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Research Interests

I study dusty star-forming galaxies (DSFGs), the most rapidly star-forming galaxies in the Universe. Using state-of-the-art telescopes such as the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) and the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), I investigate the stellar and dust properties and morphologies of these galaxies to understand their role in high-redshift galaxy evolution.

I currently work with Amy Barger at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and have published three first-author papers in the course of my PhD.

Keywords: *Submillimeter galaxies, high-redshift galaxies, dust-obscured star formation, radio interferometry*

Education

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| 2021–present | Ph.D. in Physics , University of Wisconsin–Madison
GPA: 3.87
Advisor: Prof. Amy Barger, Dept. of Astronomy |
| 2021–2023 | M.A. in Physics , University of Wisconsin–Madison
GPA: 3.90 |
| 2017–2021 | B.S. in Physics and Mathematics , Wheaton College (IL)
GPA: 3.99 (graduated <i>summa cum laude</i>)
Honors Thesis: “Implementation of Angular Momentum Transport by an Accretion Disk in MESA”
Advisor: Dr. A. J. Poelarends |

Awards & Honors

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| 2024 | Graduate Research Fellowship, Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium |
| 2024 | ALMA Ambassador Fellow, National Radio Astronomy Observatory |
| 2022 | Best Teaching Assistant Spring 2022, Dept. of Physics, UW–Madison |
| 2020 | Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship |
| 2020 | Induction into Sigma Pi Sigma Honors Society |
| 2020 | Joseph Spradley Outstanding Physics Award, Dept. of Physics, Wheaton College |
| 2020 | Senior Scholarship, Wheaton College Alumni Association |
| 2019 & 2020 | Physics Merit Scholarship, Wheaton College |
| 2017 | National Merit Scholarship |

Research Projects

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| 2024–2025 | Stellar Properties and Morphologies of JWST-selected Dusty Star-forming Galaxies (DSFGs)
Advisor: Prof. Amy Barger, UW–Madison
Constructed a unique sample of JWST/NIRCam color-selected DSFGs in order to compare the properties of a large, faint submillimeter sample to those of brighter DSFGs. Fit the spectral energy distributions and surface brightness profiles of the sample to understand their stellar populations and merger histories. First-author paper published (McKay et al. 2025, ApJ, 988, 135). |
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2023–2024	<p>SCUBA-2 and ALMA Selections of Faint DSFGs in A2744</p> <p>Advisor: Prof. Amy Barger, UW–Madison</p> <p>Compared selection of DSFGs using ALMA 1.2 mm observations with a red color selection using JWST NIRCам data with SCUBA-2 850 μm observations. First-author paper published (McKay et al. 2024, ApJ, 962, 128).</p>
2022–2023	<p>Dust Properties of DSFGs in GOODS-S</p> <p>Advisor: Prof. Amy Barger, UW–Madison</p> <p>Used multiwavelength ALMA observations along with SCUBA-2 450 and 850 μm data to study the dust temperatures and spectral emissivity indices of 57 DSFGs by fitting models to their spectral energy distributions. First-author paper published (McKay et al. 2023, ApJ, 951, 48).</p>
2020–2021	<p>Implementing Accretion Disk Angular Momentum Transport into MESA</p> <p>Advisor: Dr. A. J. Poelarends, Wheaton College</p> <p>Senior Honors Thesis project using the Modules for Experiments in Stellar Astrophysics (MESA) code to simulate how an accretion disk around an accreting star regulates the angular momentum transfer and rotation speed of the star.</p>
2019	<p>Emission and Current Distribution of a Laboratory Plasma Arcade</p> <p>Advisor: Dr. Darren Craig, Wheaton College</p> <p>Ran trials of pulsed plasma array, operated CCD imaging, and analyzed extent of current distribution. Presented results at SPS Physics Congress 2019.</p>

Recent Publications

- **McKay, S. J.**; Barger, A. J; Cowie, L. L.; & Nicandro Rosenthal, M. J. (2025). “The Physical Properties and Morphologies of Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies Identified with JWST.” ApJ, 988, 135.
- Nicandro Rosenthal, M. J.; Barger, A. J; Cowie, L. L.; Jones, L. H.; **McKay, S. J.**; & Taylor, A. J. (2025). “Spectroscopic Confirmation of a Massive Protocluster with Two Substructures at $z \approx 3.1$.” ApJ, 979, 247.
- **McKay, S. J.**; Barger, A. J; & Cowie, L. L. (2024). “Comparing SCUBA-2 and ALMA Selections of Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies in A2744.” ApJ, 962, 128.
- **McKay, S. J.**; Barger, A. J; Cowie, L. L.; Bauer, F. E.; & Nicandro Rosenthal, M. J. (2023). “Dust Properties of 870 μ m-selected Galaxies in GOODS-S.” ApJ, 951, 48.

