

Where ideas are born

Inside the network of funding, mentors and culture that turns students into entrepreneurs

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
August 17, 2026

Editor's note: This story was featured in the fall 2026 issue of [ASU Thrive](#).

Story by Ellen Sheng

Nearly two decades ago, Tom Prescott, '80 BS in civil engineering, and former CEO of Align Technology, asked a room of ASU biomedical engineering students to name the country's largest life sciences companies. Few could.

For Prescott, then a Silicon Valley medical technology executive, this was a light bulb moment. The students needed exposure to the companies, markets and business realities that would shape their careers. He began spending more time at ASU, speaking with students across departments.

With entrepreneurship, "There's so much experiential framework that can't be learned in a book or a studio class or a pitch contest," Prescott explains.

Students needed real stakes, not simulation. That conviction helped shape several entrepreneurship programs across the university, including Venture Devils, the eSeed Challenge, the Prescott Fellows Program and the \$100,000 Inferno Cup. Prescott also supported trips to Silicon Valley, where students could meet founders and investors and gain firsthand insight into how startups are built and scaled. To date, the eSeed Challenge and the Prescott Fellowship, now both 10 years old, have seeded more than 300 and 100 ventures, respectively.

But Prescott is quick to note that capital alone wasn't enough. The programs work, he says, because ASU has built a culture that encourages entrepreneurship.

Where founders meet

In 2016, Jonathon Barkl, Chelsea Border, '18 BS in business data analytics, and Scott Fitsimones started renting driveways from homeowners near the ASU campus and renting the spots to other students.

What started as a workaround became [AirGarage](#). Their first funding, \$6,000 from the eSeed Challenge, went into building a website and then an app. Of the three of them, only Fitsimones had an entrepreneurial background, having taught himself iOS development in high school, and had already built and shipped apps.

“When I arrived at ASU, I didn’t even know what a startup was. ... By the end of my college journey, I had learned so much about startups,” Border says.

Barkl tapped professors who could provide tactical advice because they had started their own companies. The three students relied on ASU’s connections to other founders. Also important was the encouragement.

Their company grew into an asset intelligence company that helps owners run parking as real estate assets, not just lots to fill. Now based in San Francisco, AirGarage employs about 100 people and has landed all three founders on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list.

The founders have stayed close to the ASU entrepreneurship programs that helped launch them, hiring graduates and hosting fireside chats for student founders who pass through Silicon Valley on the same eSeed trip that Barkl and Fitsimones once took.

Building more accessible health care

Jasmine Bhatti, ’04 BS in psychology and ’13 MS in regulatory science, trained as a nurse before coming to ASU for a PhD. She left with her third ASU degree and a company.

The inspiration for her company, [Navi Nurses](#), came from personal experience. When her grandmother was diagnosed with head and neck cancer, Bhatti saw how limited resources are for adults, especially older adults, once they are discharged from the hospital.

Years later, she took the problem to Rick Hall, founder of ASU’s Health Entrepreneurship Accelerator Lab, where students receive support developing their ideas. As she pursued a solution, she drew on entrepreneurship resources from across ASU, including programs supported by Prescott.

Her idea was “Uber, but for nurses ... so the ordinary person can hire additional nursing support that insurance isn’t going to cover,” she recalls, explaining that “it’s something that I wish I would have had caring for my grandmother.”

Related story

[Student startup AirGarage receives \\$12.5M from venture capitalists](#)

Resources to start your business

ASU’s J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute programs offer numerous resources to budding entrepreneurs in Arizona and beyond, including programs for ASU students, K–12 students, alumni and anyone living in Arizona. Go to entrepreneurship.asu.edu.

With that, Navi Nurses was born. Hall connected Bhatti to the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, where law students drafted her company's initial contracts for a fraction of market cost. In addition, he connected her with the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering, where engineering students built her first prototype app; and the W. P. Carey School of Business, where business students helped with marketing. She won \$10,000 through Venture Devils and was later selected for a Prescott-sponsored trip to SXSW.

\$105M+

in grants, gifts, service agreements plus 3 endowed funds since FY15

1,500+

students supported through the Venture Devils program

800+

active Venture Devils teams

7+

seed funding tracks for students through Venture Devils Demo Day

"ASU is unique from other universities because students aren't just taking entrepreneurship classes or reading startup case studies. They're developing real ventures with real money to create real societal and economic impact at full scale," says Brent Sebold, Hool Coury Law Professor of Entrepreneurship, Global Entrepreneurship Fellow and director of Entrepreneurship + Innovation at the Fulton Schools.

