

# 3 MTSU Students Receive CLS Spark Awards for 2023 Cohort

BY: ROBIN LEE



*Alec Barger*

Three MTSU students were among 80 undergraduate and graduate students nationwide selected for the U.S. Department of State's Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) program Spark Award for Summer 2023.

"MTSU is very proud of all the students who applied for the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) grants," said Laura Clippard, International Fellowships and Honors College coordinator. "The CLS offers both language development and cultural exchange. The students selected will strengthen their intercultural communication abilities and pay it forward in their professional careers."

CLS Spark is a virtual initiative for U.S. undergraduate students to learn languages essential to America's engagement with the world. Designed to leverage best practices in online language learning developed by the CLS Program during the pandemic, CLS Spark provides American students the opportunity to study critical languages virtually when they may not have access to studying these languages on their campuses. Participants will spend the summer learning either Arabic, Chinese, or Russian through online classes and activities facilitated by native speakers through a host institution abroad.

"Being selected for the Critical Language Scholarship



*Aura Ganster*

out of a national pool of applicants is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to learn my family's language while simultaneously bolstering my cultural knowledge and furthering my career," said Nashville resident Aura Ganster, who was selected for the Chinese virtual program. She is an Honors student majoring in Nutrition and Food Science. "Learning any foreign language can be lucrative, but Mandarin Chinese is especially important for Americans to learn because of the country's growing business presence, the huge percentage of Chinese speakers worldwide, and their rich and beautiful culture. The Critical Language Scholarship not only helps break the language barrier separating me from my culture but also allows me greater opportunities to travel worldwide and learn about food science from the best in the world. This experience will be invaluable."

History and Religious Studies double major Alec Barger, of Lebanon, Tenn., was selected for the Russian virtual program. Business Administration, Management major Nina Meer, of Collierville, Tenn., was selected for the Chinese virtual program. Meer was also recently awarded the Outstanding Senior in Business Administration Award.

"This scholarship will give me the foundation and confidence to jump into deeper study, in both language



*Nina Meer*

and art history. I plan to spend the rest of my life learning about China's brilliant art, culture, and language," said Meer. "Anyone who's met me knows I'm very interested in ancient Chinese art. In my experience, the back doors to my interests have led me down the most enriching and exciting paths—like my marketing internship at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture at MTSU."

A program of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the CLS Program and CLS Spark are part of a U.S. government initiative to expand the number of Americans studying and mastering foreign languages that are critical to national security and economic prosperity.

Since the program's inception in 2006, more than 8,500 CLS scholars have studied critical languages around the globe. Approximately 79 percent of alumni who participated in a recent survey identify language skills as having made them more competitive candidates when searching for jobs, which include careers across the public and private sectors. To learn more about the CLS Program, contact Laura Clippard at [laura.clippard@mtsu.edu](mailto:laura.clippard@mtsu.edu), or visit [mtsu.edu/honors/ufo](https://mtsu.edu/honors/ufo).