

ASU program helps former foster youth succeed in higher education for 10 years and counting

Bridging Success, started in 2015, provides ‘ecosystem of support’ to aid students in college life

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
November 24, 2025

Cynthia Lietz has walked only one former student down the aisle of their wedding.

That student was Breanna Carpenter, whom Lietz met in 2015 when Carpenter was a member of the first cohort of [Bridging Success](#), an Arizona State University program designed to help former foster youth, like Carpenter, succeed in higher education. Nationally, only [8–12% of former foster youth](#) complete two- or four-year degrees by their mid to late 20s.

Carpenter and Lietz met on the first day of the program’s [early start week](#), where students who experienced foster care have the opportunity to come to campus a week early to learn about academic expectations, navigate the campus and meet other first-year students with similar backgrounds.

Lietz and Carpenter saw each other again when Carpenter walked into Lietz’s yearlong Introduction to Social Work course during the first week of classes.

Lietz, dean of ASU’s [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#) and founder of the Bridging Success program, developed close relationships with all of the students in that yearlong class, but she sensed that she would have a lifelong connection to Carpenter.

Last month, the pair presented Bridging Success at ASU in California, in partnership with Ready to Succeed, a nonprofit that supports young people with a background in foster care in California. Both programs are celebrating 10 years of support for foster youth.

The event highlighted expertise being developed in both states and brainstormed ways to better support youth with foster care experience. Lietz called the event a chance for shared learning between the two states to improve programs and uncover pitfalls that hamper success.

A program is born

In 2013, Arizona established a program requiring state universities and community colleges to provide tuition waivers for students who experienced foster care after age 16, later adjusted to age 14. It was a policy that excited Lietz but also concerned her. She couldn't get past the policy's potential unintended consequences.

"I was worried that without additional services, these students may face more barriers than other students," said Lietz, who had previously worked with foster youth. "If that happened, then a well-meaning policy could do more harm than good."

Lietz wanted the students to feel an "ecosystem of support," which meant receiving guidance every step along the way.

Lietz's concern led her to connect with the [Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust](#), which provided funding to Bridging Success at ASU and a sister program at [Maricopa Community Colleges](#). In collaboration with others, Lietz designed Bridging Success to be a one-stop shop that provides students a support network, academic assistance and campus services navigation.

Since its inception, hundreds of ASU students with a background in foster care have engaged with Bridging Success. The program is available to students who experienced foster care, regardless of their location. Justine Cheung, the program's director for the past 10 years and a former foster parent, travels to all four ASU campuses in metropolitan Phoenix. She also supports online students, including one at ASU in California.

Having someone to turn to for help is very important, Cheung said, because the first few semesters can be "very disorienting" for students.

Success on many levels

Working through struggles is a key element of the support ASU's Bridging Success provides. And it has paid off. A [review of the first four cohorts by the Morrison Institute](#) found that students at ASU graduate at a far higher rate than their peers nationally.

Cheung said she is most encouraged by the students who work hard and get off academic probation.

"These students remind me of what we can overcome when we put our minds to it," she said.

The 10th first-year cohort of Bridging Success finished its freshman year last May, and the program is looking ahead to the next 10 years. Lietz said another study evaluating graduation rates will begin soon.

Removing just one barrier can have a domino effect on someone's life. Receiving an education, in particular, is transformational — it is going to help the student but also their family, their future family and their community.

Breanna Carpenter

Director of Public Enterprise Strategic Initiatives, ASU Office of the Chief Operating Officer

Cheung is proud of how far the program has come in 10 years. Its success is connected to the financial supporters whose contributions have sustained it. Cheung's dream for the next decade is for Bridging Success to be endowed.

"We want the program to live beyond us," Cheung said. "The big thing is making sure Bridging Success is financially sustainable."

Carpenter, who now works at ASU in the Office of the Chief Operating Officer, agrees. She sees the program as emblematic of ASU's commitment to access.

"Removing just one barrier can have a domino effect on someone's life. Receiving an education, in particular, is transformational — it is going to help the student but also their family, their future family and their community," she said.

A lifelong connection

Carpenter knows the impact education has on one's family. When she left for college, her younger sisters stayed behind with their relative who was fostering them. She worried that by not being there to care for them, she had changed her sisters' lives for the worse. But in 2019, when her sister accepted admission to ASU, she knew she had changed her family's lives for the better.

And she established the roots of her future family.

Back in January 2016, Lietz, a [social work](#) professor who at the time served as vice dean of the Watts College, put together a research project to evaluate the first year of Bridging Success. She was joined by Cheung and three students — including Carpenter, a freshman in social work, and Bryan Lietz, Lietz's son and a sophomore in social work.

Eight years later, Bryan Lietz was waiting for Carpenter at the end of the aisle.

Carpenter and Bryan Lietz began dating in 2019 and married in 2024. Cynthia Lietz sees it as one of many "stories of resilience" she has witnessed since the start of Bridging Success.

“We should never put an upper limit on what a person is capable of. Instead, when we remove barriers and believe that amazing things can happen for our students — even those facing the most challenging of circumstances — we open the door to stories of resilience just like this one,” Lietz said.

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

Main image



Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions Dean Cynthia Lietz (left) speaks with Breanna Carpenter, a former student who participated in Bridging Success, during a presentation at the ASU California Center in October. Photo courtesy of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions