

# Navigating the chaos: Research community owes better communication to taxpayers

**ASU's Crow, editor of Science discuss how decades-old research model needs revising**

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
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In exchange for continued taxpayer funding, American universities must better explain how research promotes the well-being and security of the public, according to two of the country's top leaders in science policy.

Arizona State University President Michael Crow had a fireside chat with Holden Thorp, editor-in-chief of the journal *Science*, Tuesday on the Tempe campus. The two discussed how, over the decades, the science community became complacent, taking federal funding for granted. And now, the political landscape has disrupted higher education institutions.

"I think the chaos has the potential to give us something new and better," said Thorp, who often writes editorials on the civic responsibility of the science community.

"It is completely understandable that it got this way because all the incentives were, 'Do more research, publish more papers, ring the cash register for the institutions.'

"But we took it for granted that the American people would always believe that it was a good idea to get a college degree and that science was generally a force for good. And as that eroded, we were so busy peddling our bicycles that we didn't notice this whole thing falling apart."

Thorp and Crow spoke to a gathering of several dozen students and ASU faculty members who are fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which publishes *Science* and the related journals.

Thorp traced the beginnings of the current era to a groundbreaking 1945 report titled, "Science: The Endless Frontier," by Vannevar Bush.

"Bush makes this very, very shrewd political argument that America's strength economically, and in terms of what it stands for, is enabled by a strong academic scientific enterprise. And the best way to do it is by funding professors and universities. And that system has worked extremely well for 80 years. And now it's definitely in danger," said Thorp, who is on leave as a professor of chemistry and medicine at George Washington University. Before that, he was a professor and provost at Washington University and chancellor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Crow said that although America's superior technology helped to win World War II, the focus evolved from the success of the country to the success of science itself.

"Bush says, 'Give me this license to build this republic of science where the scientists get to decide what we do. And I'll give you economic security. I'll give you health and well-being. I'll give you national defense,'" Crow said.

"We don't have any of those. We have the most expensive health care system. We haven't had sustained 4%-plus economic growth since the 1960s.

"So if I was out in the general public, I'd be concerned about where we're going."

Crow emphasized that the current disruption of higher education is democracy in action.

"We're not under an existential threat," he said.

"Welcome to a place where the people speak with loud voices, sometimes angry. They speak when they're frustrated. They speak when they're hurt. They speak when they're let down. And we have hurt, frustrated and let-down people."

Thorp agreed.

"We're not suffering because we don't know what to do when we have pipettes in our hands. We're suffering because we haven't figured out how to invite the public into what we're doing," he said.

Thorp said universities must take advantage of this opportunity.

"It's a great time to ask ourselves if we were going start over, how would we do it? The first thing is, the students would come first," he said. "And the public would have to be invited into it in a way that we haven't done in the past.

"If this whole thing was upside down and the students wanted to focus more on translation and public engagement and less on research, we wouldn't tell them, 'Why would you waste your time doing that?'"

The [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) will hold its annual meeting at the Phoenix Convention Center in February, drawing thousands of scientists to ASU's doorstep to explore the theme of "science at scale."

Tuesday's talk was facilitated by Lara Ferry, Knowledge Enterprise vice president of research at ASU. She described the [AAAS + ASU Collaborative](#), a five-year partnership that will feature a joint

prize — to be awarded at February's gathering — and an opportunity for ASU students, faculty and staff to join the American Association for the Advancement of Science for free.

"This facilitates involvement in science in many different ways — in the laboratory, remote field sites, libraries, museums, policy forums, media — everywhere science is conducted and everywhere science is needed," Ferry said.

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

## Main image



From left: Lara Ferry, vice president of research at ASU, moderated a talk between Holden Thorp, editor-in-chief of the journal *Science*, and ASU President Michael Crow on the Tempe campus on Tuesday. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

## Text image(s)



Holden Thorp, editor-in-chief of the journal Science, speaks to an audience of ASU students and faculty members who are fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on Tuesday on the Tempe campus. Of the current climate of higher education research funding, he said, "I think the chaos has the potential to give us something new and better." Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News