When Kara Aquilano Forney was planning her wedding in 1994, she turned to popular wedding guides to help her prepare for the big day.

When she became pregnant with her first child six years later, she looked to the internet to help plan for the arrival of her little one. But she had trouble finding the tools she needed.

By that time, The Knot, a wedding planning website, had been launched as a one-stop shop for couples planning their big day. Forney thought: Wouldn't it be great if there were a similar online hub for expectant mothers?

The idea stayed with her, and while she was on maternity leave she started a business plan, which she set aside when she returned to work as director of advertising and marketing for Del Webb, a retirement community company, in Phoenix.

In 2004, when Forney became pregnant with her second son, she still couldn't find a one-stop shop for expectant moms. Recognizing the gap in the market, she dusted off her business plan and launched The Bump, a robust online resource that points future moms to everything from health information to baby names to parenting advice.

It was a first foray into the world of startups for Forney, who earned her degree in marketing from the UA Eller College of Management in 1989. She soon left her day job to run The Bump, which quickly expanded from Phoenix to 12 more markets across the country.

In 2010, The Knot reached out to Forney with an offer to acquire the company it had inspired, and Forney worked with The Knot for three years to integrate The Bump. From there, she went on to consult for other startups and businesses in the growth stage.

Today, Forney puts her entrepreneurial spirit to work as executive director of the Arizona Online Corporate Initiative.

Her job: to develop educational partnerships between Arizona Online, the UA’s online education arm, and businesses and organizations in Arizona and nationwide, with the goal of helping those companies' employees attain UA degrees online.

"Our mission is to create greater access to our degree programs, as well as to stimulate successful degree completion for working adults through these strategic partnerships," Forney said.

The program has grown significantly since Forney joined the UA in 2015. Today, Arizona Online partners with 20 local, regional and national companies and organizations, including,
among others, American Express, GameStop, Geico, the state of Arizona, the city of Tucson, the city of Phoenix and, most recently, Banner Health.

"It was super exciting to start something from scratch. That's what I love to do as an entrepreneur," Forney said. "It's been my goal the last 3 1/2 years to put an entrepreneurial spin on everything we do to help grow this program as a startup."

Arizona Online partners with organizations that have existing tuition assistance programs for their employees. The University then works with those partners to promote Arizona Online as an educational option for their employees, through websites, on-site events, webinars and more.

In addition, the UA pairs the organizations with dedicated enrollment counselors to help guide their employees through the process of becoming Arizona Online students.

"Instead of an employee getting someone different every time they call or email, they actually have the same person that can work with them through the whole process," Forney said. "That is key, because for working adults who've been out of education for a while, the process of going back can be daunting and overwhelming. That's what blocks people most of the time. So by having a dedicated counselor for them, it helps lower that barrier."

The partnership program not only offers valuable personal and professional development opportunities for partner organizations and their employees, it also provides a strong enrollment pipeline for Arizona Online, which has allowed the UA to increase its educational reach and brand recognition in the state capital and beyond.

"Now that we have an online platform for our undergraduate degrees, it's been a game changer," said Forney, whose office is in Phoenix, across from the Phoenix Biomedical Campus. "We have a much larger presence up here in Phoenix now because we are partnered with organizations like AmEx, Cox Communications, the state of Arizona and the city of Phoenix. It's been extremely helpful to our presence here."

Arizona Online will soon extend its reach even further thanks to a new partnership with Guild Education, which works with Fortune 500 companies to improve corporate tuition assistance programs. The UA expects to pilot programs with two Guild partner companies - Disney and Discover - in the fall.

For Forney, working with Arizona Online has been a dream job, combining her entrepreneurial skills with her longtime love of the UA.

Forney and her two brothers essentially grew up on the UA campus, where their father, Nicholas Aquilano, served on the Eller College faculty for more than 25 years. As a child, she often attended departmental holiday parties, football and basketball games, and Spring Fling, knowing she'd one day become a Wildcat herself.

As a UA student, Forney worked as an office assistant in Student Affairs, was active in her sorority and was among the first female members of the Bobcats Senior Honorary. After graduating, she worked at IBM and earned her Master of Business Administration from the Thunderbird School of Global Management before her time with Del Webb and The Bump.
Forney said it has been rewarding to return to her alma mater and help others earn their UA degrees.

"A number of individuals have told us they would not have pursued their degree had it not been for the partnership with their employer," Forney said. "Hearing those individual stories about the life-changing power of education has been incredibly meaningful."

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