

Public service grads celebrate at Watts College Convocation

College confers 952 degrees; dean encourages new leaders to help society focus on community

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News
May 15, 2025

Nearly 1,000 new graduates celebrated their first full day as Arizona State University alumni on May 13 as the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#) honored them at its spring 2025 convocation.

Representatives of the college's leadership, faculty and staff, along with families and friends, gathered to celebrate the hard work of 952 graduates — an increase from last spring's 916 — from the college's four schools at an afternoon ceremony at ASU's Desert Financial Arena in Tempe.

According to university figures, the [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) presented the most spring 2025 graduates at 368, followed by the [School of Social Work](#) with 294, the [School of Public Affairs](#) with 161 and the [School of Community Services and Development](#) with 129. An estimated 750 graduates participated in the ceremony.

The college's ASU Online graduates totaled 338, while campus immersion, or in-person, students totaled 614. The latter included 24 graduates who attended classes using [ASU Sync](#).

Eight doctoral degrees were given — three from the School of Community Resources and Development, three from the School of Social Work and two from the School of Public Affairs — along with 397 master's degrees and 547 bachelor's degrees, at university commencement ceremonies held a day prior in Tempe.

In addition, more than 300 graduates from the [Hainan University-ASU International College](#) will be honored later this spring in Haikou, China.

Dean to grads: Community is essential

Tuesday's convocation began with a procession of Watts College faculty, led by the college marshal, Associate Professor [Justin Stritch](#) of the School of Public Affairs, who carried the college's gonfalon. Stritch was chosen in recognition of his work on ASU's design aspiration to

practice Principled Innovation and his positive contributions to his school.

The college's four spring 2025 Outstanding Graduates also served at the head of the procession as student marshals, each carrying a colorful gonfalon behind Stritch. Representing their schools were: [Daniel Maldonado](#) of the School of Community Resources and Development, [Deena Khoury](#) of the School of Public Affairs; [Lindsey Joy Smith](#) of the School of Social Work and [April Walton](#) of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

In remarks to the graduates, Dean [Cynthia Lietz](#) highlighted the college's emphasis on what she called "this important concept of community" that is part of the college's name.

Lietz quoted former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who called the loss of community one of the "defining challenges of our time."

"What is the cause of these very serious human- and system-level concerns? It is a simple, yet profound, answer," Lietz said. "What is missing is our sense of — and our connection to — community."

While technology found in cellphones and the internet represents "a powerful tool that can facilitate connection, (it) can also be corrosive," Lietz said.

The dean said Murthy's prescription for this challenge, what he called "the antidote for division," is "to design, join and be part of a community. Community is the cure."

"Civil discourse, empathetic listening, critical thinking and a commitment to executing what it means to be a free society" are key to achieving community, Lietz said.

No one can better deliver on the objective of moving from "me" to "we" than Watts College graduates, she said.

"Whenever I start to feel discouraged, our students provide me the encouragement I need to keep going," Lietz said. "I have great confidence in our future because the graduates here today have the skills, passion, energy and commitment to realize a democracy that is far healthier than the one they inherit. Please go out and develop healthy, engaged communities that can solve the very problems we face today. Graduates, our future is now in your hands."

Grads look back on ASU experience

Graduates on the arena floor offered happy reflections on their time at ASU.

Joseph Wise, who earned a Bachelor of Science in parks, recreation and sport management, is planning a career as a game warden or state parks manager after an upcoming move to Houston.

"I'm going to miss the people," Wise said. "Watts College is a smaller school. You really get to know people in your core courses. They become your family."

Law school in Seattle awaits Kaliyah Nakke Wicks, who earned a Master of Arts in criminology and criminal justice. The online student said her professors were always there to help.

"I was really engaged," she said.

Emilie Brown said her Master of Public Policy in public policy and environmental policy will enhance her existing career with the city of Phoenix.

“I will help create good public policy in water conservation,” said Brown, who said one of her most memorable classes was taught by a former director of Phoenix’s Water Services Department.

Hollery Morris of Alabama said she plans to use what she learned earning a Bachelor of Arts in community advocacy and social policy to become a social worker who helps teens, adolescents and young adults. She said she’ll remember how one of her professors “made me see people through a different lens.”

As the ceremony concluded, happy graduates and their loved ones were treated to hundreds of maroon and gold balloons that cascaded from the arena’s rafters to the floor.

A band played ASU’s fight song as grads and their guests tossed the balloons about, while many took some home as souvenirs — small keepsakes of a day, and a journey, they’ll never forget.

View the spring 2025 Watts College convocation in its entirety [on ASU Live](#).

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions graduates celebrate a successful academic career under raining balloons on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena on ASU's Tempe campus. The university granted degrees to 952 Watts College graduates at its spring 2025 convocation. Photo by Mark J. Scarp/ASU

Gallery



Spring 2025 Outstanding Graduates (from left: Daniel Maldonado, Lindsey Joy Smith, Deena Khoury and April Walton) hold their respective schools' gonfalon banners before the start of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions spring 2025 convocation on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena on ASU's Tempe campus.



Watts College graduates pause for a selfie in the tunnel of Desert Financial Arena before the spring 2025 convocation on May 13 on ASU's Tempe campus.



A graduate gets some assistance with a stole before Watts College's convocation on May 13 in Tempe.



ASU mascot Sparky is surrounded by graduates as they pose for a photo at the Watts College convocation on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena on ASU's Tempe campus.



A Watts College graduate shows a preference for a Stetson rather than a mortarboard at convocation on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena.



Two graduates enjoy a congratulatory hug at Watts College's spring 2025 convocation on May 13.



A Watts College graduate's decorated mortarboard thanks her family for giving her wings at convocation on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena.



More personalized mortarboards at the May 13 ceremony.



Dean Cynthia Lietz (left) and Senior Associate Dean Joanna Lucio (right) enter Desert Financial Arena at the start of Watts College's spring 2025 convocation on May 13. Christine Buzinde (center), director of the School of Community Resources and Development, follows.



Graduates wave to their families to express thanks for helping them succeed at ASU during the ceremony.



Two graduates react with happy surprise during the Watts College ceremony May 13 in Tempe.



Daniel Maldonado (right), the spring 2025 Outstanding Graduate of the School of Community Resources and Development, smiles while Watts College Associate Dean Chandra Crudup tells the story of his academic journey.



Social work Associate Professor Natasha Mendoza (left) presents the doctoral hood to PhD graduate Graceson Trey Jenkins at the Watts College ceremony.



The only graduate at Watts College's spring 2025 convocation with four paws — wearing a dog-size mortarboard, gown and stole — joins a human graduate on May 13 at Desert Financial Arena on ASU's Tempe campus



Cynthia Marie Mackey, who earned a PhD in social work, receives a doctoral hood from Associate Professor Kelly Jackson.



Watts College Associate Dean William Terrill congratulates new PhD holder Yanqu Zheng after Zheng received a doctoral hood from mentor Associate Dean Kelly Bricker at the Watts College ceremony.



Watts College faculty follow the proceedings May 13 at Desert Financial Arena on ASU's Tempe campus.



Professor Christine Buzinde (left), director of the School of Community Resources and Development, congratulates PhD graduate Natasha Martell Jackson after Buzinde presented Jackson with a doctoral hood May 13 at Desert Financial Arena.



Distinguished Professor of Social Policy and School of Social Work Director Elizabeth Lightfoot congratulates new PhD holder Chao-Kai Huang after presenting Huang with a doctor hood.



An exuberant graduate waves to family and friends from the stage at the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions spring 2025 convocation.