Navi Nurses now employs 170 nurses, including numerous ASU grads, to provide care in the Phoenix area. The team has cared for the parents of ASU alumni as well as some faculty. The company landed on the Inc. 5000 list, and Bhatti was named to Inc.'s 500 Female Founders list in 2025. She says the goal now is to grow without raising outside capital — from roughly 30 to 40 patients a day in Phoenix to 400, then beyond Arizona.

To give back, [Bhatti set up a scholarship for nursing students](#).

"It's fun to just see and feel all of these connections everywhere," she says.

Turning seed money into a global supply chain

Logan Milano, '26 BS in finance, who runs a beverage company under the brand [Amryth](#) now based in New York City, intended to pursue a career in finance. While interning at a private equity firm, he learned that alcohol sales are declining as consumers shift toward wellness.

That inspired him to start experimenting with nonalcoholic drinks. He got mixed responses until he came upon mad honey, a rare honey harvested in the Himalayan mountains that has a mild euphoric effect. When he began incorporating it into his beverages, demand started to pick up. Mad honey is nearly impossible to source in volume and is expensive. To produce drinks at scale, Milano had to go to the source.

ASU's Venture Devils backed him early with \$35,000 in grants, which he used to create a supply chain. He flew to Nepal, drove nine hours through mountains to track down a "chief honey hunter," and, through a translator, negotiated directly with harvesters. The honey was tested, flown to the U.S. and sent directly to the beverage manufacturer.

The first batch of honey took three months to arrive in the U.S. and lost its potency because of the high temperatures on the ship. But throughout the process, ASU's funding and resources helped.

"It's a good vote of confidence," he says, describing how ASU's backing later helped him negotiate with angel investors.

He also hired a cameraman to document the whole journey and posted about it on social media, building a following.

He went on to [win the Prescott-funded \\$100,000 Inferno Cup](#), which he put toward production costs. The first run of 10,000 cans sold out within a month. He quickly followed with another run, and then another. In the first three months, Amryth generated nearly \$250,000 in online sales. Milano primarily markets the drinks through social media, where he and a network of content creators document the company's story and promote the brand to consumers.

The ASU advantage

When Sandul Gangodagamage, who is a senior at ASU this fall, was looking at universities, he knew he wanted one that would support entrepreneurship. He had started a gaming company, [Legion Platforms](#), in high school and wanted to grow it further.

"The universities I was considering, they barely mentioned entrepreneurship," Gangodagamage says. "But ASU had entrepreneurship plastered on their website, and I thought this was a place that I want to be."

One program in particular caught his attention: the Venture Devils program, which awards capital to promising student ventures and provides mentorship, community, invitations to training events and other resources.

Since coming to ASU, he has grown his company's monthly users from 1 million to 16 million. Gangodagamage, who is majoring in business law, has won nearly every Prescott-funded competition at the university, along with others, and a spot on the Forbes 30 Under 30 Arizona list.

Related story

[ASU sophomore wins \\$100K prize in inaugural Inferno Cup](#)

He took a class last year with President Michael M. Crow, and was mentored by John Velotta, a retired Navy captain and energy executive who teaches through a program based at Mirabella, a senior living community on the Tempe campus that pairs retired ASU alumni with student founders.

The growth came with setbacks. One game required multiple launches and revisions before it gained traction.

"The truth behind every story is that it's always a bunch of failures," Gangodagamage says.

Paying it forward

For Prescott, the value of ASU's programs is measured not only by how many students build lasting companies but by the experience gained through the journey.

"You will be more valuable as an employee, be more valuable as a leader, and you may go do multiple startups after this," he explains. "It's only really a failure if you don't take anything away from it."

What keeps the model running, he says, are Sun Devil founders who return the favor once they've succeeded — with money or mentorship for the next student.

About the author

A writer and editor with a focus on business and finance, Ellen Sheng's work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal, CNBC, Forbes, Fast Company, Real Simple and Marie Claire.

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

Main image



While students, (from left) Chelsea Border, Jonathon Barkl and Scott Fitsimones founded AirGarage with their ASU education, funding, support and connections. Photo by Sabira Madady

Text image(s)



AirGarage, now headquartered in San Francisco, employs about 100 people. Photo by Sabira Madady



Jasmine Bhatti (right), '04 BS, '13 MS, and nurse Caitlin Carson (left), '19 BS, at the home of client Robert Kiyosaki, author of "Rich Dad Poor Dad." Photo by Aron Sher



Logan Milano grew his drinks business Amryth organically, through social media videos. Photo by Matt Pearson



Sandul Gangodagamage has grown Legion Platforms to nearly 16 million users while at ASU.
Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News