

At ASU in Tucson, small campus creates big connections for social work students

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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Mariel Montiel wasn't interested in finishing her bachelor's degree in a traditional college setting. Instead, she wanted the feel of an intimate campus that was also conveniently close to home.

She found what she needed at one of the country's largest higher education institutions. Enrollment at Arizona State University [topped 200,000 students this semester](#), but opportunities for attendees seeking small classes and close-knit experiences still exist.

That may be especially true at ASU's Tucson location, which offers the only bachelor's and master's degrees in social work available in southern Arizona. Students choosing immersion classes benefit from small cohorts where the professor to undergraduate student ratio is usually 15 to 1. In-person graduate classes normally have around 25 students.

Students pass faculty and staff offices every time they head to class, creating countless opportunities for check-ins and words of encouragement, said [Heather Voelkel](#), Tucson campus director and assistant teaching professor in the School of Social Work.

"Those everyday interactions foster a strong sense of belonging," she said. "Every student is known by name by our faculty and staff. ... They receive personalized, wraparound support from people who are genuinely invested in their success."

An approachable scale

Montiel transferred to ASU in Tucson last year from [Pima Community College](#). The Tucson program primarily serves transfer students, many of whom come from Pima or Tohono O'odham community colleges.

Montiel has worked for a decade in behavioral health, but after joining an interdisciplinary team at the Pima County Superior Court that included social workers, she decided it was time to complete her degree. But while Pima Community College was small enough for her to feel comfortable, she

was concerned that a four-year institution would be too big.

“When I visited the Tucson program, I loved the size of it,” she said.

The personal attention from the instructors and the size of her cohort lessened her worries and created space for deeper discussions. Montiel learned about other cultures and ideas from her classmates. The smaller group helped people open up, she said.

The cohort’s size also meant that all students end up working on projects together, she said. That collaboration has benefits beyond the classroom, Montiel said, helping students build relationships they can draw on after graduation.

Montiel’s classmate, Bruce Donahue agrees.

“The city of Tucson is small, and the behavioral health community is even smaller. With all of us working on social work degrees, it will really help us connect professionally after graduation,” said Donahue, a full-time student and a justice services navigator at the Pima County Department of Justice Services Transition Center, a community resource facility that connects people being released from the county jail with resources to help avoid future legal issues.

Like Montiel, he transferred from Pima Community College.

Their cohort checks in through a group text message, he said. Students use it to coordinate projects and bounce ideas off one another, even when they are working independently. His peers are supportive rather than competitive, he said.

“Having a small cohort has been a blessing,” he said.

Connections rooted in southern Arizona

Many students at ASU in Tucson are the first in their families to attend college, Voelkel said. Most also come from southern Arizona communities and remain in the region after graduation, bringing their education and skills back to the places where they already live and work.

Donahue, who has a background in substance use treatment support, experienced from a young age the disconnect that can come when a therapist doesn’t share a patient’s background. As a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation, he has seen how that gap can affect members of his community.

“There’s still a lot of historical and intergenerational trauma, and sometimes having support from someone outside the community just doesn’t work for our youth,” he said.

Students are also giving back to those communities while completing their degrees. The Bachelor of Social Work program requires students to complete a 480-hour practicum internship. Montiel will be working with the mitigation unit at the Pima County Superior Court. This fall, Donahue is starting his practicum hours with the Pima County Attorney’s Office.

A community that knows your name

In August, Donahue participated in a panel discussion about the Tucson social work program. His message focused on the welcoming environment created by faculty and staff. Donahue said he knows he can turn to them when he needs help. He also knows that if faculty notice a change in his behavior, they'll check in.

ASU in Tucson is proof that small doesn't mean isolated. The program hosts multiple opportunities to get involved outside of classes, including through student council, service learning trips to Agua Prieta, Mexico, campus mixers and educational workshops that connect students with practicing social workers.

"These experiences create a campus culture that is welcoming, connected and deeply engaged with both one another and the broader community," Voelkel said.

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

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Main image



ASU file photo of the Pima County Historic Courthouse in downtown Tucson.

Text image(s)



Mariel Montiel



Bruce Donahue