‘A good neighbor’: ASU supports the most vulnerable in our community

Christina Ngo creates connections to help students, staff and faculty engage in social embeddedness

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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When Peyton Pierce heard about a fellowship that would let her work with people who live in a homeless shelter, she knew it was for her.

Pierce, a fourth-year student majoring in psychology at Arizona State University, wanted to get outside of her comfort zone. This year, she’s one of 10 Leadership in Action fellows at St. Vincent de Paul in Phoenix, directing a program in which shelter residents get paying jobs and valuable job skills.

“We do workforce training, helping with resumes, and a lot of soft-skills training for job readiness,” Pierce said of the Workforce Brigade.

Upcoming: Ditch the Dumpster

Last year, St. Vincent de Paul received over 2,250 pounds of household items as part of the spring 2025 Ditch the Dumpster initiative during the ASU residence hall move-out.

Ditch the Dumpster 2026 has just began and will run until about mid-May. Students can donate gently used furniture, appliances, clothing, mattress pads, sealed food and partially used cleaning and hygiene products, diverting those items from the landfill and supporting local

“A lot of these people have had jobs but it’s been awhile. They have so much persistence and love, even after all the hardships that they’ve been through.”

Pierce’s fellowship is just one example of the hundreds of ways that ASU students, staff and faculty are committed to taking responsibility for the community. The outreach ranges from a few volunteer hours packing food in a warehouse to long-term relationships and research projects that increase efficiency and improve operations for nonprofits.

nonprofits.

ASU Zero Waste is partnering with several organizations for the initiative: St. Vincent de Paul, Goodwill, Big Brothers Big Sisters, CheckSammy and Pitchfork Pantry.

Thanks to a grant from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, the program has been expanded this year to include more signage and communications with students. Plus, students will get instructions on how to donate items.

The collaborations help the most vulnerable in the community, including people experiencing homelessness, isolated seniors, families living with food insecurity and teenagers leaving foster care.

The partnerships are reciprocal — community groups get help with their missions while faculty and students get research opportunities and the chance to build skills.

ASU students, faculty and staff have completed more than 1,000 community engagements and nearly 300 public service activities in the past 10 years, according to Christina Ngo, assistant vice president of social embeddedness at ASU.

Hundreds of these examples can be found in the ASU Collaboratory Database, a searchable platform for reporting and discovering how ASU faculty, staff and students live out the ASU Charter .

The effects of ASU’s outreach are profound. Tamera Abernethy, CEO of Hope Women’s Center, has worked with MBA students in the W. P. Carey School of Business who created a three-part plan to help the center manage donations.

“We didn't have a good system for volunteers, to process them, and it was a massive drain on our staff. And over the next year, we were able to adopt the three-tiered plan, including getting funding to build out a storage area at our site,” she said.

In another project, students in the T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics analyzed five years’ worth of client data to evaluate how effectively the Hope Women’s Center’s network serves clients across Arizona by pinpointing where demand is highest and where there are gaps.

Working with students has a high return on investment, Abernethy said.

“We do invest time — staff time, my time. But they send me students that are at the top of their game and care about doing a good job,” she said.

And the work can change the students as well. Pierce, who moves among several St. Vincent de Paul locations for her fellowship, said her work has been profoundly moving, personally and

professionally.

“I’ve gotten so much better at presenting myself,” said Pierce, who is considering a career in counseling.

“I’m really seeing the range of human experience and emotions that I haven’t gotten in the classroom. I’m open to all possibilities right now.”

The Leadership in Action fellowship, which lasts two semesters, is intended to create sustainable changes that far outlive the fellowships, according to Caden McCune, community engagement program manager at St. Vincent de Paul.

“The goal is to help them develop their skills to become competent leaders and also develop the kind of character that we think the corporate and nonprofit world needs — the kind of people that make a huge impact in the world in a high-integrity, caring, humble way,” he said.

Creating community connections

ASU meets with community partners in a variety of ways, and one of the major connectors is Ngo.

“I help ASU be a good neighbor,” she said.

“I get to listen to faculty and staff and students and community partners and then, from a universitywide lens, think about that and help start partnerships.”

She homes in on what the partners really need and how to achieve the best fit at ASU.

“Some people used to say I was a matchmaker but it's more than that. There has to be an in-person meeting. There has to be clarification of the assets and resources we both bring, and also what gaps we have.

“And we also have to figure out what it looks like for each of us to win separately. And then what does a win together look like?”

Her work gets to the heart of the ASU Charter.

“Our design, the way our institution is designed to be, is to fit with community partners. We will always figure out a way to get to ‘yes’ — even if it's not the original request,” she said.

Sometimes community groups reach out directly to her, or they find her via ASU President Michael Crow’s Community Council.

But Ngo jumps on any opportunity to create partnerships.

“Our St. Mary's Food Bank partnership started with me emailing a faculty member who wrote in his search profile that he loved to work with community partners. And then we started to develop a relationship where it was like, ‘You’re from Texas, I'm from Texas.’

“And then there was an opportunity to work on a data project. And it's turned into an awesome project, and they are co-publishing a peer-reviewed journal article.”

ASU and St. Vincent de Paul established a formal partnership in 2017, which has resulted in more than 500 service opportunities for ASU students, staff and faculty across several academic units.

ASU projects with St. Vincent de Paul include:

- Free audiology and speech pathology services from the ASU Speech and Hearing Clinic.
- The Rob and Melani Walton Urban Farm, which harvests more than 51,000 pounds of produce served to people experiencing food insecurity.
- ¡Viva Maryvale!, a diabetes-prevention program for children and families.

The partnership has evolved to be truly reciprocal, according to Shawn Donnelly, associate chief philanthropy officer for St. Vincent de Paul, who meets with Ngo regularly.

“I’ll bring something that we're hoping to do and she brings something that (ASU) is hoping to do. We start the year looking at, ‘OK what do you want to accomplish this semester and where have we fallen short of that?’

“And then we work on that,” she said.

Hungry for knowledge

Even ASU’s smaller collaborations can have a deep impact. One example is the Durango guitar club at the Maricopa County Juvenile Detention Center, started by Martha Masters, an assistant professor in the School of Music, Dance and Theatre.

Staff at the center reached out to her two years ago to beef up the existing guitar club, which had been run by corrections officers.

She spent several visits observing the teenagers, who are given guitars from Free Guitars for Kids.

“They don’t have the opportunity to practice because they can’t take the instruments back with them,” she said.

“It was figuring out a learning environment that functions differently in a juvenile detention facility but that still gives them that creative outlet for, and the possibility to have something to be proud of.”

Derick Sears, a student of Masters' who is pursuing a DMA in guitar performance, teaches the guitar club every week.

“The first time I went, the kids were hungry for information and had such dedication,” he said.

“I could really see the impact we were having.”

He starts each session just listening to music, which the teenagers rarely get to do.

“I’ll ask ‘Why did you choose this song?’ And sometimes it’s, ‘I like the beat’ but sometimes it’s ‘It reminds me of my mom,’” he said.

Masters said she can feel how much the young people respect the volunteers and the opportunity.

“You get to see them collaborating with the person that they're respecting. And I think the lack of that is probably something that contributed to them being there,” she said.

Sharing success stories

Ngo is always working to improve ASU’s social embeddedness. One of her goals is to encourage people to log into the collaboratory and record their outreach projects.

“The community sees ASU as one entity, one organization, so the more that we learn about each other's work, the more we can share the same message and be a good ambassador for every person who's working with community partners,” she said.

Another goal is to increase the number of ASU faculty and staff who use their paid volunteer time.

“About three years ago, we were at a 1.2% utilization rate of that eight hours of paid volunteer time off. Now we're at over 6%, which is exciting,” Ngo said.

She hopes to see more people in the ASU community wearing their ASU gear as they volunteer at community organizations.

“And then hopefully organic conversations happen there where it's like, ‘Hey, let’s do a project together.’”

Embedded in the community

There are hundreds of social embeddedness projects across ASU; here’s a closer look at a few:

Food drive: The ASU Staff Council recently collected around 2,000 pounds of food across the university as part of St. Vincent de Paul’s Feeding Our Neighbors Together Campaign, which also engaged students, who give feedback on how to expand the drive.

Invention Convention: The J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute supports this statewide entrepreneurship curriculum and competition for thousands of K-12 students.

HeatReady Schools: The Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory helps Valley schools improve the safety of children exposed to extreme heat during the school day.

Senior loneliness: The Center for Innovation in Healthy and Resilient Aging partnered with Meals on Wheels to research the effects of pets on social isolation.

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image

The Rob and Melani Walton Urban Farm, a partnership with St. Vincent de Paul, harvests more than 51,000 pounds of produce served to people experiencing food insecurity. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU

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Christina Ngo, assistant vice president of social embeddedness at ASU, talks with staff at the St. Mary's Food Bank facility in Phoenix about a new data analytics tool ASU students and faculty have created to help food banks fight hunger. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery

An ASU student volunteer waters plants at the Rob and Melani Walton Urban Farm with a natural pesticide. The initiative partners with St. Vincent De Paul to provide fresh produce to people experiencing food insecurity.

Children participate in a burpee race as part of ASU's ¡Viva Maryvale!, program, which works with families on diabetes prevention in the underserved community.