

# Rethinking the Future of Higher Education: Interview with ASU President Michael Crow



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The world of work is evolving, with emerging technologies—like artificial intelligence (AI)—shifting roles and responsibilities. At the same time, the skills needed in today’s workforce have changed from even just three or five years ago. With this new reality, [higher education](#) institutions are evaluating what they can do to support learners and prepare them for today’s and tomorrow’s workforce.

We had the opportunity to speak with Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University (ASU), who is guiding the institution’s transformation into one of the nation’s [most innovative](#) research universities. Crow shared his views on the future of higher education,



Michael Crow

why it's important to create a culture of lifelong learners, and why technology is the key to advancing a new kind of university.

### **You've talked about this idea of universal learning. How did it come about?**

As stated in our [charter](#), ASU is measured by whom it includes and how they succeed. With this in mind, ASU and partner institutions knew we needed to ensure that those whose jobs will be impacted by new technology developments still have opportunities in the new economy.

That's where [universal learning](#) comes in. It's an evolving model we've developed that makes higher education accessible, and it's designed to provide academic, training, and skill-building opportunities to learners from all socioeconomic backgrounds through different learning experiences, such as online or immersive. An immersive learning environment uses different techniques and software tools (such as game-based, simulation-based, and virtual 3D worlds) to simulate realistic scenarios that give students the opportunity to practice skills and interact with peers.

We needed to find a way for institutions like ours—driven by principles of democratic success and justice—to move away from becoming breeding grounds for the new aristocracy. To do this, we decided to work together to advance the concept of universal learners who can access any education format at any point in their lives.

### **Can you explain some of the programs ASU has developed to cater to digital learning?**

ASU has gone through a transformation over the past several years, replacing the old approach to education with a whole new model to become what we call the [New American University](#). In addition to enhancing our research programs, we have also enhanced our culture so faculty is able to leverage technology, where and when needed, and teach all of our students—whether they're in the classroom or online.

We offer more than 150 online degree programs, including the first fully accredited online electrical engineering degree in the world. We also built a program called the [Global Freshman Academy](#), which is the entire first year of college, digitally available with

interactive, adaptive learning platforms for subjects like calculus and algebra. Another digital learning platform that we've created is [Education Through eXploration](#), where we're using game-based learning that omits lectures, tests, books, and instructors from courses such as chemistry, biology, and physics.

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By incorporating technology in everything we do, we're able to accelerate and intensify the learning experience while making it more affordable. We can help anyone who didn't have the opportunity to go to college, went to college but wasn't able to finish, or thrives in an immersive learning environment.

## **What do you see making the biggest impact in the future of higher education?**

The future of education is in the personalization of learning. People need to learn how to learn. In the future learning framework, the university will be a “knowledge core” that offers its resources in different ways—digitally or immersive—to typical and nontraditional students across their lifespan.

Technology and the future will be about helping each and every individual move up the learning continuum in a way that's most conducive to his or her learning style. Every person is biologically, psychologically, culturally, and sociologically different. So, why would we all learn in the same way?

A great example of personalized learning is adaptive learning. There are numerous college courses—including economics, chemistry, and psychology—which can be referred to as “killer courses” that some students won't pass because of the traditional way they're taught. By embracing new technologies, we can individualize the learning process to create an environment that's advantageous to all types of students so they can learn complex subjects at their own pace.

## **What are some examples of how your school works with businesses to help reskill or upskill their workforces?**

There are two types of corporations—those interested in shareholder value and making money, and those interested in these two benefits along with reskilling their employees to help ensure their lifetime success in the workforce. We partner with the latter, using our

technology and programs to build and partner on reskilling efforts that help companies improve employee retention, performance, and their leadership cadre.

For example, we're partnering with the [Mayo Clinic](#) on nursing and doctor preparation as well as problem-solving—assisting with skills development for students wherever it's necessary. Through this collaboration, we've developed signature joint programs to help prepare medical students to address the evolving needs of patients.

Additionally, we've expanded our partnership with Starbucks from a college achievement program into the [Starbucks Global Academy](#), which we're now pushing out into their markets across the world. The academy reinforces our commitment to lifelong learning, providing pathways to opportunity through personalized educational experiences that are entirely free of charge.

For these socially conscious corporations interested in human capital development, sustainability, and community engagement, we partner with them to advance on all of those fronts.

## **What are the five takeaways you hope students will gain from their university experience to help ensure their success in the professional world?**

- **Be a versatile learner.** We want students to be empowered as learners with the ability to enhance and adapt their learning.
- **Have empathy.** To succeed as a member of society, you need to have understanding for other people. An immersive learning environment is diverse and complex, which we hope will help students gain empathetic learning capabilities.
- **Think in critical ways.** Know how to attack arguments and construct counter-arguments from a foundation of knowledge.
- **Understand systems.** We've had too many specialists in the past. Learn system-level thinking versus narrow, technical skills so you're able to have context to the problems you're solving and can understand how what you're working on impacts a larger whole.
- **Be comfortable with multiple means of communication.** Whether it's verbal, written, technological, or social media communication, students need to know all of these languages and understand them well.



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