

ASU President Crow talks with US Army leaders about adapting organizations for rapid change

Appearing at the 2025 Leader Solarium, Crow points to design-driven leadership, importance of lifelong learning for shaping agile organizations

By Annie DeGraw, ASU News
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Arizona State University President Michael Crow on Oct. 13 spoke to nearly 100 U.S. Army leaders at the Association of the United States Army's 2025 Leader Solarium in Washington, D.C., about advancing a new mission: designing organizations built to evolve.

Leading a session titled "Transformation by Design: Building Agility and Innovation into the DNA of an Organization," Crow explained how ASU's design-driven model can inform the Army's own efforts to adapt to rapid technological and cultural change.

"We cannot solve our problems using the same thinking we used to create them," Crow said, echoing Albert Einstein. "At ASU, we've learned that it's not the learner who fails, it's the design of the institution. Everyone is an abundant learner; you just have to figure out how to teach them."

Held at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, the annual high-level event's name references Project Solarium, a national security exercise held in the spring of 1953, when then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower gathered top personnel in the sun-filled solarium of the White House to plan America's Cold War strategy.

A design-driven approach to change

Crow described ASU's two-decade transformation into a "design-driven institution" centered on inclusion, innovation and public value. He explained that organizational evolution must be intentional: understanding why an institution exists, articulating what it seeks to achieve and advancing how it measures success.

"Our mission isn't about how selective we can be," he said. "It's about how we make the country work by breaking down barriers, rethinking design and ensuring that every qualified learner can succeed."

That design philosophy, he argued, is not unlike the Army's own challenge: creating adaptable systems and leaders capable of learning in real time.

From calculus to combat readiness: Evolving the way we learn

Using examples from ASU's engineering and digital learning initiatives, Crow illustrated how redesigning education can multiply outcomes.

By eliminating overly rigorous introductory college courses meant to "weed out" students and developing new teaching methods, from adaptive learning robots to virtual-reality biology labs, ASU expanded its engineering enrollment from 6,000 to 35,000 students, increasing annual graduates eightfold.

"We found ways to teach calculus, chemistry and biology so that every student could learn, and our outcomes were better than we ever imagined," Crow told attendees. "Higher education, just like the Army, must evolve all the time."

Crow emphasized that learning must extend beyond the classroom and across a lifetime. "In our country, 8.8 million people have less than a high school diploma," he noted.

"You don't need a degree to be smart. You need a way to show what you know. For the Army, that's a badge. For ASU, it's a credential. It's all about recognizing learning wherever it happens."

Continuous innovation and lifelong learning

Crow encouraged the audience of Army leaders to view innovation not as a department or initiative but as a continuous state of being.

"There is no status quo," he said.

He also shared examples of ASU students applying design thinking through Luminosity Lab, where teams develop technologies such as battery-powered running systems and wall-climbing devices.

These hands-on projects, he said, demonstrate the power of creativity, teamwork and applied problem-solving, which are principles equally vital in military innovation.

"Every organization must embed agility into its design."

Designing the future together

During an extended Q&A session with the Army leaders, Crow expanded on the idea that design must be treated as a living discipline.

“The environment is changing faster than ever,” he said. “Design has to become part of the culture.”

He also drew parallels between ASU and the Army, noting that both are public institutions committed to advancing the nation’s strength and resilience.

“We’re both public institutions built to advance the nation,” Crow said. “The Army protects it; the university propels it forward. Together, we design the future.”

Army leaders expressed appreciation for Crow’s message, saying his ideas “connected the dots” between higher education and military readiness. Cynthia Gertsen, senior program manager at AUSA’s Center for Leadership, closed the session by noting that Crow had been personally requested by the chief of staff of the Army for the event, thanking him for his “leadership in innovation and adaptability.” Crow ended the discussion with a challenge that resonated throughout the room:

“Continuous innovation isn’t just a strategy — it’s survival. Whether in universities or in the Army, those who learn (the) fastest shape the future.”

President Crow’s remarks were made during the Leader Solarium at AUSA 2025, a high-level, invitation-only forum planned and executed by the AUSA Center for Leadership on behalf of the chief of staff of the U.S. Army. Solarium participants engage in high-impact development, strategic coaching and direct dialogue with the secretary of the Army, chief of staff of the Army and sergeant major of the Army — culminating in an outbrief that provides bottom-up insights and recommendations to Army senior leadership. This experience equips leaders to drive change, build trust and lead with purpose — accelerating transformation across the total Army.

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

Main image



During the U.S. Army's 2025 Leader Solarium, ASU President Michael Crow emphasized how universities must rethink different ways in which everyone can learn throughout life. Photo courtesy of ASU Media Relations and Strategic Communications