

ASU science workshop gets teens' 'minds in motion'

Initiative designed to expand access to higher education, STEM careers for children impacted by foster care, incarcerated parents and homelessness

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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For Tristen McKenna, the path was clear — he would become a welder when he graduated from high school.

"My family never pushed for college," said McKenna, a senior in Arizona's foster care program. "They wanted me to go to a trade school — not college."

But last week, McKenna was one of 20 teens who participated in an immersive STEM program at Arizona State University, and it may have just changed the trajectory of his life.

The Mind in Motion workshop at Arizona State University is a four-day program that introduces students from underserved backgrounds to neuroscience, astrophysics and college pathways. The initiative was designed to expand access to higher education and STEM careers.

"Coming to ASU and seeing the campus made me want to attend ASU and get a business degree so I could open up my own welding shop," McKenna said.

Envisioning a different future

Mind in Motion is hosted by [First Star ASU Academy](#), a national nonprofit serving high school students impacted by foster care, incarcerated parents and homelessness.

It grew out of a shared vision between [Aryza Olague](#), program coordinator for First Star ASU Academy, and [Jessica Verpeut](#), an assistant professor in ASU's [Department of Psychology](#) and one of the program's organizers.

The pair wanted to create meaningful STEM opportunities for students who are often overlooked.

"There are particular high-risk groups that are never tapped for community engagement," Verpeut said. "They are kind of invisible to the rest of the community. I am looking to partner more with those groups so we can increase that kind of engagement."

Soon, Olague and Verpeut were collaborating with other ASU faculty, researchers, graduate students and staff to grow their vision.

For Olague, it was a natural fit.

"(Verpeut) had a passion for serving youth, and I had young people who needed to be served," Olague said.

The inaugural program introduced students to neuroscience through microscopy labs and EEG demonstrations. The students also explored astrophysics through interactive lessons on exoplanets, asteroids and planetary science that were taught by astrophysics PhD student Hailey Nelson.

Students also explored [Dreamscape Learn](#), the [Interdisciplinary Science and Technology Building IV](#) and the [ASU planetarium](#), all the while getting a sense of what it might be like to be a college student on ASU's campus.

"Our role here is as another trusted adult that they can come to for guidance," Olague said. "They need help. They need support. They need to be able to envision a different future for themselves."

Breaking down barriers

According to the Arizona Department of Child Safety, there are roughly 7,600 to 8,300 children in foster care at any given time, including approximately 2,000 to 2,500 teenagers.

Olague said many students from overlooked groups believe their only realistic options are the trades or social work simply because they have not been exposed to other careers. She said many students are also unfamiliar with financial aid, scholarships and the college admissions process.

"That fear of the unknown and that fear of doing it all alone can be scary to a lot of them," Olague said.

According to Rachel Kist, program manager for First Star ASU Academy, frequent moves also disrupt students' education.

"Students in Arizona's foster system that are ages 0–18 move an average of 2.2 times a year," Kist said. "That's a lot."

Olague said the program works to remove the obstacles many foster youth face when applying to college.

"They don't have a support system," she said. "That's where ASU First Star comes in to really help them."

Dreams can come true

McKenna's change in outlook wasn't unusual among students in the program, Verpeut said.

"They came in very hesitant, very quiet, scared," she said. "They really opened up over the past couple days. You just see a different personality, a different side of them."

Verpeut said many of the students have had few opportunities to receive individualized attention. During the neuroscience activities, conversations often extended beyond brain anatomy to topics that directly affected the students' daily lives.

"We've been told by a lot of them that they don't get a lot of sleep in these group homes," she said. "We talked a lot about sleep and the brain yesterday and how important that is."

Helping students understand the science behind their own experiences can be empowering, she said.

"I think understanding the why to how they feel is so important, especially for teenagers."

For Triston Larkin, the First Star ASU Academy has already changed the course of his life.

An Obama Scholar and Nina Pulliam Scholar, he will begin classes at ASU this fall, majoring in biomedical sciences with a minor in psychology. His goal is to become a physician.

"The program has definitely helped me see my potential and see what is out there for people like me," he said.

Although he always wanted to attend college, Larkin worried about paying for it.

"First Star helped me see beyond that. They showed me that going to university was very important and very possible."

He credits the program with giving him confidence.

"Being in a research university environment made me feel like — this is who I am. This is where I belong."

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

Main image



Sebastian Curiel (left), with Access ASU, gives incoming ASU student Triston Larkin some guidance on a worksheet that accompanies a slide of neuron clusters during the four-day Mind in Motion STEM workshop on Tuesday, July 14. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



High school students Triston Larkin (left) and Tristen McKenna (right) participate in a dissection activity while psychology Assistant Professor Jessica Verpeut assists, during the four-day Mind in Motion STEM workshop held at ASU. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Incoming ASU student Triston Larkin studies a slide of neuron clusters during the Mind in Motion STEM program.



A slide of neuron clusters as seen through a microscope during the Mind on Motion STEM workshop.



High school student Bella Reinhardt draws neuron clusters after seeing them through a microscope during the four-day Mind in Motion STEM workshop held at ASU. Reinhardt plans to attend Scottsdale Community College in the fall.