

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hughes Federal Credit Union and University of Arizona Celebrate 20 Years of Empowering Youth Through the "Arizona Financial Faceoff"

TUCSON, Ariz. — Two decades ago, a shared vision between a local credit union and University of Arizona students sparked a movement to bring financial literacy to the forefront of Southern Arizona education. Today, Hughes Federal Credit Union and University of Arizona's Norton School of Human Ecology—Take Charge America Institute are proud to announce the 20th anniversary of the Arizona Financial Faceoff, scheduled for April 18, 2026, at the University of Arizona campus.

The program's roots trace back to 2005, evolving from the "Duel in the Desert," a prestigious national competition for college students. Recognizing a critical need for earlier intervention, Hughes and the University pivoted the model to focus on a greater local impact, bringing that same high-level competitive spirit to Southern Arizona high school students. The first "Financial Face Off" was held the following year, hosted by the University's Norton School in partnership with the Take Charge America Institute housed within the school and sponsored by Hughes.

A Legacy of Leadership and Community Impact

"Financial decisions are more complex than ever," said Kellie Terhune Neely, a long-time judge and former Hughes executive who helped launch the program. "Giving kids financial knowledge before they graduate gives them the confidence to make smart decisions throughout their lives. It's a natural domino effect: financial literacy leads to financial health, which ultimately strengthens our entire community. I've seen parents thank us because their children are starting money conversations at home that they never had before. It truly touches you to see that impact."

Throughout the school year, U of A students from Take Charge Cats (formerly Credit Wise Cats) conduct 150 to 200 workshops in local classrooms. These courses cover essential practical skills, including budgeting, saving, debt management and the wise use of credit. Students then participate in the annual competition, hosted by The Norton School and Take Charge America Institute.

"The success of the Financial Faceoff is a testament to the power of peer-to-peer education," said Daniel McDonald, director of the Take Charge America Institute. "By having our university students lead these workshops, we create a relatable and high-impact environment. We are changing financial behaviors for the long term."

The Competition: Solving Real-World Challenges

During the event, students apply their skills to solve intensive financial case studies. These scenarios challenge teams to coordinate realistic monthly budgets, forcing them to make tough choices—such as consolidating cell phone plans and streaming services—to achieve financial stability.

"We are incredibly proud of the legacy Hughes has built alongside the University over the past 20 years," said Valerie Fanelli, vice president of Marketing at Hughes Federal Credit Union. "The Financial Faceoff has been a launchpad for financial health. Seeing thousands of high school students walk the U of A campus, some for the first time, and leave with the skills to own their financial future is exactly why Hughes remains committed to this mission."

Looking Ahead: Expanding the Vision

The 20-year success of the Financial Faceoff has paved the way for permanent academic and community infrastructure. The University of Arizona now offers a dedicated degree in Personal and Family Financial Planning, ensuring a pipeline of future experts in the field.

"The Financial Faceoff is the foundation of a much larger vision," said Laura Scaramella, director of The Norton School. "We are now taking these financial coaching workshops for adults directly into the community. Our hope is to expand this reach even further into our rural communities, ensuring every student in Southern Arizona has access to these life-changing tools."

Mike Staten, interim dean of the College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences, added, "As we look at the next generation of our economy, we are proud to continue this 20-year legacy with Hughes and grow our impact across the state."

The competition will conclude with an awards ceremony recognizing the top-performing teams in Southern Arizona.

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About Hughes Federal Credit Union

Hughes Federal Credit Union is a member-owned financial institution serving over 190,000 members with \$2.5 billion in assets. Since its founding in 1952, Hughes has remained deeply committed to improving its members' financial lives while maintaining strong local roots. Recognized as one of the Best-in-State credit unions by Forbes in 2025 and consistently rated as a Five-Star "Superior" or Four-Star "Excellent" financial institution by BauerFinancial since 1991, Hughes offers a full range of financial products and services designed to meet the evolving needs of its diverse membership. Hughes was instrumental in founding the Financial Faceoff and has been the title sponsor since its inception. For more information, please visit HughesFCU.org.

About the Take Charge Cats

Housed within the Norton School of Human Ecology at the University of Arizona, the Take Charge Cats are trained student ambassadors who provide free financial education workshops to youth across Southern Arizona through the Take Charge America Institute.