

From classrooms to the community, geographic information systems connect work across ASU

ASU earns 2026 Esri Special Achievement in GIS Award for Higher Education

By Ariana Pup, ASU News
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Do you use your phone's map app to find the quickest route across the city? Have you opened the [ASU map](#) to locate a building? Or wondered how a university the size of ASU uses data to support daily operations?

These questions share a way of understanding the world through location. Geographic information systems, or GIS, connect maps with data to help people understand places, patterns and decisions.

At ASU, GIS helps students, researchers, faculty and staff turn complex information into practical tools.

More than 13,000 academic and administrative users across ASU have access to [ArcGIS tools](#), creating an enterprise-scale platform for spatial analysis, collaboration and real-time information.

That campuswide use of GIS has earned ASU a 2026 Esri Special Achievement in GIS Award for Higher Education. Presented during the [Esri User Conference](#) in San Diego, the award recognizes ASU's use of GIS technology across teaching, research, operations and public service.

Esri, the company behind ArcGIS mapping and spatial analytics software, presents the award to organizations around the world using GIS in innovative ways. ASU's recognition reflects work across the university, where spatial thinking connects people, data and place.

Rather than treating GIS as a tool for one discipline, ASU has built a geospatial ecosystem supporting teaching, research, operations, resilience planning, broadband equity, environmental analysis and public-facing tools.

"GIS is about understanding the value of location," said [Wellington "Duke" Reiter](#), special adviser to the ASU president and executive director of [Ten Across](#) and [University City Exchange](#).

"Demonstrating a strong correspondence between ASU's [New American University](#) model and Esri's intense focus on the aspects of 'where,' the first of our [design aspirations](#) is a commitment to Leveraging Our Place, including physical, cultural and socioeconomic attributes.

"Achieving this goal is obviously benefited greatly by the use of GIS tools."

From the classroom to the community

At the [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning](#), GIS is central to preparing students to ask better questions about the "where" behind challenges.

Through the geographic information science [bachelor's degree](#), [certificate program](#), [master's degree](#) and [PhD](#), students build skills in GIS software, spatial data analysis, programming and data communication.

"Our faculty helped shape this field and bring that expertise into the classroom through award-winning instruction, both online and in person," said [Andrew Trgovac](#), GIS program coordinator.

"We stay closely connected to GIS professionals so the curriculum keeps pace with where the field is actually going, whether that's AI assistants, digital twins or web- and cloud-based mapping. Our goal is for our students to leave ASU prepared for the job market and the career they want."

The same tools students learn in class support decision-making across ASU. Campus teams use GIS to analyze utilities, facilities and services, helping staff coordinate maintenance and operations across ASU campus locations.

"ASU uses GIS to establish a unified geospatial foundation for managing campus infrastructure," said [Joseph Gregory](#), director of geographic information systems with [Business and Finance Support Services](#). "This institutional effort supports the university's vision for a smarter, more connected, resilient and operationally intelligent campus. By leveraging GIS as the enterprise spatial backbone, ASU is building the foundation for a fully spatially enabled campus ecosystem capable of supporting future innovation, sustainability and smart campus evolution."

GIS also helps ASU researchers and community partners turn data into action. Recent GIS projects include:

[Data Devils](#), which works with Arizona's community organizations to advance mission-critical goals.

[A partnership with St. Mary's Food Bank](#) that developed an interactive dashboard that maps food insecurity across Arizona and helps guide resource decisions.

The [Phoenix Dust Storm Scale](#), which ranks Phoenix-area dust storms from Category 1 to 5 after they occur.

The [AZ-1 Maricopa County Broadband Initiative](#), which uses mapping to better understand where internet access gaps exist.

[Ten Across](#), which examines challenges facing communities along the Interstate 10 corridor.

[ASU YouthMappers](#), whose students use open-source data to help humanitarian efforts.

“ASU uses GIS to enhance research and provide solutions to real-world problems,” said [Shiloh Johnson](#), senior project manager with [ASU Geospatial Research and Solutions](#). “This work extends beyond academics, supporting the university's own operations while working with partners to address local, regional and global challenges.”

ASU's recognized GIS work spans academic programs, research centers, technology teams and operational units. They include the [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning](#) and its [Urban Climate Research Center](#), [Spatial Analysis Research Center](#) and [ASU YouthMappers](#); [ASU Geospatial Research and Solutions](#); [Ten Across](#); [University City Exchange](#); [ASU Library's Map and Geospatial Hub](#) and [Naturespace](#); [ASU Enterprise Technology](#); [Business and Finance Information Technology](#); the [AZ-1 Maricopa County Broadband Initiative](#); [Central Arizona-Phoenix Long-Term Ecological Research program](#); [Decision Theater](#); [Facilities Development and Management](#); [Knowledge Exchange for Resilience](#) and [Knowledge Enterprise](#); [ASU Next Lab](#); the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#) and [Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures](#); [School of Earth and Space Exploration](#); and [W. P. Carey School of Business](#).

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

Main image



Urban planning doctoral student Natalia Arruda points out areas on a map in the wake of the Turkey/Syria earthquake at a YouthMappers session in 2023. YouthMappers is just one initiative at ASU that makes use of geographic information systems to turn data into action. The university has been awarded for its use of GIS at the Esri User Conference in San Diego. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



From left: Kelly Mukherjee, Adelaide Rodriguez, Mathew Riley and Wellington Reiter of ASU; Jack Dangermond, president of Esri; Joseph Gregory and Yueling Li of ASU; Khaled Garadah of GeoScope Analytics; and Patricia Solís of ASU accept the 2026 Esri Special Achievement in GIS Award for Higher Education on July 15 in San Diego. Photo courtesy of Esri