Finding a career through service

ASU’s Piper Servant Leader Network helps students explore nonprofit sector, build skills through hands-on experiences

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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Hector Jaquez hadn’t considered putting his business degree to work in a nonprofit until a chance email opened his eyes to the possibility.

“I was taking a policy course, and I got an email my teacher sent to the entire class. It said that you could get hands-on work experience, and I thought, ‘Perfect,’” said Jaquez, a student at Arizona State University's W. P. Carey School of Business. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted an internship.”

He calls the connection “fate.”

Jaquez, who is majoring in business with a concentration in public service and public policy, had never heard of The Joy Bus before meeting the organization through the Piper Servant Leader Network, a service-learning course connecting ASU students with nonprofits to help them explore potential careers in the sector. He immediately connected with its mission to provide healthy, fresh meals to cancer patients, having lost a loved one to the disease.

He quickly learned that the skills he was developing at ASU applied to The Joy Bus. He went to the Arizona Capitol for the Nonprofit Day of Advocacy, where he met with legislators and discussed The Joy Bus and its sister coalition Food is Medicine Arizona. It also allowed him to use his business skills — such as calculating overhead and payroll — since the nonprofit also operates a diner in North Phoenix. He volunteered with the nonprofit in fall 2025 and completed an internship with the organization in 2026.

While finishing his degree, Jaquez continues to work part time at The Joy Bus, supporting policy initiatives and assisting the CEO, board members and donors.

ToniMarie Mendez Tijerina, manager of programs at The Joy Bus, said Jaquez stood out from the beginning. As a volunteer, he tried every role, and that deep understanding of the organization allowed him to come back as an intern without the usual onboarding.

“When he came back in the spring, he knew so much about what we did that he was empowered to serve in these more polished, professional capacities. He was able to speak with confidence. He knew how things worked and who to ask to get things accomplished,” she said.

Jaquez's path from volunteer to intern to employee illustrates how the Piper Servant Leader Network, supported by Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, helps students turn classroom learning into hands-on experience while building professional skills, expanding their networks and exploring careers in the nonprofit sector.

Spring 2027 enrollment for the network's introductory course, NLM 160: Voluntary Action and Community Leadership, opens this month, with priority registration beginning Oct. 19. Students who complete the course are eligible for a $500 scholarship.

In the program's first three semesters, 133 students from 11 colleges completed more than 4,000 hours of service and 1,000 hours of job shadowing with more than 30 Maricopa County community partners. The program has given out nearly $70,000 in scholarships to students who completed NLM 160 and NLM 220, the advanced course and internship.

The program is designed to give students a greater understanding of the diversity of roles in the nonprofit sector and help them translate what they learn through service into skills they can use in future jobs, according to Bailey Borman, director of strategic projects and initiatives for the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

Register for spring

Priority registration for NLM 160: Voluntary Action and Community Leadership in spring 2027 begins Oct. 19.

"We want students to view this as a worthwhile experience that they can talk about in internship and future job interviews," said Borman, the chief architect of the program. "At ASU, we're really thinking about workforce development in an integrated way that combines classroom learning with building capacity in our community."

Exploring new career paths

For some students, the experience brings their career pursuits into focus.

When Hailey Compton enrolled in NLM 160, she was undecided about her major and unsure how to align her professional interests in advocacy and making an impact with her love of writing and the arts. Through the network, she explored those passions while connecting with Phoenix-metro nonprofits, eventually finding a fit with the Down Syndrome Network last spring.

Her experience showed her how advocacy, community engagement and communication could come together to make a difference, helping her choose communication as her major.

"This class honestly helped me figure out what I want to do," Compton said. "I was undecided. I wanted to work in policy, but I also loved the arts. Taking this class helped me dive into the logistics of things and really understand my own skills."

For business student Jadon Pernicano, one of the most valuable parts of the experience was stepping outside the business-focused perspective he was accustomed to. He volunteered with the Tempe Community Action Agency food pantry during the fall 2025 semester.

The course gave him a chance to see how nonprofits operate and how people with different skills and resources can work together to address local needs. He also met an Arizona Cardinals player

who was donating to the organization.

The program pushed Pernicano out of his comfort zone, encouraging him to engage more with his colleagues and classmates. He advises future students to approach the network with curiosity.

“Ask more questions. That was the biggest thing for me as an introvert. I’d ask the people next to me why they’re volunteering or how they got their role,” Pernicano said. “The CEO even came in, and I asked, ‘What did your path look like?’ and ‘Where did you start? What got you into nonprofits?’”

Building capacity for local nonprofits

The Piper Servant Leader Network also benefits the nonprofits that participate.

For The Joy Bus, the network provided talent the nonprofit otherwise could not afford, said Jennifer Caraway, the nonprofit’s founder, chairperson and CEO. More than a dozen students have volunteered with The Joy Bus through the network, contributing skills ranging from graphic design to website development to communications.

“It’s very difficult when you give away everything for free to be able to be sustainable,” Caraway said. “So to have this collaboration with Piper Trust and ASU, it’s given us the ability to bring in talent that we wouldn’t be able to afford.”

The network not only helps strengthen the nonprofit workforce pipeline but also gives students opportunities to make an immediate difference, said Steve Zabilski, president and CEO of the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust.

“Through the Piper Servant Leader Network, we have seen students engage with the nonprofit sector in such intentional and enriching ways. In addition to fortifying the workforce pipeline, these students are making real and lasting contributions and improving quality of life for people now,” Zabilski said.

The Piper Servant Leader Network is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



During a volunteer shift, ASU student Jadon Pernicano moves a box full of cucumbers at the Tempe Community Action Agency's food pantry. Photo courtesy of the city of Tempe

Text image(s)



ASU student Hector Jaquez poses with Jennifer Caraway and ToniMarie Mendez Tijerina from The Joy Bus at Phoenix's annual State of the City address. Courtesy photo



Hailey Compton