

State's public universities are expanding access and research, presidents say

Leaders plead for business community to demand state support for workforce development

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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While scrutiny and directives from the federal government have intensified, the biggest challenge to the state's three public universities is from Arizona itself, the leaders of the institutions said on Wednesday.

A lack of investment in higher education and in K-12 success is imperiling Arizona's economic momentum, and the state's business community needs to step up and speak out, they said.

The Greater Phoenix Chamber's "The State of Higher Education" event on Wednesday featured the presidents of Arizona State University, the University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University, who described how they have expanded access and served their communities despite a lack of state support.

ASU President Michael Crow said the universities have had to be entrepreneurial, with less than 9% of ASU's total funding coming from the state.

"The real situation we have in Arizona is that we haven't decided how to fund higher education. There's no model," Crow said.

The three universities have proposed a system that has been successful in other states, including Georgia, in which the state offers tuition support to qualified students plus funding for specific capital projects.

"I wish we had a model, and we could argue about the effectiveness of that model as opposed to having no model and arguing about everything," Crow said.

One area of agreement is expanding access. ASU has increased its annual Arizona resident enrollment by 20,000 students over the last two decades, while overall enrollment has reached its highest ever levels — more than 194,000 students enrolled annually. And more than 1.2 million unique learners worldwide have now enrolled in ASU learning offerings, including through [Universal Learner Courses](#), [career certifications and stackable credentials](#).

José Luis Cruz Rivera said that NAU has significantly expanded its access. The school's universal admissions policy accepts every applicant, and those who don't meet the enrollment threshold are admitted to a community college with a guaranteed transfer to NAU.

In addition, under its Access to Excellence program, tuition is waived for students whose household income is \$65,000 or less. Many other states, including California, Texas and New York, fund tuition support.

"I'll be very frank here ... that has not been enough to get our political bodies to decide that NAU is a great place to invest in," Cruz Rivera said. "In fact, I have made the case as recently as this past legislative budget session that NAU will be forced to reduce the percentage of students from in state, trying to recruit from out of state and international, so that we have an enrollment mix that allows us to balance our books.

"And I've been told by some of our elected officials that, 'Maybe that's what you need to do.'"

But the universities need to be training a workforce to serve the state, Cruz Rivera said.

"We live in a state that needs a significant number of nurses, a huge surge of physicians, physician assistants, of engineers," he said.

Two-thirds of the jobs being added in the state's economic expansion will require a postsecondary degree, he said.

"The only option that we have is to reinvent ourselves and look for new revenue streams. I have 10,000 beds in one of the most beautiful locations in the world in Flagstaff. It's a destination," Cruz Rivera said.

"How do I capitalize these public assets in a way that will allow us to advance our mission? I'm from the university, but I've got to start thinking more like a private equity person to advance the mission."

Suresh Garimella, president of the University of Arizona, said his institution produces 300 physicians a year.

"With a little bit more state support, we could double that. That's the place to invest," he said.

The presidents said their universities are responding to the increased federal oversight. Garimella said the U of A has sharpened its mission to focus on student success, community engagement and research.

"We are a massive research organization, and we need to focus on our distinctive strengths. So where are we strongest? Space sciences, health sciences, mining and minerals. And we're going to do more of that for the benefit of Arizona," he said.

Crow said that while he doesn't agree with some of the federal officials' rhetoric, he has listened to their complaints, including those of U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy," Crow said.

"Here's what he's saying: America spends more than any other country in the world on health care. We're not in the top 25 in outcomes. What are we going to do about that problem?

"OK, let's roll. (ASU) is mounting initiative after initiative, idea after idea, into [a new system](#)."

The three leaders pleaded for support from Arizona's business community. Garimella, who was on the National Science Board, said that corporate support was crucial to the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act.

"We knew that any number of faculty members was not going to be as effective as CEOs of large companies saying, 'We must have this,'" Garimella said.

"So I absolutely think that our business community needs to band together and not take no for an answer."

Crow said improving high school graduation rates will require a level of collaboration that's absent in Arizona right now.

"It's time to realize that we have one of the most significant economies in the world. The economy of Arizona is twice the size of the economy of Ukraine, for instance," he said.

"We'd like to have development of the human capital that makes up our state. We'd like a 90% high school graduation rate. We'd like the 10% that can't graduate on time to have a chance to graduate within five years, bring ourselves to a 98% or 99% high school graduation rate — completely attainable."

Arizona also should be aiming for 60% of high school graduates to attain a postsecondary credential from a technical school, community college or university.

"And we'd like everyone — business leaders, political leaders, university leaders, community college leaders, private college leaders, everyone — to work together toward that goal," Crow said.

"If you don't have any goals and you don't have any targets, no one is accountable for anything on a large enough scale to make a difference."

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

Main image



Northern Arizona University President José Luis Cruz Rivera (left) and Arizona State University President Michael Crow (center) participate in a panel discussion moderated by Jaime Molera (right), a businessman, ASU alum and former state superintendent of public instruction for Arizona. Suresh Garimella, president of the University of Arizona, was also part of the event. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU News

Text image(s)



Suresh Garimella (left), who has been president of the University of Arizona for nine months, said the university will focus on space, health and mining research. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU News