flagler Business School this year.

#### A CHAT WITH BRENDA

##### **What are your career goals?**

Upon graduation, I plan to continue my service within state government. I intend to use the knowledge I gained through the MBA program to have a broader impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of programs and services provided to the public.



##### **JESSICA TAPIA**

Jessica is one of four recipients of the four awards for the Government Finance Professional Development Scholarship; she will receive \$10,000.

Jessica Tapia started as senior accountant at the Village of Lake Zurich, Illinois in June 2021. Before that, she was an accountant with the Village of Barrington, Illinois; she has also worked with the McHenry County Probation and Court Services as a court specialist in the Circuit Clerk's office and then as a court monitoring program coordinator for the Probation Department. She holds a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Elmhurst University and will complete her Master of Business Administration degree in December 2021.

#### A CHAT WITH JESSICA

##### **Why did you choose to pursue a master's degree?**

I have a passion for continuous learning and a quest for more knowledge.

##### **What are your career goals?**

The first full-time position I held after graduating high school was as a court specialist, and I've remained in the public sector ever since. The experience of working in government, along with my undergraduate accounting coursework, ultimately led me to the financial public-sector career path. My goal is to one day be a finance director for a municipality, and completing an MBA is an essential part of that role.

##### **How will the scholarship you received help you achieve those goals?**

This scholarship provides me with the resources I need to finish a degree that will further develop the skills I need to become a financial leader. 🙌

*Genevieve Carter is a senior consultant in GFOA's Research and Consultant Center.*

#### GFOA SCHOLARSHIPS

GFOA Academic Scholarship applications open in October of each year. If you are interested in one of our scholarships, please visit [gfoa.org/scholarships](https://gfoa.org/scholarships) for more information.