

ASU president frames democracy and higher education as 'unfinished work' in forward-looking address

As nation's upcoming 250th anniversary approaches, Michael Crow says ASU and the community have continued responsibility to seek out solutions to today's complex challenges

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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With the stage lights up and the audience settled into their seats, Arizona State University President Michael M. Crow opened his Wednesday address at ASU Gammage not with policy prescriptions or academic jargon, but with a challenge.

“This is not an academic lecture,” Crow told the crowd. “I’m going to try to draw you into a challenge.”

The event, titled “Changing Futures: Impact and Outlook,” was part of the [Changing Futures](#) campaign, which aims to attract philanthropy and new partnerships to fuel ASU’s commitment to prepare future leaders to solve the complex challenges facing society.

The United States stands on the threshold of its 250th anniversary. Crow argued that the milestone should not be treated as a finished celebration of history, but as a reminder that democracy itself remains a work in progress.

“You are all alive in the early months of 2026,” he said to an audience made up of Arizona Board of Regents members, university deans, ASU faculty and staff, [Mirabella residents](#) and local constituents. “You are going to be a part of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the United States. And that’s not a done project. That’s a project that’s still underway.”

Democracy is fragile, unfinished and dependent on institutions that must continuously evolve to serve a changing society, Crow said. Universities, he argued, are among the most important of those institutions.

“We’re not running this university just to produce scientific results or great musicians or accountants or philosophers,” Crow said. “Philosophers of what? Engineers for what? Engineers for the success of the thing on which our very existence depends.”

Unlike traditional models rooted in exclusion and hierarchy, Crow said ASU was designed to be inclusive, scalable and responsive to real-world needs. The university's mission of broad access reflects the country's founding ideals. Crow quoted one of the Declaration of Independence's most enduring lines.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” Crow said, emphasizing the word “all.”

“It doesn’t say some people,” he added. “It doesn’t say privilege. It doesn’t say test scores at age 14 or 15 or 16. It says all people.”

Yet Crow acknowledged that higher education has not always lived up to those ideals. Many universities, he said, were modeled on European systems that emphasized social stratification rather than broad access.

“We haven’t yet built the kinds of universities that fully allow us to achieve those things,” he said.

At ASU, Crow said, that realization led to a [charter](#) formally adopted more than a decade ago, one that committed the university to access, public-value research and responsibility for community outcomes.

Crow pointed to measurable outcomes as evidence that the model works. Over the past two decades, ASU’s enrollment of Arizona residents has grown from about 49,000 students to nearly 71,000, he said. At the same time, the university has dramatically expanded online education.

“In 2009, we had essentially no online degree-seeking students,” Crow said. “This semester, we had 117,766.”

The expansion, he emphasized, was not achieved through quotas or lowered standards.

“We didn’t set diversity quotas,” Crow said. “We made the university accessible. Period.”

He noted that the number of undergraduates from families earning less than \$20,000 annually has grown from fewer than 1,000 students in 2003 to more than 6,000 today. Overall, ASU’s student body now closely reflects the income distribution of Arizona and the nation.

Changing Futures campaign

Fueled by philanthropic investment and unique partnerships, ASU’s Changing Futures campaign focuses on six key areas: enhancing education access, developing leaders, promoting sustainability, strengthening communities, advancing health and developing impactful technology.

Learn more on the [ASU Foundation website](#).

Graduation numbers have grown as well, from about 12,000 students graduating annually to more than 40,000, without declines in employment outcomes or wages.

“Don’t tell me you can’t do this,” Crow said. “We proved you can.”

Crow also addressed a common criticism of large, inclusive universities: that access comes at the expense of research excellence. He countered that argument with data.

ASU’s annual research expenditures [now exceed \\$1 billion](#), placing it among a small group of U.S. universities to reach that milestone without a medical school. The inaugural class for ASU’s new John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering will begin this August..

“You can be great at research and accessible,” Crow said. “You can educate 200,000 people and still be excellent.”

Crow highlighted several initiatives that reflect ASU’s broader ambitions, including the [launch of a new medical school](#) focused on improving health outcomes rather than simply producing physicians.

That focus on outcomes extends to the health of the planet, too.

“When Arizona didn’t get a national lab, we built our own,” he said, referring to ASU’s [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#).

He also pointed to the creation of the [School of Ocean Futures](#) and the [Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures](#) as responses to shared public values among Arizonans, such as clean water, clean air and environmental stewardship.

“Innovation is how we do this,” Crow said, describing new learning technologies, [immersive virtual reality classrooms](#) and partnerships that allow people of all backgrounds to access high-quality education.

“Why shouldn’t a university in a democracy be available to everyone?” he asked.

As ASU approaches the nation’s semiquincentennial, Crow made clear that the university does not see itself as reacting to disruption, but shaping what comes next.

“This is unfinished work,” he said. “And we’re all responsible for it.”

Crow’s call to action shifted from vision to invitation. The work he described, expansive and unfinished by design, would require participation well beyond the university’s leadership or faculty. It would depend on sustained engagement from alumni, donors, business leaders, government partners and community members willing to invest in the long arc of institutional change.

[Gretchen Buhlig](#), chief executive officer of the [ASU Foundation for a New American University](#), underscored that message in her closing remarks, framing philanthropy and partnership as essential forces in turning ambition into impact.

“We can’t do this alone,” Buhlig said. “Please join us and be part of our mission. We are not retreating. We are advancing from Arizona to the world.”

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

¹ The inaugural class for ASU's new John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering will begin this August.

Main image



President Michael M. Crow talks about Arizona State University's domestic and global influence at the "Changing Futures: Impact and Outlook" event on Wednesday at ASU Gammage on the Tempe campus. Changing Futures is the university's fundraising and partnership campaign aimed at addressing urgent societal needs by expanding learning, creating opportunities and promoting economic mobility to build healthier communities. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Sun Devil Women's Basketball Head Coach Molly Miller shares the discipline and energy she instills in her winning team during opening remarks at the "Changing Futures: Impact and Outlook" event on Jan. 14 at ASU Gammage on the Tempe campus.



ASU Executive Vice President and University Provost Nancy Gonzales and President Michael Crow engage in a Q&A on the university's growing influence at home and abroad during the Changing Futures event.



Gretchen Buhlig, CEO of the ASU Foundation, delivers closing remarks framing philanthropy and partnership as essential forces in turning ambition into impact. The Changing Futures campaign advances ASU's mission to expand access to learning, strengthen communities and drive economic mobility.