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Sun Devils in Silicon Valley

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October 13, 2017

From a poet coder to a culture conductor, ASU alumni share what it takes to get to startup mecca and how to flourish there

A supernova of innovation, Silicon Valley has been drawing the brightest, most creative employees for decades. And increasingly, those workers include Arizona State University graduates.

ASU recently made Business Insider's list of the [top 20 universities for landing a job](http://www.businessinsider.com/silicon-valley-hiring-most-popular-universities-2015-7) (<http://www.businessinsider.com/silicon-valley-hiring-most-popular-universities-2015-7>) in the high-tech mecca, and a different analysis, by the online recruiting company HiringSolved, put ASU in the [top 10 for sending the most graduates](https://qz.com/967985/silicon-valley-companies-like-apple-aapl-hires-the-most-alumni-of-these-10-universities-and-none-of-them-are-in-the-ivy-league/) (<https://qz.com/967985/silicon-valley-companies-like-apple-aapl-hires-the-most-alumni-of-these-10-universities-and-none-of-them-are-in-the-ivy-league/>) to Silicon Valley.

These accolades are not surprising for a university that was named most innovative in the nation three years in a row, according to a survey of peers published by U.S. News and World Report magazine.

So how do Sun Devils get to Silicon Valley? Hard work, talent and a lot of energy, of course, but the journey isn't always straightforward. What they learn outside the classroom is just as crucial as their courses.

These five ASU alumni who are succeeding in Silicon Valley say it takes curiosity, creativity and even a healthy dose of failure.

The venture capitalist: Keith Ryu

Bachelor's degrees in computer information systems and finance; Barrett honors student; 2014

Ryu took advantage of ASU's support for entrepreneurial students, and one of his projects led directly to the company that he now leads. OnboardIQ is a platform that streamlines recruiting and hiring for large companies that need many hourly workers. Ryu is the CEO of the company, which has raised nearly \$11 million in capital. Even with talent, a great idea and hard work, Ryu admits that first year was tough.

How he got to Silicon Valley: "From freshman year I was into learning new things, whether web programming or how to play the guitar. I always knew there were resources for learning out there, but it was difficult because I didn't know what I didn't know. In my sophomore and junior years I worked on a project called Onvard, a self-educational platform. That evolved in my senior year to be a learning-management system.

"By the time I graduated I had two choices: I could join a company in Arizona or I could come out here to Silicon Valley and continue working on Onvard. At the time, Onvard had only one paying customer at \$50 a month, so it wasn't a real company but it did give me enough confidence to test out the scene.

"When I was living in Arizona, Silicon Valley was a mystical land where things seemed to be happening. I wasn't sure I could punch above my weight, but I wanted to come out here.

"I tried selling Onvard but got no responses, but I did get a response that outlined the need for high-velocity, high-volume recruiting. That was an opportunity to tweak our software to help them."

On finding support at ASU: "Fortunately while I was at ASU, I was in a lot of entrepreneurship programs. I was very active in that community. I was leading a club called Entrepreneurship at ASU. Edson [the Edson Student Entrepreneurship Initiative] gave us \$7,000, and I won some money in a pitch competition at the end of school and that's what allowed me to come out to Silicon Valley. If it wasn't for Edson's support and resources, Onvard could have died before it became OnboardIQ.

"I also went every single day to Gangplank, a co-working space in Chandler that had a lot of tech companies. The people there were the ones who taught me to code and took a chance on me with an internship."

What the first year was like: "My co-founder and I were two young non-engineering students who didn't come from a Stanford background. For a tech startup, you want to have at least one engineer on your founding team, and we didn't have that. We had a competitor who was threatening to sue us. The first year we were living off of dumplings and boiled eggs and pizza pockets because we didn't have any money. Eventually we were very fortunate to find an investor who believed in our hustle and gave us a shot."

On putting in the work: "People always say that I have a great idea and I'm very driven. That isn't what matters. It's all about execution. The idea part is luxury. It's about waking up each morning and grinding and keeping yourself motivated even when things aren't going well over the course of three years.

"People will say, 'It's so brave of you' and they think of it as a big risk. But to be honest, because of the nature of startups and having to have this drive to even have a chance of succeeding, you have to give it your all. If you're doing it on the side, if you don't show that level of dedication, no investor or team member will trust you. If you can't put 100 percent into it, why would they give you money?"

The culture conductor: Kelsey Wong

Bachelor's in marketing, 2011

After graduating, Wong was director of operations at CO+HOOTS, a collaborative workspace in downtown Phoenix. In 2014, without a job, she moved to San Francisco, where she landed two interviews. She now works for Delivering Happiness, a consulting firm that helps businesses create productive work cultures. The firm was launched by Tony Hsieh, founder of the innovative online retailer Zappos. Wong has perhaps one of the coolest titles ever: "culture conductor and coachsulant."

