

# Military program leaders learn about breadth of ASU's defense-focused initiatives

**First-ever event organized by Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement aims to bolster military collaboration**

By Jerry Gonzalez, ASU News

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Arizona State University seeks to be the U.S. military's top partner in strategic learning and innovation. To advance this vision, the [Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement](#) hosted military program leaders on March 20 at the Tempe campus Memorial Union to strengthen campuswide efforts.

The event showcased presentations from various units and a gripping keynote by a former POW who endured over five years in the notorious "Hanoi Hilton" during the Vietnam War.

"The Bridging Military and Veteran Programs event at ASU brought together researchers, faculty, and program leaders to foster collaboration and create synergy across military and veteran initiatives," said [Wanda Wright](#), director of the Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement and assistant teaching professor. "This gathering provided a platform to share insights, align resources and strengthen partnerships, with the goal of enhancing support for military-affiliated students, advancing research and expanding community impact."

ASU Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer [Chris Howard](#) gave a detailed presentation about ASU and [military programs](#), including the Military Innovation and Education Initiative working group. The initiative seeks to make ASU the U.S. military's top choice for education and innovation.

Howard, a former Air Force officer and past president of Robert Morris University and Hampden-Sydney College, highlighted the university's size and inclusive excellence inspired by the [ASU Charter](#). He noted ASU's 181,000-student enrollment, \$1 billion in annual research expenditures and the 35,000-plus degrees awarded each year.

"We are the largest D1 and R1 university by enrollment," Howard said. "We have a student body that is about 30% first-generation, about 30% Pell eligible, 30% Hispanic. If it was an HBCU (Historically Black College and University), it would be number 9 or 10. It educates more Native American students than the next 50 universities combined; 10% Asian Pacific (students).

"We represent all that is America," he said.

ASU's [Army](#), [Navy](#) and [Air Force](#) ROTC leaders briefed attendees on their programs, which train over 500 cadets to become "leaders of character." ROTC provides the armed services a rapid way to scale the production of commissioned military officers based on national needs.

"If the worst happens, and our country goes to war, we are going to rapidly expand and train the people who will lead the best in our country into harm's way," said Navy ROTC Commanding Officer [Katrina Hill](#). "Like Dr. Howard alluded, ASU is one of the best places in the world to do that and has the resources to train people who are going to protect our country in the future."

One of the event's most powerful moments came when retired Air Force Col. Thomas Kirk, 97, shared his remarkable journey of courage and perseverance.

The former fighter pilot recounted being shot down by antiaircraft fire while flying an F-105 Thunderchief over North Vietnam in 1967, and his subsequent experience as a prisoner of war.

Kirk endured over five years as a POW, including two in solitary confinement after striking a guard who hit him in the head with a set of keys. Released in 1973 as the war neared its end, he retired from the military in 1978 and transitioned to a successful career as an entrepreneur.

Despite the inhumane hardships he faced as a POW, Kirk has no regrets.

"My entire experience (in the military) was wonderful, including Vietnam," said Kirk, who befriended the late Senator John McCain in the Hanoi prison. "I would go through it again, the whole career, even if I had to do the whole prison thing all over again."

Today, Kirk advocates for veterans through public speaking engagements. While hesitant to refer to all veterans as "heroes," he firmly believes all those who have worn the nation's uniform deserve recognition.

“Every man and woman who leaves home, joins the service, goes through training, goes anywhere they send you, and signs a check up to their life, deserves a little appreciation,” Kirk said. “For young people, (the military) is a wonderful opportunity to get some socialization, learn a trade and serve your country.”

Wright, a retired Air Force colonel and former director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, brings insight into veterans' needs and understands the power of collaboration across ASU. She has led ASU's Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement since April 2023.

“By connecting diverse perspectives and expertise, the event laid the foundation for future innovation and collective action in support of the military and veteran community,” Wright said.

The event also highlighted other military support, research and education programs. Presenters included [Bob Beard](#), senior program manager leading the [Veteran Imagination Project](#); [Jeff Kubiak](#), director, Future Security Education; [Daniel Rothenberg](#), center co-director for the [Future Security Initiative](#); and [James Toweill](#), instructor with the [Writers' Studio](#).

Aligned under the [College of Integrative Sciences and Arts](#), the Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement supports military-affiliated students through events, networking and partnerships. It offers courses, certificates and degrees on military and veteran topics while advancing research on veterans' well-being through university and external collaborations. Its mission is built on three pillars: dialogue, teaching and research.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## **Main image**



Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Chris Howard gives a detailed presentation to military program leaders about ASU during a gathering on the Tempe campus on March 20. Photo by Alyssa Thornhill/ASU

## Gallery



The Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement hosted “The Bridging Military and Veteran Programs” event on March 20 on the Tempe campus to bolster military program cooperation across campus.



Retired Air Force Col. Thomas Kirk, 97, shares his remarkable journey of courage and perseverance as a prisoner of war in Vietnam during the event. Kirk spent over five years as a POW in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" where he became friends with the late Arizona Senator John McCain.



Wanda Wright, Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement director, and Daniel Rothenberg, ASU Future Security Initiative co-director and professor of practice, chat before Rothenberg's presentation on March 20.



Capt. Katrina Hill, Navy ROTC commanding officer, provides an overview of the program she leads during the Office for Military and Veteran Engagement event held March 20 on the Tempe campus.