

Scholarship celebrates 25 years of overcoming barriers to higher education

Nina Mason Pulliam Legacy Scholars program provides funding, mentorship to ensure student success

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
February 6, 2026

Faculty and students agree that what makes the [ASU Nina Mason Pulliam Legacy Scholars](#) program special goes beyond the funding it provides for recipients:

The relationships that develop make it truly remarkable.

This May, the 25th cohort of ASU Nina Scholars will complete their degrees. Since its creation, 180 Arizona State University students have graduated as Nina Scholars, with another 25 currently working toward that goal. The scholarship, funded by the [Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust](#), provides up to six years of need-based funding, staff support and mentorship, and exclusive curriculum and events for the recipients.

“When promoting the program, I always say it is a life-changing scholarship because it is,” said [Jo Ann Martinez](#), program director for the Nina Mason Pulliam Legacy Scholars program. “We use a trauma-informed model to provide a strong support system to help scholars get through school. This scholarship can really make a difference in their lives and allow them to see new opportunities for their future.”

The program provides educational pathways to students from vulnerable backgrounds, Martinez said. Prospective students are eligible for the scholarship if they meet one of the following requirements: have a dependent in their household; have a physical disability; or have experienced foster care or are financially independent from their parents or primary caregiver.

The criteria for the program was established by Nina Mason Pulliam, based on her own life experiences, including an allergy to printing press ink that affected her vision when she worked as a journalist and board member of Central Newspapers Inc.

“The ASU Nina Scholars program is an incredible partnership with the trust. Nina Mason Pulliam was a very successful woman who cared a lot about education,” said [Cynthia Lietz](#), dean of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#), where the program is housed. “The funding acts as a facilitator to get the students enrolled at ASU. Then, the staff takes over, providing the critical support that is fundamental in terms of students’ ability to graduate.”

Beyond academic support

Cesar Yanez, who is on track to graduate next year, can attest to the value of the program’s wraparound support.

Yanez grew up in Phoenix. He moved around a lot, he said.

For kids, maintaining friendships is critical, and “moving around messes with that,” he said. It also means learning the layout of a new school, which for Yanez was challenging because he’s visually impaired.

He learned about the ASU Nina Scholars program from the CEO of the Foundation for Blind Children, an Arizona nonprofit. He’s now halfway through his junior year in information technology — a field he’s been interested in since middle school. He also has a campus job as an alternative format quality-assurance editor to ensure digital accessibility.

When he applied for the ASU Nina Scholars program, he assumed it was just financial support, but he really appreciates how the program is designed to provide both academic and nonacademic assistance. He’s participated in different workshops and appreciates that mentors check in on students’ overall well-being.

“When I first heard about the program, I assumed it was going to be just a scholarship. I get money; that’s cool. But there are so many more resources,” he said. “The program focuses on more than just education. It also focuses on help beyond college, including resources for food and mental health options.”

‘Part of the community’

Eric Davis, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in engineering management in 2018 and a master’s degree in industrial engineering in 2020, also grew up in Arizona. He entered the foster care system when he was 5.

He considers himself lucky to have had a more stable experience than some other kids in the foster system. He had foster parents who helped guide him when he didn’t make the right choices rather than give up on him. Their support, he said, contributed to him only having five placements during his 13 years in foster care, whereas some kids have “two or three placements a year.”

At his last group home, the directors — whom he considers his parents now — urged him to apply for the ASU Nina Scholars program and attend an event about the scholarship. At the event, he met Martinez, who also encouraged him to apply for the scholarship.

When he got to ASU, the program became a “second home.” The mentorship component helped him understand the resources available at the university. He would go into the Tempe office for outreach programs or for snacks on Fridays, or to participate in mock interviews with the staff. Davis even hung out in the office during his graduate studies, even though the scholarship is for undergraduates.

“It was one of the best scholarships I had. Overall, the program has been very helpful, and I'm glad I was part of the community during college,” he said.

Davis is now with the Virginia National Guard, where he recently completed officer's school. He also provides project management for the government.

Program's future: Help more people

The Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust was established in 1997 to provide 50 years of support for the causes in Arizona and Indiana that its benefactor held dear. Martinez hopes that during the remaining years of the fund, more students can benefit from its generosity.

Davis encourages potential students to apply for the scholarship.

“Don't have self-doubt that you're not going to get it,” he said. “There are so many resources available, and the ASU Nina Scholars program partners with many other organizations that can provide additional help.”

Every year, the program hosts an event to celebrate the year's graduates. Lietz said it is always inspiring to hear what the students have overcome and how they plan to use their degrees. This year, the event will double as the celebration for the program's 25th anniversary of helping students succeed at achieving their higher education goals, with alumni joining current students to share how the scholarship has changed their lives.

In total, the Nina Mason Pulliam Legacy Scholars program has helped 405 students earn their degrees across four institutions: ASU, Maricopa Community Colleges, Indiana University Indianapolis and Ivy Tech Community College.

“Mrs. Pulliam believed in the power of education changing lives,” said Gene D'Adamo, president and CEO at the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust. “In the last 25 years, we have seen many extraordinarily resilient and determined students persevere through tough situations to graduate. The Nina Mason Pulliam Legacy Scholars program is there to guide them through it, providing the support network and financial assistance to help them reach their goals.”

Apply now

The ASU Nina Scholars application is open for students who will enroll at Arizona State University in fall 2026. The application deadline is March 1. The program is available to individuals who meet at least one of the following criteria:

Adults with at least one dependent in their household;

Adults with a physical disability; or

Adults, ages 18–25, who have experienced foster care or are disconnected from their primary caregiver and are responsible for their own financial support.

Learn more at publicservice.asu.edu/become-nina-scholar.

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

Main image



ASU Nina Scholar Eric Davis poses with his dog in his cap and gown for his undergraduate graduation. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



NINA MASON PULLIAM LEGACY SCHOLARS

25 YEARS OF CHANGING LIVES

No caption



Cesar Yanez