

Making ASU more inclusive: Cassandra Aska reflects on 8 years of challenges, joy

Aska led Committee for Campus Inclusion; honored with award named for her

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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[Cassandra Aska](#) is wrapping up her role as university chair of the ASU [Committee for Campus Inclusion](#), and while there were difficult challenges over her eight-year term, it's the joy she'll remember.

"It's the overwhelming positivity of the good work that faculty, staff and students are doing because it's part of their core values and they're not walking out the charter as a transactional thing — they are living the charter because that's who they are," said Aska, deputy vice president of [Educational Outreach and Student Services](#) at Arizona State University.

"One of the things I often say is that this work is not easy," Aska told the crowd at the Committee for Campus Inclusion Catalyst Award event on Wednesday.

"And it's also never done perfectly, particularly at large institutions where there are thousands of people. Everybody's going to have a different perspective of how this work can be done, how it should be done, why it should be done, and how you, whoever you might be, need to do it better," she said.

The Committee for Campus Inclusion works to create a supportive environment that welcomes, respects and honors the diversity of ASU's students, staff and faculty educational opportunities and activities, as well as the Catalyst Awards and Catalyst Grants.

"We've had some great conversations in different spaces throughout the years," Aska said.

"We've had dialogues around disability and love and art, and around what it means to be a student parent and around the history of who we are, and resiliency and how we continue to work with the difficult challenges we have," she said.

In a surprise to Aska at the ceremony, the committee announced the creation of the Cassandra Aska Excellence Award and named her as the first recipient. The award will honor ASU staff who advance student success and well-being, build and sustain partnerships and cultivate a sense of belonging across the institution.

[Amalia Pallares](#), vice provost for inclusive excellence at ASU, oversees the committee and praised Aska at the awards ceremony.

"I would like to express, on behalf of the provost as well as my team, our deepest, deepest gratitude to you for eight years of incredible commitment to CCI. Let me emphasize that — eight years, even though it's a three-year term," she said.

Pallares' position was vacant for two years before she came to ASU in 2023.

"Dr. Aska understood the importance of maintaining continuity and stability in very turbulent times, while also having the ambition to see opportunities that could be pursued."

Aska said that the committee's success has been a team effort.

"I look around the room at some faces who have been in very difficult settings and spaces with me, trying to figure out, 'How do we lead?' Not, 'Will we lead?' But, 'How do we lead?'"

Aska was particularly moved by the announcement of the award named for her because she had just presented the Stanlie James Legacy Award, named for the former vice provost for inclusion and community engagement, to Cynthia Lietz, vice provost and dean of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions. It was James who invited Aska to take on the university chair role in 2018.

There were 22 nominations for Catalyst Awards this year. Reviewing the nominees every year is always a highlight, Aska said.

"It's reaffirming that there are individuals in our community that are continuing to advance what the charter says we are, and we have an opportunity to recognize that and celebrate that," she said.

"I'm also really proud of the Catalyst Grants. What I value about that is giving people an opportunity to switch from saying, 'Here's what you can do' to 'Here's what I can do.'"

Many of the award and grant nominees are doing work outside of their jobs or disciplines, she said.

"They see this as how they want to change the world and contribute to the broader community," she said.

The next university chair of the Committee for Campus Inclusion will be [Catalina Cayetano](#), an assistant teaching professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Eight Catalyst Awards were presented during the ceremony.

Meghan McDermott, academic success advisor in the School of Technology for Public Health, was the **Staff Awardee** for mentoring students and serving as the president-elect of the LGBTQ+ Faculty Staff Association.

“This recognition reflects the leadership that happens beyond my job description — the passion projects, the late nights, the creative risks and the belief that people deserve spaces where they can show up fully as themselves,” McDermott said.

“A lot of what drives me is the intention to be the safe support that I needed when I was in college. This work is deeply personal, but it's also collective and I'm incredibly grateful to the community that shows up.”

The seven other Catalyst Award winners were:

Student Organization Awardee: She's the First at ASU, a group that advocates for the education of girls around the world.

Student Awardee: Anya Chaturvedi, a PhD student in computer science who updated ASU's campus map to accurately list lactation rooms and menstrual product stations, and also advocated for more equitable graduate compensation.

University Group Awardees: The Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement and the School of Social Work, Tucson campus

Faculty Awardees: Angel Algarin, assistant professor in the Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation, who founded the Stigma and HIV-related Health Lab; Jessica Solyom, associate teaching professor of American Indian studies, who implemented several initiatives for Indigenous students, and Rafael Martinez, assistant professor in the School of Applied Sciences and Arts, who created an oral history of the Latino community in Chandler.

In addition, six Catalyst Grants were awarded:

ASU LGBTQ+ Faculty and Staff Association for Intersectional Futures: Queer Voices in Academia symposium in October 2026

The Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation for a module on strengthening the ASU Engagement Survey

The Department of English for El Día de los Niños: El Día de los Libros/Children's Day, Book Day on April 21

Hidden Cultures at ASU for a storytelling event earlier this month

The **Camp Catanese College Club** chapter at ASU

Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics for "Responding to Community Needs: Exploring the Realities of Communities We Serve," an initiative that helps students connect academic training with the lived experiences of the communities they serve

Main image



Casandra Aska (left), university chair of the ASU Committee for Campus Inclusion, receives an award named in her honor as Amalia Pallares, vice provost of the Office of Inclusive Excellence, congratulates her during the 2026 Catalyst Awards on Wednesday, April 15, held at the Carson Ballroom in Old Main on ASU's Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Casandra Aska is surprised at being called to the podium as the inaugural recipient of an award created in her name at the 2026 Catalyst Awards, hosted by the Committee for Campus Inclusion, on Wednesday, April 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Catalyst Award and grant recipients pose for a group photo at the 2026 Catalyst Awards, hosted by the Committee for Campus Inclusion, on Wednesday, April 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News