Research Talks

2025	“Spectroscopic Redshifts for Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies.” 2025 Wisconsin Space Conference, University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. Green Bay, WI.
2025	“A New View of Dusty Star-forming Galaxies with JWST and ALMA.” <i>New Data that Challenge Underlying Assumptions in Early Galaxy Evolution</i> , CHOIR collaboration workshop, Schoodic Institute. Winter Harbor, ME.
2025	“Revealing Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies with JWST and ALMA.” <i>Extragalactic Discussion Group Seminar</i> , University of Hawaii Institute for Astronomy. Honolulu, HI.
2025	“Revealing Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies with JWST and ALMA.” <i>Instituto de Astrofísica</i> , Pontificia Universidad Católica. Santiago, Chile.
2024	“The Physical Properties of Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies in GOODS-S and A2744.” 244th Meeting of the American Astronomical Society. Madison, WI.

Poster Presentations

2024	McKay, S. J. , Barger, A. J, & Cowie, L. L. “Identifying Faint Dusty Star-forming Galaxies with JWST NIRCам.” ESA/STScI conference: <i>Science with the Hubble and James Webb Space Telescopes VII: Stars, Gas, and Dust in the Universe</i> , Porto, PT.
2024	McKay, S. J. , Barger, A. J, & Cowie, L. L. “Comparing ALMA and SCUBA-2 Selections of DSFGs in Abell 2744.” ALMA Ambassadors Poster Session, National Radio Astronomy Observatory, Charlottesville, VA.

2023	McKay, S. J. , Barger, A. J., & Cowie, L. L. “Unveiling the DSFG Population with a Red NIRCam Selection.” STScI <i>First Year of JWST Science</i> Conference. Space Telescope Science Institute, Baltimore, MD.
2019	McKay, S. J. , Craig, D., McMillan, M., Rak, M., & Adams, C. “Emission and Current Density Distribution in an Extended Magnetic Arcade.” Society of Physics Students <i>Physics Congress 2019</i> . Providence, RI.

Facilitated Conference Sessions

2025	Co-led “ <i>Growing and Destroying Dust</i> ” breakout session at CHOIR collaboration workshop, focused on understanding the existing paradigms and major open questions in dust formation and evolution.
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Observing Experience

2025	Keck/DEIMOS, 2 nights multi-object spectroscopy (MOS)
2025	Keck/KCWI, 2 nights integral field unit (IFU) spectroscopy
2025	Keck/MOSFIRE, 2 nights MOS
2024	Keck/MOSFIRE, 2 nights MOS
2023	Keck/MOSFIRE, 2 nights MOS
2023	Keck/DEIMOS, 3 nights MOS
2023	Keck/MOSFIRE, half-night MOS

Teaching Experience

2021–2022	Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Physics, UW–Madison Course: Physics 103 – Mechanics 6 discussion sections and 3 labs weekly 75 undergraduate students per semester
2019–2021	Observatory Assistant, Wheaton College Course: Astronomy 305 Operated two deck telescopes and one 24 in dome telescope, 3 hours weekly 45 undergraduate students per semester

Outreach and Volunteering

2024–present	Activities for Community Outreach in STEM (ACORNS) Events, <i>UW–Madison</i> Assist in leading planetarium visits, developing and running astronomy/physics demos, and other educational activities for K-12 students from low-income backgrounds through partnerships with local community centers, with the goal of developing ongoing relationships and increasing opportunities for STEM experiences.
2024	ALMA Ambassador, <i>NRAO/UW–Madison</i> Supported new ALMA users and those interested in interferometry by sharing expertise and facilitating community events. Led proposal preparation workshop at home institution and assisted in proposal review.
2022	PEOPLE Program, <i>UW–Madison</i> Helped teach a short-term physics summer class for high-school students from underrepresented minority groups. Led large-scale group demos on electricity and magnetism.

Summer Schools and Workshops

2025	CHOIR conference: New Data that Challenge Underlying Assumptions in Early Galaxy Evolution
2025	Picture an Astronomer Symposium
2024	Code/Astro: A Software Engineering Workshop for Astronomy

2023	IMPRS (Max Planck) Summer School: Galaxy Evolution with JWST
2023	SMA Interferometry School
2022	Penn State Summer School for Statistics for Astronomers XVII
2022	NRAO 18th Synthesis Imaging Workshop

Other Skills

Programming:	<u>Proficient:</u> Python (including astropy, scipy, matplotlib, casa, bagpipes, cigale, emcee, pyBDSF, scikit-learn, and photutils) Bash MATLAB <u>Familiar:</u> C/C++ Java FORTRAN (including experience with MAGPHYS and MESA) <u>Beginner:</u> R Julia
Other software:	Jupyter, CARTA, GALFIT, GILDAS, MAGMA, git
Observing/lab skills:	Optical/near-IR spectroscopy (Keck/MOSFIRE, Keck/DEIMOS, Keck/KCWI) CCD imaging Oscilloscopes Soldering
Languages:	Spanish (limited working proficiency) German (elementary proficiency)