

Why Payson is the perfect home for an outdoor education hub

ASU class works with northern Arizona town to turn natural assets into an education destination

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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Tom Fraker nodded in the direction of the busiest street corner in Payson, the intersection of State Routes 87 and 260.

“More than 6 million people drive through that corner every year,” said Fraker, a part-time resident of Payson for eight years.

What they don’t do, Fraker added, is stay a while. Instead, he said, they get gas or hit the McDonald’s on the corner and then head out to Flagstaff, Sedona, Pinetop or someplace else in northern Arizona.

“Payson is not really a destination,” he said.

That could change if an online course held jointly with Arizona State University and Gila Community College in Payson sees its plans come to fruition.

Students from the Designing Sustainable Solutions with Communities class, out of the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation [Global Futures Education Alliance](#), have been working with Payson residents and officials since the start of the fall 2025 semester to create the Rim Country Learning Landscape, or RCLL.

RCLL would position Payson as a home for nature-based education — an outdoor classroom where students co-create interpretive exhibits, educational programming and community-facing learning tools tied to Payson’s regional trails system.

“Payson is an incredible outdoor landscape,” said Rajul Pandya, who co-teaches the class with Fraker and is an executive director and professor of practice in the Mary Lou Fulton College. “What if Payson becomes a place where people go to engage in outdoor education, outdoor learning, and we could do that in a kind of systematic and coordinated way that would actually enrich the lives of residents?”

The designing sustainable solutions class, which offers a certificate through the [ASU Professional Educator Learning Hub](#), reflects the university's broader emphasis on experiential, community-connected learning, while giving Payson access to student talent, faculty expertise and curricular infrastructure.

"So, the model of the class is you bring us the thing you want to work with, and we'll work on it with you," Pandya said.

Conversations between Fraker and Pandya in 2024 led to the creation of the class and the idea of Payson being an ideal location for an outdoor education hub. Within 30 minutes of Payson in any direction lies low desert, high desert, Ponderosa Forest, conifer forest, streams, springs, rivers and lakes.

"There are so many different things you can physically interact with and see," said Crystal Kubby, a student in the class who grew up in Payson and moved back to the community after graduating from college.

As the 14 students in the class — ranging from graduate students to high school students to professionals — began thinking about how they could implement a nature-based education system in Payson, they engaged the Payson community.

They met with more than 50 people through interviews and guest lectures, hosted community meetings, visited Payson for two days looking at spaces where they could construct outdoor education "villages" and held a "community listening" session on March 7 that was attended by Payson's mayor and members of the town council.

"One of the goals was to really think about how universities, especially a big university like Arizona State University, can be a better partner," Pandya said. "Not show up with a lot of ideas about what people should do, but ask people what they want, and then figure out how resources and knowledge inside the university can complement the expertise and wisdom in the community."

Class member Rachel Dudley, who graduated from ASU in 2009 with a degree in electrical engineering and is now pursuing a master's degree in architecture, said community members often repeated the same frustration.

"Proposed projects seemed to start strong and gain momentum, but for whatever reason didn't make it into implementation," Dudley said. "So, this is a place where change must earn trust. That meant our question was, 'Can we create a real economic opportunity in a way that strengthens what makes this place special, instead of asking it to give something up?'"

That desire for a collaborative effort impressed former Payson town councilman Andy Romance.

"I've heard that ASU is number one in innovation," Romance said. "I think this kind of partnership brings that to life."

In a presentation at Gila Community College on April 25, the students presented their ideas for the Rim Country Learning Landscape. Among them:

Villages: Small, place-specific hubs that build on existing parks, trails, landmarks and community assets. The villages would include six to 10 interactive signs, bathrooms, parking, public art,

trailside features, ramadas, etc.

“Come and visit for two or three days here, learn about nature, what it can do for you and how we can be part of nature,” Fraker said.

Trading cards geared for young people: The cards would explore different aspects of nature in and around Payson. One card, for example, might introduce content or experiences a person could have at Granite Dells, 1.4-billion-year-old exposed granite boulder formations near Watson and Willow Lakes.

Another card, Cubby said, would be about texture and have printed on it: “Rough bark, smooth wood, soft moss, hard rocks. How do these feel with your touch?”

Kubby said young people could mix and match the cards, which would be available at local merchants. The backs of the cards, she said, would feature art from local artists.

“The goal is that this would be something community owned, inspired and developed,” she said.

Nature Rx: Create a way for health care providers to recommend wellness opportunities in the Rim Country for their patients. It could be in the form of a handout, fliers or a website, all of which would have information about trails and beautiful locations in the Payson area.

“Maybe it’s a great place to meditate, or a great place to take a walk,” said class member Miranda Milovich.

Now that the class’s ideas — with input from the Payson community — have been finalized, Pandya said the next step is to identify one or two pilot villages, work with Payson-area partners and, of course, fund the project.

“What the students have done is sort of show a map of all the possibilities,” Pandya said. “Now we can reconvene and think about what possibilities make sense to pursue.”

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

Main image



Raj Pandya (left), ASU professor of practice and co-teacher of the Designing Sustainable Solutions with Communities class, and ASU architectural graduate student Rachel Dudley chat before a presentation at Gila Community College in Payson, Arizona, on April 25. The class worked with community members from the town to come up with ideas to create a nature-based education hub that would draw more visitors to the area. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Tom Fraker, co-teacher of ASU's Designing Sustainable Solutions with Communities and part-time Payson, Arizona, resident, joined community leaders and university faculty and students to present ideas for an environmental education hub in the town of Payson on April 25 at Gila Community College. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Class member and Payson native Crystal Kubby talks about the class' recommendations for a nature education hub in the town of Payson on April 25 at Gila Community College. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Payson area residents Trisha Gullett (second from left) and her children (from left) Waylon, 9 Morgan, 8, and Tenley, 2, learn about a community journaling project called "Mini Paths of Payson" from ASU architectural graduate student Rachel Dudley (right) before a community presentation on April 25 from ASU's Designing Sustainable Solutions with Communities class, which provided recommendations on how to turn Payson into a nature education hub. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News