How she got to Silicon Valley: "I didn't move to San Francisco right away, but I always knew I wanted to live and work there because it's such a creative environment. My question always was, 'Who will I become in this environment?' For three months I worked 80 hours a week to save money to go out there.

"I found Delivering Happiness through a friend of a friend, and I had been watching them online because they're both a movement around happiness at work and also a sustainable business. They didn't have a job description. They didn't ask for my resume; they just wanted to get to know me. I felt really connected to them. I invited myself to their all-hands meeting, which they have four times a year. They didn't have an opening, but they let me come. Three months later I joined the team.

"My lesson learned is to take risks. It's genuinely following your passion and curiosity, what you wonder about, and letting that guide your journey."



Keith Ryu says determination, not inspiration, is what really matters. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU



Kelsey Wong says taking risks and following your curiosity are keys to success. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU

On building a creative workplace: "We coach leaders and teams to create workplaces that are more emotionally intelligent. It's not just about business, it's about creating a place for people to have meaningful lives and to learn and to grow. We use a lot of the science of happiness and positive psychology.

"We facilitate workshops and training, and we help companies and people find their values. We worked with an accounting firm, and their values were authenticity and generosity. They really applied that to their systems, how they hire, how they lead meetings, how they communicate internally. You define these values and embed them into your processes. They should permeate and help with decision-making. What companies try to do is create an environment that has a positive reinforcement loop. You reward not just what people do but how they do it.

"I also work with another company, DSIL, that works with international NGOs."

On what she learned at ASU: "There were three main things at ASU that helped me. One was a class called "Finding Purpose" [offered through the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts]. I wish it was like ASU 101+ because it's so valuable. When I took the class I didn't know

what purpose meant, which is funny because now I help organizations find their purpose.

"Secondly, I did Collegetown@ASU (<mailto:Collegetown@ASU>), an activity that helped me build empathy and expand my awareness. It's about diversity, inclusion and social justice. The third thing was study abroad.

"The class was about self-awareness, Collegetown was about community awareness and study abroad was a global perspective."

The poet coder: Joshua Ziering

Bachelor's in English, 2012



Joshua Ziering was first drawn to the idea of delivering items with drones. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU

Ziering's path from ASU to Silicon Valley was not a straight shot, and in fact, neither was his path to graduation. But he had an unwavering confidence in his dream. He knew that commercial drone flying would be a huge business opportunity, and he pursued it. He co-founded Kittyhawk.io, a San Francisco-based company that created a platform that helps commercial drone pilots manage fleets of drones and comply with FAA regulations.

On his winding journey to a degree: "I started going to ASU for aerospace engineering. I've always loved airplanes — it was a lifelong obsession for me. When I was told that my academic record was not going to support my aerospace ambitions, I was devastated. [He got a letter stating he was no longer academically eligible to attend ASU.] I was still interested in being at ASU, so I went to Mesa Community College, I went to Chandler-Gilbert Community College, I went to online community college. I started taking the classes I would need to work my way back into the university system.

"During that time I was learning the things I was good at. I'm awful at math. I found I had a knack for writing. When it came time to come back into the university system, the answer was clear. I wanted to be a creative writing major, and in that, I wanted to be a poetry major. The liberal arts program was such a different place. I loved it. It felt like coming home."

How he got to Silicon Valley: "I started a small advertising agency in Tempe, and when it came time to graduate, I doubled down on that. I didn't love it, but it made use of my talents. I made the move to San Francisco and worked with a startup, and I was even more unhappy. So I started my own startup. I wanted to deliver things with drones, and that idea really took off. In six weeks I was on Fox News and CNN and NPR. This was in 2014. It was a great story and everybody wanted to hear about it, but nobody wanted to fund it.

"So I started working on software. The idea was, if we're going to deliver stuff by drones we'll need software to manage it. [He and a friend launched kittyhawk.io, eventually going full time.] Last summer someone said, 'Yes, I want to put my money behind this idea.'

"I knew this was coming. I didn't have inside information; I just knew this would be a turning point."

On being a poet coder: "If you look at my academic record, I failed out of coding. I was self-taught. When you have a problem to solve that requires skills, you have to get those skills. Now we have the support of brilliant people who are much better at this than me. But I still push code every day."

On success after failure: "For me, it wasn't a poetry degree, it was redemption. Part of that college experience was hearing no a whole bunch of times. What I learned from the degree was how to think about problems and solve them in different ways. People aren't hiring poets, but if you have the skill set of being able to solve problems creatively, you have an amazing opportunity to work on things that don't have established answers. You can solve them in ways people haven't thought of yet."

