

# ASU programs help position students as leaders in diplomacy, national security

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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Lt. Gen. Benjamin Freakley had no idea the future that was ahead of him when he met Arizona State University President Michael Crow in 2012.

Freakley, who retired from the U.S. Army after more than 36 years of active military service, didn't know he would be wearing an ASU shirt 13 years later, proudly extolling the virtues of the university he works for and speaking with great zeal about the ASU leadership lab he cofounded.

What Freakley considered then, and what he knows now, is this: ASU is playing a vital role in issues of national security.

In advance of the ASU Flag Officer Advisory Council fall meeting on Oct. 21, which provides advice to Crow, faculty and students on matters of national significance, ASU News spoke with Freakley to learn more about the university's role in this space.

*Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.*

**Question: How did you get involved with ASU?**

**Answer:** A World War II veteran who had gotten to know Dr. Crow and become somewhat of a mentor to him introduced the two of us in 2012. I was still on active duty, and Dr. Crow asked me what I was concerned about or focused on, and I said our universities in the country are producing great students in different academic fields, but I was concerned about how much they were focused on character and leadership and values. ... And he said, "Well, why don't you come join us?" So, 60 days after I retired, I was a Sun Devil.

**Q: You cofounded ASU's [Leadership, Diplomacy and National Security Lab](#). What is the purpose of that lab?**

**A:** As the name would imply, we explore and think about these ideas of character-driven leadership, the commitment to do the right thing and the right way for the right reasons. We

explore diplomacy and how the United States conducts itself in international affairs, and we concern ourselves with ideas and thoughts on national security.

**Q: How does that manifest itself?**

**A:** Besides us thinking about it, writing about it and researching it, we have a four-year-old [Master of Arts in international affairs and leadership](#). We've had 155 graduates, and we currently have 235 master's degree students pursuing their degree to serve as character-driven leaders in the public and private nonprofit sector.

But also, quite frankly, to strengthen our influence as a nation internationally, we also have several undergraduate programs, including the [Policy Design Studio](#). It's a fascinating course and the students are just remarkable. They form an embassy country team led by a former U.S. ambassador and study the issues between the United States and that country as a vehicle to think about how America makes foreign policy.

**Q: There's a study abroad program as well, correct?**

**A:** Yes. We do about 10 days of character-driven leadership every day right after May graduation. Then, unlike other programs, we don't take them abroad. We send them abroad in groups of two or three to leaders in different countries we know, and they have to work six to eight weeks on a project.

I'll give you an example. One student had lived somewhat of a sheltered and isolated life in Arizona. She did our program, went to Morocco and connected with one of the leaders that we had trained before. She worked for six weeks on a project to help this company with their marketing and advertising. She came back to ASU very confident, very broadened and more culturally aware. I saw this in military basic training all the time. Men and women come to basic training hesitant about things they've never done, things that would either confuse them, challenge them or intimidate them, but they get on a team — all that fear is eventually replaced by confidence. That's what happens with our students who go abroad. They realize they're smart, values-based men and women who can make a difference by thinking about hard problems.

**Q: Why is ASU the right place for the program?**

**A:** I got this assignment to run this thing called the Army Accessions Command. We did all the recruiting, marketing and advertising for the Army. In that role, I traveled 200 days a year. I would go to high schools or do a business luncheon, and the job got me on a lot of college campuses. What I realized in talking to Dr. Crow and visiting ASU is that ASU is incredibly supportive of the military. I had worked enough with the Pentagon and other Army outfits to know that when you want to advance ideas and you're hitting a stone wall, it's a waste of time to continue. The culture is not ready for the idea that you have.

So I was attracted to ASU because of its innovation, its receptiveness and its respect for all. I saw in visiting ASU that the students were respected, the faculty and staff were respected, and it was a healthy environment. And I wanted to be a part of that.

**Q: How is ASU playing a role in national security issues?**

**A:** First, I think that ASU is holding a strong position about the value of higher education in America. To me, having served abroad, traveled abroad and lived abroad, one of the strengths of America is our higher education system. Education helps us with the unknown, and that's one aspect of preparing American citizens for tomorrow.

The second thing is the research that (ASU) does. Dr. Crow talks about the [invisible hand](#). Many of the things that America has created ... they created the idea, created the technology, explored, failed, redesigned, failed, redesigned again and learned. Universities that do this research are invaluable.

Then, the other aspect, to me, is the cultural awareness. Higher education brings together the melting pot of America. I saw it in the military all the time ... a bus of 200 trainees would show up and some of them had never seen (another person) like that before. But all of a sudden, the color of the skin, the gender, that doesn't matter. What matters is, can you contribute to the team?

**Q: Are there other specific issues of national security that ASU is involved in?**

**A:** Think about the focus ASU is doing on really understanding climate change. With ASU Health, we're going to take a whole new look at the way health is advanced through technology. I believe that's a national and even an international issue. When I served in Afghanistan for 13 months, the life expectancy of the Afghan person was 43 years. We can be better than that. I think ASU is thinking about those issues and advancing those issues.

Then you can look at other pockets with energy use, drone use, thinking about statecraft and issues like equality and justice, and ideas of freedom and democracy. There are a lot of vectors ASU is looking at internationally and nationally to improve the stance that we have right now as a globe.

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**Main image**



Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

**Text image(s)**



Benjamin Freakley