

College starts anytime

Record enrollment in ASU's Universal Learner Courses reflects growing demand for flexible pathways into higher education

By Carrie Peterson, ASU News
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For generations, choosing a college came before taking a college class. Today, more learners are getting started earlier, earning college credit before submitting an application or stepping onto a campus.

That shift is driving record growth for Arizona State University's [Universal Learner Courses](#), or ULCs. More than 43,000 learners participated in ULCs this year — an increase of more than 40% from last year.

Open to anyone, Universal Learner Courses allow learners to complete more than 75 first- and second-year ASU courses online without applications, transcripts or GPA requirements. After completing a course, learners decide whether to add the credit to an official transcript, making ULCs an affordable way to explore college majors without posing a risk to learners' GPA.

Learners can choose from [new degree pathways](#) — including [business](#), [nursing and health](#) and [engineering](#) — that allow them to take a series of ULCs to apply to a future degree. Once a pathway is completed with the required GPA, students have the option to earn admission to ASU with credits already in hand.

Enroll

Fall enrollment for Universal Learner Courses remains open through Aug. 18. [Get started now.](#)

Meeting learners where they are

The learners enrolling in those courses are as varied as their goals. High school students are completing general education courses before graduation and exploring potential majors. Adults who never attended college — or who left years ago — are returning to college while balancing work and family responsibilities. Homeschool families are expanding academic options, while other learners are exploring new subjects before deciding what comes next.

At Fountain Hills High School in Arizona, English teacher Brent Olsen has watched students discover they are capable of succeeding in college-level coursework long before graduation.

"Many students who previously didn't see themselves as 'college material' are now finding success in these courses, building confidence and seriously considering higher education," Olsen said. "Others who may have thought college was financially out of reach are seeing new possibilities."

Jaime Smith, who serves homeschool families as founder of [Online G3](#), finds that ULCs can also help homeschoolers prove college readiness when applying to universities or seeking college credit.

"If you go to your local university and say, 'Can I take a class?' They say, 'We want to see your report card, or we need your principal's verification,'" Smith said.

"Well, (for homeschoolers), my principal is my mom, and my transcript is this Excel spreadsheet that I'm going to print out for you. That makes it a lot harder. ULCs are so accessible, so students are able to build up this credit and show that they're successful in college. And they don't have to live near a college. They don't need to prove that they're ready. They don't need to pay some astronomical amount of money."

Working adults are finding value in the same courses. Universal Learner Courses also serve as the foundation for ASU's [Earned Admission pathway](#), allowing learners to qualify for admission by demonstrating success in college coursework. More than 10,000 learners have been admitted to ASU through Earned Admission, creating new pathways into degree programs for adults returning to college as well as those beginning for the first time.

Scott Weatherford, executive director of Universal Pathways, said the program's growth reflects a broader shift in how learners approach higher education.

"More people want to start before they commit, and we think that's a smart way to go about it," he said. "They do the work, they earn the credit and they decide what's next from a position of knowing rather than guessing."

Learning at every stage

The trend is reflected in the program's continued growth. More than 46,000 high school students have participated in ASU's Universal Learner Courses, including more than 35,000 through [Accelerate ASU](#) partner schools. Historically, ASU has partnered with 800-plus high schools in the United States and internationally, expanding access to college-level coursework for students in a wide range of learning environments.

Since 2021, more than 148,000 learners have participated across ASU's [Universal Pathways programs](#), with nearly 400,000 course enrollments. More than 122,000 course completions have resulted in earned college credit, helping learners build momentum toward degree programs at ASU and other colleges and universities.

Designed by ASU schools and colleges

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Universal Learner Courses are developed and taught by faculty across ASU's colleges and schools, giving learners access to the same academic content and expectations found in degree programs.

[Kenro Kusumi](#), senior vice provost and dean of The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, said Universal Learner Courses also give learners the opportunity to explore the breadth of a university education before committing to a degree.

"The questions students ask early in their education often shape the opportunities they pursue," Kusumi said. "Universal Learner Courses allow learners to engage with a broad range of disciplines that define a university education, helping them develop the critical thinking skills and perspectives needed to be successful in any field."

For [Ohad Kadan](#), Charles J. Robel Dean and W. P. Carey Distinguished Chair in Business, making those courses available through ULCs reflects ASU's commitment to expanding access to learning.

"We know talent is everywhere, but opportunity isn't always," Kadan said. "By offering Universal Learner Courses, we are expanding access to the rigor and excellence of an ASU education. Learners can build confidence, earn university credit and begin making progress toward their goals long before they arrive on campus."

[Kyle Squires](#), the senior vice provost of engineering, computing and technology at ASU and dean of the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering, said the program also extends the reach of ASU's faculty and curriculum.

"ULCs do more than introduce learners to a subject," Squires said. "They bring the expertise of ASU faculty to a broader community while helping learners develop the knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving skills that support more advanced study. It's one way ASU can put its academic strengths to work for a much broader group of learners."

Building toward a future degree

ASU's new degree pathways allow learners to build momentum toward a degree while exploring potential majors and future careers, with no risk to their GPA. After completing a pathway with the required GPA, they have the option to enroll in ASU or apply their credits to other postsecondary institutions.

Popular degree pathways include:

[Business](#): Learners can explore a BA in business administration, entrepreneurial leadership, human resources and more. Popular ULCs include [CIS 105: Computer Applications and Information Technology](#) and [ENG 101: First-Year Composition](#).

[Nursing and health](#): Pathways include a BS in health care coordination, a BSN in nursing and a BS in community health. Popular ULCs include [HEP 100: Introduction to Health and Wellness](#) and [BIO](#)

[100: The Living Word.](#)

[Engineering](#): Learners have a wide array of engineering pathways to choose from, with popular choices including BSEs in electrical engineering, biomedical engineering and electrical engineering. Popular ULCs include [MAT 117: College Algebra](#) and [FSE 100: Introduction to Engineering](#).

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

Main image



More than 43,000 learners participated in Arizona State University's Universal Learner Courses this year. ASU photo