The Google analyst: Varsha Iyengar

Master's degree in computer science, 2016



Varsha Iyengar cites her research at ASU as a tool that helped her get ahead. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU

Though her job search took a long time, Iyengar landed a position at one of the top companies in the world thanks to her thesis work at ASU. She works at Google as a contractor doing motion-capture analysis for Project Soli, a radar chip that analyzes hand gestures and movement. The project, still in the research phase, could eventually be used for wearable devices, with phones or in cars.

How she got to Silicon Valley: "I was in the Arts, Media and Engineering program at ASU, and my thesis was on human movement with a concentration in arts media. During my job search, I messaged anyone who had the slightest interest in the field.

"I had been very close to moving to Singapore for a research position. It was two weeks from when I was going to book my ticket. Then I found someone on LinkedIn and I sent her my thesis work, and I got my job through my thesis."

On the Silicon Valley culture: "As a new graduate, it was a huge learning curve. The pace here is definitely different. Every week is something new to work on so I'm constantly on my toes."

What it takes to get there: "It takes perseverance to hunt for a job that you like. The interview process is very different than programming in school, where you don't really know what you'll face in this environment. This particular job is a contractor job, and it's very rigorous.

"The interview was a lot about my research work and higher-level thinking. When you get the interview, if you can show that you're interested and you want to hear more, it goes a long way."

On what she learned at ASU: "There was a direct relationship between my research work at ASU and what I'm doing now, and I'm lucky to have that. Not everyone does. The professors taught us to think very differently. For this job and this team, that's exactly what they were looking for."

The talent finder. Alex King

Degree: Bachelor's of interdisciplinary studies, 2006

King is one of the people who lure all that talent to Silicon Valley. He directs recruiting for hiring firms including FlexedHire, Integrate and Radius Intelligence. He works with technology companies of 50 to 500 employees.



Hiring expert Alex King says adaptability is a key trait for those who want to work with a startup. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU

How he got to Silicon Valley: "I grew up in Silicon Valley and went to ASU because I was a big fan of the hot weather and year-round golf and I was a walk-on football player. I joined a big corporate staffing firm out of college for three years. I hated it, but I learned a ton. I then joined a startup that wasn't even launched yet, and I still consult with them."

"Before that I tried to start my own staffing firm, but I couldn't get enough clients. It was a good learning experience to see where I could improve the next time and try not to make the same mistakes. I decided to move back to Silicon Valley because that's where the up-and-comers were."

On building skills at ASU: "It's not so much what you learn about in the classroom, but it's what attributes and character you bring to the table. ASU teaches a lot of good people skills, and I've seen that reflected in people hired in sales and business development, especially over the last year and a half. I've seen that trend going upward, which is really good."

What he learned on the field: "Football taught me a lot about commitment, and it was good to be part of a team environment."

"In Silicon Valley, when it comes to company culture, it's about humility and bringing on people who don't have an ego. There are a lot of transferrable skills from being on a competitive team to working in a technology environment."

How to get an interview: "Too many people wait for a job posting. You have to be proactive. You have to put together a list — here's the top 25 companies you want to work for whether they're hiring or not. Send them a tailored cover letter and talk about your experiences in college. Hopefully you can land a few interviews. Ask a lot of questions. Make sure they know you're an adaptable person who can go with the flow and if the business changes, you can deal with it."

What it takes to make it: "I get the chance to go on-site quite a bit so I see a lot of different company cultures. They look for self-sufficient, self-motivated people."

"A lot of the venture-backed startups don't have all the resources of larger companies, so employees need to know the full cycle. If you're an engineer, you need to know the back end. If you're in sales, you need to know the process. They want agile and adaptable employees because things change so quickly. The number one thing is finding people who have adaptability."

Resources at ASU

Entrepreneurship isn't just for Silicon Valley startups.

And it's not just for business majors or engineers creating the next hot tech.

It's a mind-set that ASU strives to weave into the fabric of the university and beyond, helping to grow the ideas of both the ASU community and Greater Phoenix area through programs, mentorship, resources and outreach.

It can take funding, know-how and workspace to bring an idea to fruition, and ASU's Entrepreneurship + Innovation team works to meet each entrepreneur where he or she is and help individuals and their ideas make it to the next level. Learn more at entrepreneurship.asu.edu (<https://entrepreneurship.asu.edu/>).

This story first appeared in the ASU Thrive magazine. Top photo: Keith Ryu in San Francisco. Photo by Jarod Opperman/ASU

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