

ASU's online social work master's degree marks 10 years of expanding access

More than 2,600 students have completed the program since it launched, helping grow the social work workforce

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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For [Remi Lafayette](#), the path to becoming a social worker started with one who cared enough to help him figure that path out.

Lafayette, a U.S. Army veteran, was at a Veterans Affairs hospital when the staff social worker asked him why he had joined the military in the first place.

To get money for college, he told her.

“Well, let’s get back to that,” she told him.

Recognizing his interest in supporting others, she encouraged him to pursue a career where he could help people heal. He enrolled in community college, then transferred to Arizona State University to finish his bachelor’s degree in psychology. In 2021, he completed ASU’s [online Master of Social Work](#) (MSW).

Lafayette is one of thousands of students to complete the [School of Social Work's](#) online program. Last week, the school marked 10 years of offering the online MSW with a virtual celebration for students, alumni and faculty.

The school has also offered an [online bachelor’s degree in social work](#) since 2024 and an online one-year accelerated advanced standing MSW program since 2025.

Ten years ago, social work education was beginning to shift, with more programs moving online, said [Marcos Martinez](#), online program director and assistant teaching professor in the School of Social Work. It mirrored ASU’s broader efforts to expand access to education through virtual degree opportunities.

Since it began, more than 2,600 students have completed degrees through ASU's online MSW program. Students have come from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as 22 countries outside the U.S., representing every inhabited continent. Half of the MSW online graduates identify as first-generation college students.

The numbers represent thousands of individual stories — people who wanted to help others but needed an education that could fit around jobs, families and other responsibilities.

For the School of Social Work, making degrees more accessible also means preparing more people to serve communities in need.

The school's online programs have helped grow the social work workforce by expanding access to social work education, said [Elizabeth Lightfoot](#), director of the School of Social Work and Distinguished Professor of Social Policy. That access is critical because of a significant shortage of social workers in Arizona and across the U.S. The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) expects 6% employment growth in the field between 2024–2034 — twice the predicted average growth rate for all occupations.

“Our programs are flexible, affordable and offer students the quality and rigor of a top-ranked research university, with all courses designed and taught by full-time faculty,” she said. “That combination of access, flexibility and quality is what draws students to our online programs and has helped make ASU's School of Social Work the largest in the country.”

Nearly 80% of ASU social work students are enrolled online, Martinez said.

Balancing life and education

Students choose online programs for a variety of reasons. Some can't move across the country, while others have work and family obligations. For students who completed ASU's online MSW, the combination of a high-quality degree and flexibility was a major appeal.

Tresha Mabile, who completed her degree in May, is a journalist and documentarian who covered the U.S. military. She traveled the world but found herself calling home “every 10 minutes” to talk to her kids because she missed them. It wasn't sustainable.

She was drawn to social work after witnessing firsthand the “therapeutic nature of storytelling” through interviews and filmmaking.

“I'm a people person, but the online program turned out to be the best thing for me. I couldn't have completed a master's degree in person because I have two children, one who goes to the Helen Keller School in Boston, and I live in D.C.”

Flexibility was also one of the main reasons Jessica Flores, '21, selected the ASU online MSW. She wanted to continue working while earning her master's degree and starting a family.

“Completing my degree took a lot of planning and flexibility. I was pregnant while I was in the program, so I was balancing school, internship, work and preparing to become a mom,” she said. “Having an online program helped make everything more manageable.”

Creating meaningful connections

Earning a degree online doesn't mean students are disconnected.

Flores, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in California and Virginia, said support from other students in the program also made a big difference. Flores and Lafayette were part of the same cohort, and she credits him with encouraging her to pursue licensure.

Five years later, their classmates still get together monthly on Zoom, said Lafayette, also an LCSW in California and Virginia, who serves as a practicum liaison and co-instructor for the online MSW.

"We talk about our careers and what we're doing. We actually have a little network where when we see a job opening, we'll send it to one of our peers who is a good fit for the position," he said.

Mabile developed meaningful relationships through internships at [Jesuit Refugee Service USA](#) and [The Arc of Northern Virginia](#). Both internships were in person, which provided a nice balance, she said. She remains in touch with both organizations.

She also made deep connections with faculty.

"I think the dedication of the people in the program is absolutely amazing. I don't think you see this level of commitment everywhere. And it's such a wonderful university. I love the tagline: [It's not who we exclude; it's who we include](#). I think that's where America is going," Mabile said.

As she pursues licensure, Mabile is focused on continuing to advocate for veterans and people with disabilities.

The quality and dedication of the faculty is a feature that sets ASU's online social work program apart from other universities, Martinez said.

"Every single semester we're actively addressing strengths and challenges. Faculty and staff are an incredibly important part of that, making sure that we're continuing to provide a high-quality education," he said. "We know there are other institutions that offer the online MSW, but we believe that we do it the best."

The School of Social Work is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

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

Main image



Online graduates from ASU's School of Social Work pose outside Desert Financial Arena after the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions convocation in May. Photo by ASU School of Social Work

Text image(s)



Remi Lafayette



Tresha Mabile



Jessica Flores