

ASU launches new center to train informed, innovative public leaders

Center for Local Government Education and Innovation unites student fellowships, executive education and applied research under one umbrella

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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Road repair and lane striping. Trash removal and recycling. Water and sewer services. Public safety and parks.

These are just a handful of everyday services that public servants working in local governments deliver to keep a community humming.

ASU, one of the nation's [highest-ranked universities](#) in local government education, wants to make sure current and future leaders are prepared to adapt to present and forthcoming challenges. That means training informed, innovative leaders who are prepared to meet the needs of the public without compromising quality of services.

To that end, ASU is launching the [Center for Local Government Education and Innovation](#). The center, housed in the [School of Public Affairs](#), will provide a bridge between student-focused academics and the school's executive education, community partnerships and applied research programs.

The new center combines the Bob Ramsey Executive Education Center, the Center for Urban Innovation, and the School of Public Affairs' local government fellowship programs under one umbrella.

Merging these programs will enable the school to better coordinate academic and practitioner expertise, creating applied research that helps local communities, and improving learning opportunities for ASU students and professionals in executive education, said [Shannon Portillo](#), director of the School of Public Affairs.

“The ASU Charter encourages us to take fundamental responsibility for the communities that we serve. The Center for Local Government Education and Innovation does that by creating a coordinated approach to education, career readiness and applied work that benefits local governments and communities,” she said.

The center will be led by [Jeff Tyne](#), a former city manager of Peoria, Arizona, who has three decades of experience working at different levels of local government. Tyne is a faculty associate with the School of Public Affairs.

Tyne sees the new center as a bridge to connect ASU to local governments in Arizona.

According to Tyne, the center will be a place to share resources, exchange ideas and best practices, and transfer expertise between ASU and surrounding communities. It will also create a clearer pathway for students wanting to enter public service.

“With this center, I see the potential that ASU has to really be a stakeholder in local communities, both within Arizona and beyond,” he said. “I also hope we can inspire future leaders and instill confidence in those who want to enter the profession. But honestly, I don't think that's too hard once folks embrace public service.”

Kari Kent, director of local government fellowships for the School of Public Affairs and a retired Mesa assistant city manager, also sees the new center as a space for practitioners, students and academia to learn from one another.

Kent manages the [Marvin Andrews and Jane Morris Fellowship](#), a two-year Master of Public Administration or Public Policy program where fellows intern with local governments in the Phoenix metropolitan area and are matched with a local government professional mentor. The program has grown from three fellows in 2006 to 21 fellows across two cohorts in 2025 — the largest and most diverse group in the fellowship's history

This fall, Kent also helped launch the Rural Communities Local Government Fellowship, a pilot program with two fellows earning their MPA degrees who are also employees serving Pinal County.

Kent hopes the launch of the new Center for Local Government Education and Innovation will create even more experiential learning opportunities for students.

“I want to continue the growth in our fellowship programs by creating new partnerships,” Kent said. “So far, our fellowships have focused on the Phoenix metropolitan area and a little in Pinal County. There are 92 cities and towns in Arizona and 15 counties — there is more we can offer to our rural communities throughout the state.”

Sara Villabos, program manager for [Bob Ramsey Executive Education](#), hopes the new center will also stimulate growth in executive education enrollees and lead to new learning modules tailored to current issues.

Bob Ramsey Executive Education is the only nationally accredited provider of the Certified Public Manager credential in Arizona. Between the in-person and online formats, about 100 people complete ASU's Certified Public Manager program each year.

“The new director knows what local governments in Arizona want in terms of executive education for their employees. He will be able to cater programs and topics to current needs, which is going to make the program even more valuable and effective,” Villalobos said.

The Center for Local Government Education and Innovation will also serve as a tool to reinforce the importance of local government and the services it provides.

“Local government is really dynamic. It covers a lot, but we don’t focus on it enough,” Portillo said. “Without a thriving local government, we don’t have the kind of communities where we want to live, learn, work and play. Local governments also run elections, so it is where we keep democracy thriving.”

Tyne agrees. He hopes the center will grow awareness of the role of local government employees. Disruptions, whether from economic change, technology or the political climate, often hit local governments first, noticeably impacting service delivery, finances and the labor force.

The center can help local governments and students prepare for those disruptions, he said.

The School of Public Affairs is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

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Main image



The new Center for Local Government Education and Innovation is housed in the School of Public Affairs at the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus. ASU photo

Text image(s)



Jeff Tyne