

ASU program empowers older adults to create change in their community

Distinguished Innovation Fellows take classes, share feedback on social-change projects

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Kaden Sheffield was retired, but she wasn't done.

After leaving her job as a professor of linguistics and humanities in the Maricopa Community Colleges in 2014, she taught in China, studied jazz theory, and became a certified storyteller and spiritual director.

But she craved more.

"I thought when I retired that I would pursue the arts, but I found that it wasn't really structured enough and it didn't feel like it had any benefit to anyone else," she said.

Sheffield took classes in the [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#) at Arizona State University, geared toward older adults, and attended an information session on the new [Distinguished Innovation Fellows](#) program.

"I remember feeling very thrilled," she said.

She was in the first cohort of the [Distinguished Innovation Fellows](#) in 2024–25 and she's still immersed in her project, called the Wisdom Tree.

The Distinguished Innovation Fellows program is part of [The Difference Engine](#), an ASU center that trains people in interdisciplinary entrepreneurship to address inequalities in the community.

What to know about the program

Cohorts are limited to 10 fellows, who are paired with an ASU faculty mentor, take ASU classes to support their project and meet weekly to keep on track and give feedback to each other.

Aaron Guest, an assistant professor of aging at the [Center for Innovation in Healthy and Resilient Aging](#) in the [Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation](#), leads the weekly colloquium for the fellows.

“For a long time in gerontology, we talked about this idea of the ‘third age,’ which was, you grow, you work, you retire and you have all this time in retirement to do new things,” he said.

“Our entire society has changed and we’re really talking about the fourth and fifth age. People move in and out of careers, and increasingly, the older adult community is becoming a larger part of our society.”

The Distinguished Innovation Fellows program is a good example of how ASU removes barriers to engagement for all populations, he said, adding that ASU is in the [Age-Friendly University Global Network](#).

“We have people with lots of expertise and experiences and ideas that they want to build on, but they don’t have an avenue or a venue to do it. And this program is providing that venue,” Guest said.

Sheffield found the experience to be intense but fulfilling.

“At our age, we’re looking at legacy-type things. Is this something I really want to spend what could be my final years doing?” she said.

“It’s very much worth it. You will learn things about yourself that maybe your whole life hasn’t taught you yet because you haven’t come up against some of those questions.”

Purpose and connection

Helen Hayes became program director of the Distinguished Innovation Fellows earlier this year after unexpectedly stepping out of a long career in K-12 education and experiencing the resulting disorientation.

“And I realized why a program like this is so beneficial — it provides purpose and connection,” she said.

A few other universities have similar programs, including Stanford and Yale universities, she said.

Applications open in January to adults 55 and older.

Cost is \$20,000, with some scholarships available.

Fellows commit to a yearlong program, auditing up to six ASU courses and attending weekly meetings together.

Fellows present their projects in Los Angeles at the end of the term.

Hayes believes the concept of empowering older adults to invent in new ways will scale.

“At some point, there's going to be a shorthand way to say, ‘I'm doing one of those programs.’”

People in the community who want to apply to the program must have a project proposal and also must be open to the cohort model, she said.

“The written application asks them to articulate what motivates them toward that project and the sense in which it is oriented toward the common good. The ‘why’ matters,” Hayes said.

“There are people out there who are great innovators but just don't need a group like ours. So ultimately, it has to be somebody who would benefit from a shared experience.”

The program also looks for people who have already been successful professionally.

Among the members of the first cohort was [Sian Proctor](#), an artist, ASU alum and adjunct faculty member, and retired geoscience professor in the Maricopa Community Colleges. During the SpaceX Inspiration4 mission, she became the first African American woman to pilot a spaceship.??

Her project, EarthLight, aims to take the sense of wonder she felt while in space and share it through science, storytelling, art, poetry, music and immersive experiences.

Neil Urban, an architect and urban planner, also was in the first group. His project was the [Z-aXis City plan](#), a design concept that reimagines the city as a multi-layered, three-dimensional ecosystem.

Guest said that the program has evolved, with the fellows needing less support than expected in some areas, such as choosing classes, and more in others, such as navigating ASU's four campuses.

“They're self-reflective — they know their strengths and they know their weaknesses,” he said.

Passion projects

When Sheffield learned about the Distinguished Innovation Fellows, she had just received an inheritance from a dear friend and thought the friend would like the idea.

She wanted to use the arts, and her background in teaching and facilitating, to ease some of the isolation faced by people in retirement or by children in the foster system.

“Literally, in a couple of hours, I had a rough draft I sent off as an application and was told within a couple of days, ‘You're in.’”

“And I was exhilarated and also a little terrified.”

Sheffield got her PhD from ASU in 2009 and both sons are ASU grads.

“We're an ASU family and it felt good to be back in an academic atmosphere that I'd spent my career in,” she said.

The Wisdom Tree is based on the idea of a Medieval travel altar.

“It folds out and has a system whereby you use one of five art forms based on the five senses: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile or literary. And I have quotes from artists and choreographers and architects that go with that. And you pick your quote and there's a book that goes with it that gives you some exercises to do in that art form.”

She took classes in poetry and digital art and got help from student workers at the makerspace in the Media and Immersive eXperience Center in downtown Mesa to create multiple prototypes of her book, which she is still fine-tuning.

“I had not envisioned this project when I proposed it, but it was an organic thing that grew out of the meetings and of trying to weave together what I really was doing and the creative design model,” she said.

“I'm still living it because I believe in it and I want it to be the best it can be.”

René Díaz-Lefebvre, a retired professor of psychology in the Maricopa Community Colleges, was in both cohorts of the program.

The first year, he created a class for students in Barrett, The Honors College at the West Valley campus based on his research of Multiple Intelligences/Learning for Understanding.

“I developed a prototype of how to incorporate academic information in a very creative way. Students had the opportunity to do sculptures, drawings, paintings, role-playing, acting and poetry,” he said.

But his real passion is this year's project: a documentary about his grandmother, Petra Óchoa Díaz, the first Mexican American, trilingual (English, Spanish, Yaqui) graduate of the Tempe Territorial Normal School, in 1897. The film will describe the challenges she encountered in her quest to become a teacher.

“There are over 20 teachers in my family, and she started the legacy of teachers,” he said.

Díaz-Lefebvre is taking documentary classes in the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, spending hours researching in Hayden Library and making connections to get funding for his film.

“It's challenging intellectually and academically, and it's personally so rewarding” he said, adding that he particularly enjoys the classes.

“We interact with fellow students, who have accepted me as a fellow learner. I learned from them and they learned from me,” he said.

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

Main image



Kaden Sheffield was in the first cohort of the Distinguished Innovation Fellows at ASU. She created the Wisdom Tree, a project to promote social connection. Sheffield is shown at the Media and Immersive eXperience Center in downtown Mesa, where she worked on prototypes for her project. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



ASU alum and adjunct faculty member Sian Proctor was part of the first cohort of Distinguished Innovation Fellows. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Kaden Sheffield's project is The Wisdom Tree, an interactive book to create social connection.
Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



René Díaz-Lefebvre, a retired professor of psychology in the Maricopa Community Colleges, was in both cohorts of the program. Courtesy photo