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Innovating US higher education: Arizona State University's Michael Crow

A pace-setting university president explains why US universities need to become more productive, and how to advance reforms.

When Michael Crow became president of Arizona State University, in 2002, the former Columbia University vice provost had ambitious plans to turn the school into a new American university devoted to educating a wider swath of students and focused on higher productivity in cultivating competitive graduates who can succeed in today's volatile job market.

Nine years and a 25 percent increase in student enrollment later, Crow, 56, has delivered big changes in those areas and others at ASU and has garnered a growing reputation as a pace-setting thinker on higher education. He has made strides toward expanding ASU in areas such as ethnic and economic diversity, graduation rates, freshman retention rates, and in the number and intellectual reach of graduates. In fall 2010, ASU boasted an 83 percent first-year retention rate, up from 75 percent in the mid-2000s, and a record enrollment of more than 70,000 undergraduate and graduate students. A survey of recruiters by the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2010 ranked ASU as the fifth-best American university in terms of quality of graduates.

Crow has been outspoken on the topic of government support for schools, pushing for an output-based model that links funding with the ability of universities to produce large numbers of graduates with literacy across multiple disciplines. He has developed close working ties with businesses to develop a higher profile and value proposition for ASU in its surrounding community. In this video interview at his office in Tempe, Arizona, Crow sat down with McKinsey's Lenny Mendonca to discuss the challenges of restructuring the intellectual enterprise of today's public universities.

A global edge in higher ed?

You know, what's interesting about the global position of American universities is that people often think that it's only the rankings of who are the top research performers. It's that, and then some. And so [with] that, relative to research, I think American universities are well positioned to maintain their dominance, in terms of fundamental knowledge production and so forth.

Where American universities are having some difficulty is in educating the broader populace. We've got 310 million people. Our universities have difficulty scaling and innovating. And so that's where I think other universities in other places may have the opportunity to be more innovative. And that's where we've got to be alert to the competitive challenges. American universities are going to have to learn how to scale. They're going to have to learn to perform multiple missions and multiple functions with greater intensity.

It's clear to almost everyone that we're going to be going through multiple careers, and multiple jobs [with] lots of changes as we ebb and flow with the changes in the economy. Well, if that's the case, which it in all likelihood will be, then our job is not to produce the

history major or the civil-engineering major but to produce the history *graduate*, or the civil engineering *graduate* who is capable of learning across, basically, all disciplines. And so you have to change your logic of what you're actually producing. And we're not there yet. We're underperforming right now in our public institutions, particularly for a whole wide range of reasons—principally, I think, a lack of focus on innovation and a lack of focus on producing that as an important outcome.

Changing an institution's clock speed

When you think about change inside a university, I think the most fundamental thing that I've worked on in the last nine years is changing the focus from being an institution measuring itself based on its inputs—you know, what's the selectivity of the students? You certainly have to have students that are qualified. But somehow that's [become] the measure of success. That, of course, has nothing to do with what you do once students come to the university.

And so we've flipped it on its head, and we said, now the university will be measured by what we are able to achieve—what's the quality of the learner that we're producing, what's the speed capacity of the learner that we're producing. And so once you are able to focus on that, then change comes from this change in mission, change in direction. Once you have a change in mission and a change in direction, then you can focus on change in routine.

And you start tearing down the routines that are standing in the way of actually achieving the institution's actual goal. Well, when you look at a public university, and you think about a public university versus a private university, or you think about a university versus a corporation, or something else, are there differences when you think about efficiency or ineffectiveness?

The answer is yes, but not meaningfully so. When you think about efficiency and effectiveness, what you're really talking about is, how can you structure your learning environment to operate at the highest level of performance? And if you're a true public university, you're very committed to access. So therefore, at the lowest possible cost, what are the differences? The differences are in terms of mission.

So our mission is to educate as broad a cross section of students that we possibly can in large numbers in ways that they can be competitive in whatever field they happen to be in, and then more broadly they can be really educated as critical thinkers and as high-speed learners.

How do you do all of that and still be efficient? It means you have to fundamentally go back and look at the fundamental model of the curriculum, the nature of the semester, the clock speed of the institution—all of those things. And so right now, we have decided to look at everything. There are no sacred cows. We're looking at every single aspect of how the institution works.

Technology: 'Our dear and intimate friend'

When you think about technology and the role of technology, we believe that just in the last couple years, just since 2008 and 2009, we have been able to apply technology to our tremendous benefit. For instance, in teaching 10,000 [students] freshman English, we have found a way to lower the cost and improve the outcomes. And [we are] doing the same with freshman math.

Before, we had students who were fully capable—based on their SAT scores or their ACT scores—to do very well in freshman math who were still failing in freshman math. What we did is we restructured how we teach. We use new technologies, artificial-intelligence-based algorithms, and new platforms—new ways of learning. We not only improved our success rate dramatically, we also lowered our costs by 50 percent at the same time. So technology has been our dear and intimate friend.

Overcoming barriers to reform

The hardest part of actually accomplishing change either in a university or another institution—but I think particularly hard in universities—is to overcome an innate conservatism, which operates on the basis that what one needs to do is to protect the routine, protect the methodological content, protect the social constructs, in a sense not even remembering where most of those things came from. Or what they were derived from. Or that they themselves were innovations at one point.

And somehow the biggest challenge is getting people to realize that they *can* be courageous. They can advance change as an objective and actually attain a measurable and better outcome as a result of that. There never has been one way to do something. Universities have not operated the same way throughout the eons. They have changed. And they have adjusted. And they need to accelerate their change and their ability to adjust in moving forward.

Mastering the future

I think in the next five or so years, ASU will definitively master the performance of the immersion part of the university, the physical part of the university, where a broader cross-section of students than most research universities have will be performing at the same level in terms of retention, graduation, success of our students, and so forth.

So we will have mastered that through innovation. Then we'll be looking in that context to accelerate learning. So that you can either get in and get out quickly, if that's what you choose, or you can take not two majors or three majors or four, but four, five, or six. That is, you could master more subjects, not for the sake of mastering the subjects but for expanding your learning capability.

I think then beyond that, we've also figured out how to project the university with our content. And so we're looking in the next five years to have as many as 30,000 or 40,000

online students who are not in the immersion part of the university but are connected to the immersion part of the university, getting an unbelievably technologically advanced access platform into fantastic degrees.

And so we're going to be doing both of those things. That, by the way, is different than the model that most of the online purveyors of educational content are working in, because in this case that content will be derivative of the same faculty working in the immersion environment—in a sense doubling down their impact. And so, could we affect 100,000 students with a small, elite, highly compensated, high-performing, fantastic faculty rather than just growing the faculty and growing the faculty with each increment of growth at the University? That's what I think that we will have mastered in that five-year time frame. ○