

Personalized Admissions Project sees success with first graduates

Initiative keeps high school seniors on track toward college degree

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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At the beginning of Lenin Juarez's senior year at Carl Hayden High School in Phoenix, he was trying to bring his grades up and was thinking about applying to a trade school after graduation.

Then he got an acceptance letter to Arizona State University. He hadn't applied to ASU, but the letter in the mailbox had his name on it.

That piece of paper changed the trajectory of Juarez's life, setting him on a path to fight for social justice for immigrant communities.

"Especially as a first-gen student, it empowered me to continue with school. And this was right after the pandemic, so I was just like every other student during that time — confused and scared," he said.

Juarez was one of more than 1,400 seniors in the Phoenix Union High School District to receive [personalized early-acceptance](#) letters to ASU in the fall of 2021 — without even applying. Now, he's part of the first cohort of recipients in the program to graduate from ASU.

The goal of the [Personalized Admissions Project](#) is to remove barriers to admission for students who might not realize that they're qualified for college.

After that first year, the program expanded beyond the Phoenix Union district, and in the fall of 2025, more than 15,000 letters were sent to students in 44 districts around the state.

This year, students with the highest GPAs received a letter that not only offers acceptance but also invites them to apply to Barrett, The Honors College.

The project is critical to the state's economy because Arizona has a shortage of workers with college degrees. The state's high school graduation rate and college-going rate are lower than the national average by 11 and 14 percentage points, respectively, according to a [report](#) by the Arizona Board of Regents. About half of Arizonans have a two- or four-year degree, professional certificate or license, while about [70% of jobs](#) in the state require some postsecondary education.

The personalized admission program is a project of the [ASU Helios Decision Center for Educational Excellence](#), a partnership between ASU and [Helios Education Foundation](#).

Many high-performing students will aim for a college degree, but the Personalized Admissions Project targets students who qualify but don't consider applying, according to Joseph O'Reilly, director of the ASU Helios Decision Center for Educational Excellence.

"Our focus was the students with ability but who are not thinking that college would want them or that they would fit in at a college. They don't know they're prepared," he said.

Moving forward, ASU has partnered with the Arizona Department of Education and the ASU Helios Decision Center to keep the letters individualized while maintaining each student's data in the district, not ASU.

Juarez said he and his mother were "blown away" when they received the letter.

"It was proof that I was going to Arizona State University," he said. "I think my mom probably still has the paper somewhere in the house.

"She's an immigrant who came here undocumented and got her citizen status in the '90s. But she gave me the best type of education she could and pushed me to be the best version of myself."

Juarez started at ASU as a political science major and then added a major in justice studies.

"I wanted to focus my research on injustice in immigration and in the immigrant community, especially injustices that revolve around undocumented immigrants," he said.

He recently was accepted into the Sandra Day O'Connor School of Law and will graduate with the Moeur Award, given to graduates who finish with a 4.0 GPA.

Juarez said that many high school students in Arizona deserve the encouragement of a personalized admissions letter.

"It can give a sense of accomplishment to them and their family, and a sort of backing that everything is going to be OK, like, 'You're going to go to college. You're going to study hard and you're going to set your own path.'"

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

Main image



Graduating Moeur Award student Lenin Juarez, part of the first high school cohort to receive early-acceptance letters in 2021, is now graduating. He was a senior at Carl Hayden High School in Phoenix and will soon earn two Bachelor of Science degrees in political science and justice studies. He plans to attend law school at ASU's Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law this fall. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News