

# The call to care

## How ASU builds stronger communities from the ground up

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News

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Albert Einstein said, “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

It’s a philosophy that Vanessa Seaney, ’92 MSW, chief of behavioral health and integration at El Rio Health, practices every day as a social worker. Her career spans nearly four decades of service as a case manager, therapist, health leader and mentor.

However, before pursuing any of those roles, the Tucson native was a Master of Social Work student at ASU in the early 1990s, completing much of her coursework in the city she called home.

That’s because more than 50 years ago, the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions started offering School of Social Work courses in Tucson, and for the first time, students could prepare for a career in public service without leaving their communities.

### An accessible social work degree

Today, Tucson-based ASU students can complete both undergraduate and graduate social work degrees in person. Not only do they avoid the challenges of relocating or commuting to Phoenix but they can also work in the field locally before they even finish their degree.

This is thanks to numerous partnerships with local agencies. This year, 75 are hosting ASU students, and in the spring semester alone, generated nearly 59,000 hours of service in southern Arizona. One of those partners is El Rio Health, which serves the Tucson area as a nonprofit health center.

In addition to mentorship and supervision in traditional clinical settings, interns have an opportunity to be embedded in integrated health care settings and in El Rio’s mobile medical and behavioral health outreach teams to help provide care to the unhoused population.

“It’s fantastic to give students real experience in their own community,” says Seaney.

It’s a very different program than the one Seaney, and her mother before her, went through.

“When my mom attended, there was no building here. When I went, there wasn’t really one either,” she says. “Now, there (is one).”

The ASU School of Social Work in Tucson opened its doors in 2001 — nearly 30 years after the Watts College brought programming to the region in 1972.

“Tight-knit is a really good way of describing our community,” says Heather Voelkel, the Tucson program coordinator. “We hold classes on Mondays and Wednesdays, and on those days, the campus is just vibrating with energy.”

The school also regularly hosts the public through its in-house academies. Covering topics from interviewing tips to Narcan training, they are designed to widen the skill sets of students and interested community members, as well as support continuing education requirements for practicing professionals.

These experiences, combined with traditional coursework, says Seaney, ensure the future work of graduates is “not only valued, but also person-centered.”

## **A hub for public service**

Another way the Watts College supports southern Arizona is through the Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation, which produces cutting-edge research — like the biannual Compensation and Benefits Report — nonprofits in Maricopa and Pima Counties use to inform decisions, while offering programs to strengthen volunteer management and build nonprofit leadership skills while bolstering local nonprofits.

Its Service Enterprise program helps “organizations become better problem-solvers, more intentional about engaging volunteers and clearer with their mission delivery,” says Tori Carlson, a trainer and former engagement manager for the Service Enterprise-accredited Interfaith Community Services in Tucson.

The research-based program includes a diagnostic evaluation, individualized coaching and change-management training for nonprofits.

On an individual level, community members earn the skills they need in their careers to level up through the Nonprofit Executive Leadership Certificate and Public Allies Arizona programs.

“The format exposed me to a little bit of everything, but one of the most valuable takeaways was understanding what kind of leader I wanted to be,” says Magdalena Verdugo, one of 30 Tucson-based nonprofit leaders to earn the certificate since 2015.

She credits the program with preparing her to step into the role of CEO of YWCA of southern Arizona in 2020.

Kayla Miranda, who completed her Public Allies Arizona internship with Southern Arizona Research, Science and Engineering Foundation, feels similarly.

“Being part of Public Allies made me realize that everything I contribute is important and meaningful,” she says.

Miranda now coordinates SARSEF’s Racing the Sun program, where high school students design, build and race electric and solar-powered go-karts.

Open to civic-minded individuals of all backgrounds, the program has mentored 37 Tucson-based Allies in 10-month apprenticeships since former Mayor Jonathan Rothschild helped bring it to the

region in 2019.

The broad impact of the Lodestar Center stands out to the CEO of Tucson-based accounting firm BeachFleischman, Eric Majchrzak, and inspired him to become involved with the center eight years ago. He now serves as the chair on the center's leadership council.

"When I looked at what the Lodestar Center does, I realized I could help the entire sector by being involved with this organization," he says.

## **Building stronger business leaders**

To support city, county and state employees in southern Arizona, the Watts College, via the Bob Ramsey Executive Education Center, began hosting custom cohorts in Tucson for its Certified Public Manager Program in 2021.

"The CPM program gave me the knowledge and techniques I needed to manage employees, explore training opportunities and understand different training methods," says Maria Talamante, a 2023 program graduate.

An assistant city clerk at the time, she enrolled in the CPM program to "broaden and expand" her professional tool kit. She now works as an administrative services manager in the Pima County Recorder's Office.

In addition to being fully accredited by the National Certified Public Manager Consortium, the center tailors the programming to city needs, such as specialized training on new systems.

"We want to provide training that's both practical and theoretical," says Michelle Hill, '17 PhD in theater, program manager for Bob Ramsey Executive Education.

That balance draws city employees from a variety of backgrounds and allows for unique collaboration opportunities on capstone projects used for internal problem-solving.

"Some projects have led to real changes — like revising sick time processes or addressing parks and recreation challenges tied to the water crisis," says Hill.

Talamante's group specifically focused on improving electricity use to make city buildings more energy efficient.

"We researched the costs and potential savings for the city of Tucson," she says. "I learned about programs the city already had that I didn't even know about, even after 12 years of working there. It really opened my eyes."

Overall, earning their CPM helps public servants expand their knowledge base. This is critical, says retired city manager Michael Ortega, who oversaw the initial implementation of the program in Tucson because "they had more confidence in how they addressed issues. They felt they had the skill sets and knowledge to address and ultimately solve problems."

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**Michelle Hill**

Program manager, Bob Ramsey Executive Education

## **A commitment that endures**

The Watts College first expanded in-person programming to Tucson so students could take classes and earn their degrees while staying in their community, fulfilling a need as the only school of social work in the region.

That commitment has expanded by bringing the only nationally accredited Certified Public Manager program in the state to Tucson communities, and serving the nonprofit sector extensively through the Lodestar Center.

Today, technology makes it possible to pursue these pathways completely online. So why is an in-person presence still needed?

The answer, explains Watts College Dean Cynthia Lietz, is simple: There is something powerful about students, working professionals and nonprofit partners being able to learn and gather in the community they serve.

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## **Service by the numbers**

**58,800**

Service hours completed in southern Arizona through Social Work Practicum Education program in spring 2025

**101**

Total Certified Public Manager certificates awarded

**12**

Faculty and staff supporting the student population at ASU in Tucson

Learn more at [publicservice.asu.edu](https://publicservice.asu.edu).

*Source: Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions*

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

## Main image



ASU's partnerships with local organizations such as El Rio Health give students real-world experience in their own communities. Photo by Sabira Madady

## Text image(s)



El Rio Health is one of 75 agencies partnering with the School of Social Work. Photo by Sabira Madady





Vanessa Seaney (center) mentors Master of Social Work students in the field of behavioral health.  
Photo by Sabira Madady





Magdalena Verdugo (left) credits ASU with helping her grow as a leader. Courtesy photo