

2026 MLK Servant-Leadership Awardees announced

Winners to be recognized at ASU's annual celebration breakfast

By Wendy Maddox, ASU News
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Every year in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy of leading through service, Arizona State University recognizes members of society who are upholding the civil rights activist's ideology and carrying it on through their own work in servant-leadership with the MLK Servant-Leadership Awards.

This year, the awardees are:

The Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley.

Vanessa Fonseca-Chávez, assistant vice provost of ASU's Polytechnic campus.

Laura Dicochea, coordinator for Educational Outreach and Student Services at ASU.

Esther Low, biomedical engineering undergraduate student at ASU.

The awards are bestowed by the ASU Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Committee, which selects the winners. In 2026, the committee is reflecting on the continuing arc of progress — both personal and collective. This year's theme of Picturing Progress invites the Arizona community to consider how they define growth and envision justice in their everyday lives.

The 2026 awardees will be recognized at the university's [Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Breakfast](#) on Jan. 22.

Here, they reflect on their own work and that of King himself:

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley, Community Servant-Leadership Award

"Dr. King taught us that 'the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education,'" said Marcia L. Mintz, CEO and President of Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley.

"At Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley, we're picturing progress by living this truth daily by shaping the character and leadership skills of the thousands of young people we serve. This honor belongs to our entire BGCAZ family who understands that servant-leadership means investing in young people during their most formative years. When we teach youth to lead with integrity, serve with purpose and dream without limits, we're building what Dr. King called the 'beloved community' — one young leader at a time."

Vanessa Fonseca-Chávez, Faculty Servant-Leadership Award

"I am truly honored to receive this recognition. In Spanish, we have a saying, 'aquí para servir,' which translates to 'here to help.' But it's deeper than that — it also means a willingness and fundamental obligación (or responsibility) to be part of a communal cause," Fonseca-Chávez said.

"This award recognizes that being called to be in community and for community is essential to our well-being and the progress we envision. Servant-leadership is a call to put the needs of others at the forefront, to dedicate yourself to the best work you can do where you are, and to recognize that we cannot do this work alone. We are our best selves in community."

Laura Dicochea, Staff Servant-Leadership Award

"Receiving the 2026 ASU MLK Jr. Staff Servant-Leadership Award is truly meaningful to me because it honors the experiences my students and I share, not only with each other, but also with the borderlands, a journey that, for me, began along the Sonora-Arizona border," Dicochea said.

"As an immigrant and transborder scholar, the borderlands have taught me to unite, rather than divide, to lead with empathy and compassion, and to serve with humility. To me, servant-leadership means walking together across borders, whether physical or symbolic, and crossing them with courage and purpose. To do so, we must listen before we lead, stand beside our students, and use our leadership to build bridges, so that every student, regardless of origin or status, is supported not only in higher education but also in their pursuit of their dreams beyond graduation."

Esther Low, Student Servant-Leadership Award

"I am beyond honored to receive the 2026 ASU MLK Jr. Student Servant-Leadership Award," Low said. "During my time at ASU, I have found a sense of community, friendship and a deep gratitude for the people and opportunities that have shaped my journey here and throughout, a place where I can be a servant leader."

"I believe servant-leadership is the basis of community, something that everyone needs. It's leading not for recognition or control, but through empathy and a desire to uplift those around you."

"It's so vital to be a servant leader in today's world and lead with values of love and compassion. Dr. King and the MLK committee remind me that when leadership is rooted in service, not only can it make an impact on our community's needs, but also on the people we are with. I look forward to carrying these values with me onward."

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

Main image



From left: Marcia L. Mintz of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley; Vanessa Fonseca-Chávez, assistant vice provost of ASU's Polytechnic campus; Laura Dicochea, coordinator for Educational Outreach and Student Services at ASU; and Esther Low, biomedical engineering undergraduate student at ASU. Courtesy photos