

Students in new health innovation program get sneak peek of their future at ASU

Inaugural McKenna Program cohort will be trained to be tomorrow's biotech entrepreneurs

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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For Aditi Sekar, this summer's sci-fi blockbuster "Project Hail Mary" provided more than entertainment.

"It made me realize that innovative solutions cannot be made into reality if (they are) unable to scale or deploy," said Sekar, a first-year student at Arizona State University studying business entrepreneurship and biological sciences (biomedical sciences).

Sekar is a member of the inaugural cohort of the [McKenna Life Sciences, Business and Entrepreneurship Program](#), established in 2025 by ASU alumni Mark and Sheri McKenna to advance innovation in health care by providing students with mentorship, internships and research opportunities in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals.

"Through this program," Sekar said, "I hope to make my solutions into life-saving market realities. Ultimately, it reinforced my passion for making a tangible impact on the future of biotechnology."

Recently, with the start of the fall semester just around the corner, she and the other 27 members of the cohort gathered with friends and family on ASU's Tempe campus to kick off the weeklong summer program with a welcome dinner, where they learned about all the opportunities that await them as a student at ASU, and program founder Mark shared a glimpse into what their future as innovative biotech entrepreneurs will look like.

"Ten to 20 years from now, the students here can actually develop therapies to cure all kinds of diseases," he said. "The vision here is, how do we create rock stars that can go out and be the next biotech game changer?"

Mark McKenna is known for his leadership across the bioscience industry, having previously served as chairman, president and CEO of Prometheus Biosciences, a clinical-stage biotechnology company that launched the first precision therapeutics clinical trial for immune-mediated diseases. Currently, he is the founder, chairman and CEO of Mirador Therapeutics, a biotechnology company developing precision medicines for immune and inflammatory diseases.

He chose to establish the McKenna Program at ASU because, he says, “I wouldn’t be where I am today without ASU.”

“I think it did prepare me with the right tool kit to be inquisitive, ask the right questions and to be an agile learner,” Mark said of his alma mater. “I like (ASU’s) grit. I like their work ethic and the tenacity of the students that come here. I know that if we give you the tools, you’re going to really take this opportunity and run with it.”

A preview of the next 4 years

During the weeklong program, the cohort got their first introduction to many of those tools.

They connected with experienced mentors, entrepreneurs, startup professionals and industry experts. They learned about career pathways available in the health care and biotechnology industries through networking activities and entrepreneurship-focused discussions. They took a test drive of [Dreamscape Learn](#), ASU’s immersive virtual reality education platform.

And they even traveled to [Mayo Clinic](#), where they spoke with researchers and toured its newest lab spaces, where they got a firsthand look into the world of health care and biomedical research, and the people, technology and processes that drive modern medicine.

Arizona native Ethan Dauner, studying finance and biological sciences (biomedical sciences), especially enjoyed the tours of Mayo Clinic and the [Health Futures Center](#).

“I’m personally interested in premed, and so being able to see all those opportunities and seeing everything that goes on behind the scenes in a hospital was just fascinating to me,” Dauner said.

A collaboration between [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#), [W. P. Carey School of Business](#) and [Barrett, The Honors College](#), the McKenna Program provides participants with two bachelor’s degrees — one in a business discipline and one in a natural science discipline — and a certificate in entrepreneurship and innovation, all in four years.

“This program embodies the spirit of ASU in that we are preparing the next generation of visionaries to tackle current-day challenges, and challenges that don’t even exist yet,” said [Kenro Kusumi](#), The College’s dean and senior vice provost of ASU. “These students will be equipped to meet ever-evolving technology with critical thinking skills that will influence medicine and biotechnology for years to come.”

“The McKenna Program and our partnership with The College and Barrett has put us at the forefront of the biotechnology industry as we integrate principles and strategies of business with the research and findings of life sciences to empower students with the skills and mindset to lead breakthroughs in health care,” added [Ohad Kadan](#), Charles J. Robel Dean and W. P. Carey Distinguished Chair in Business.

Leading innovation in biotechnology and medicine

Out of this year's cohort, 24 students are also Barrett, The Honors College students. Rebecca Davis, studying artificial intelligence in business and neuroscience, is looking forward to how the McKenna Program will support her in finding a career in the biotechnology industry by developing critical thinking and interdisciplinary thinking skills.

"I chose the McKenna Program because out of all ASU has to offer, Barrett became an even tighter-knit community within all of ASU, and this program just ties it even closer together," Davis said. "I hope that my future self can make the world a better place, whether it be through artificial intelligence, business, technology, science or any other form of innovation. I think the McKenna Program can make that possible."

"McKenna Scholars are exactly the kind of students we seek to recruit and support at Barrett: curious, ambitious, drawn to complex problems and aware that addressing them requires creative thinking across disciplines," said [Tara Williams](#), dean of Barrett, The Honors College.

"The McKenna Program also reflects our commitment to connecting an exceptional academic experience with industry engagement and professional development, and we're thrilled to be part of a program that will give these students opportunities to translate what they learn into meaningful impact. I can't wait to see what this inaugural cohort will accomplish at ASU and beyond."

Cora Hanna, studying artificial intelligence in business and neuroscience, said she was sold on the program through the value of understanding multiple sides of the research world that she wants to pursue in college while having a chance to experience a sense of community during her first year.

"I hope to find student organizations that I can become invested in so I can give back to ASU and make new friends along the way," Hanna said, "and I hope that the McKenna cohort becomes a group of friends so that we can all lift each other up as we make the transition into college."

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

Main image



Students in the inaugural McKenna Program cohort, including Aryav Pimrale (center), Oliver Mandel (second from right) and Dryden Grissom (far right), suit up to try out Dreamscape Learn, ASU's immersive virtual reality education platform. Photos by Ashley Aros and Abhinav Premkumar/ASU

Gallery



Program funders Mark and Sheri McKenna (center) pose with Sparky and college deans (from left) Tara Williams, Ohad Kadan and Kenro Kusumi during ASU's Welcome Week.



Mark McKenna speaks to students and their families at the week's kickoff dinner.



Students (from left) Charlotte Chen, Yaswitha Prathi, Aditi Sekar, Allison Ha, Audrey Ballard and Brianna Wright work on drafts for the cohort's shirt.



Scientist and founder of VATT IP Management Kathryn Vatt speaks about her career with the cohort.



Kevin Engholdt, an instructor in the Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, speaks with the cohort.



Mark and Sheri McKenna (center) pose with the inaugural McKenna Program cohort in Armstrong Hall on ASU's Tempe campus, Aug. 9.