

A new chapter in national security research at ASU

University's defense research elevates to institute level

By Pete Zrioka, ASU News
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In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, into a low orbit around the Earth. Only the size of a beach ball, the satellite sent shock waves through the United States. American politicians, military personnel, scientists and the public, long accustomed to feeling like the unquestioned technological superpower, were caught totally off guard.

The U.S. took a simple lesson from this moment, says [Nadya Bliss](#), a national security researcher: Never again.

Sputnik sparked a wave of investment in research in the United States, spurred the creation of NASA and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, and catalyzed a forward-looking science and technology ecosystem to ensure technological leadership.

[University research](#) has played a vital role in that system from the start, creating innovations that have protected human lives while advancing the American economy and quality of life.

Over the last 10 years, Arizona State University has transformed into a go-to partner for the defense and national security community, with the Global Security Initiative helping drive growth across the university in capabilities, partnerships and research expenditures.

Now, the university is elevating the initiative to become the [Advanced Capabilities for National Security Institute](#), or ACNSI. Bliss will continue to lead the institute as executive director and professor of practice.

“At Arizona State University, national security is a long-term institutional priority,” said [Sally C. Morton](#), executive vice president of ASU Knowledge Enterprise. “The elevation to institute level enhances our ability to sustain, scale and integrate research efforts across the university that address both today’s security needs and those on the horizon.”

The move reflects both the rapid growth of ASU’s national security research portfolio and the changing requirements of the federal government, which increasingly prioritize speed of tech transfer, adaptability and practical application.

Since 2018, ASU has seen a threefold increase in defense-related research expenditures and is on track to reach nearly \$100 million Department of Defense expenditures this fiscal year. This places ASU among the top universities for defense-related research, and even above some schools with University Affiliated Research Centers — prestigious, university-hosted, DoD-funded research institutions that develop engineering and technology capabilities for national security applications.

“We have an established record across multiple agencies, companies and all service branches,” said Bliss, who points to the institute's current research projects with the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Space Force. “We’ve repeatedly demonstrated our ability to transition technology into operational environments and employ interdisciplinary research to meet the needs of national security.”

Since its inception in 2015, the the Global Security Initiative has bolstered a number of national security efforts.

Their research helped [improve efficiency and security at national borders and airports](#) and [developed cybersecurity tools to protect the nation's infrastructure](#). While AI's integration into daily life is more widespread than ever, ASU researchers have long studied our relationship to artificial systems, [evaluating if an AI system would make a good teammate](#), creating the [largest publicly available human-AI team research dataset in history](#), and working directly with the [Marines to develop and test new AI-enabled team performance systems](#).

The initiative leveraged significant ASU strengths for national security mission needs and cultivated new talent to solve defense-related research challenges.

Starting in 2015, the Global Security Initiative instituted a new program supporting faculty proposals to DARPA. Since then, ASU has earned more DARPA Young Faculty Awards than any other university in the nation, catalyzing projects focused on [advanced imaging sensors](#), [predicting autonomous drone swarm behavior](#) and [improving low-frequency military radios](#).

The Global Security Initiative consistently applied an interdisciplinary approach to their research, infusing social sciences, psychology and political science to computer science and engineering expertise. Notably, researchers have delved into analyzing adversarial influence operations, parsing social and mass media to [track Chinese narrative influence in Southeast Asia](#) and to [detect possible Russian invasions in the Baltic States](#).

Bliss notes that the institute will continue to incorporate the human element into their established strengths in cybersecurity, human-artificial intelligence teaming, advanced communications, irregular warfare, and narrative and information complexity while developing new capabilities in biosecurity and space.

“Becoming an institute helps us connect assets across ASU more effectively to address systems-level problems,” said [Nate Evans](#), senior director at the Advanced Capabilities for National Security Institute. “We are heavily engaged in national conversations around the grand challenges impacting national security, and this new chapter accelerates our ability to leverage unique strengths and resources to both anticipate and respond to them.”

The institute marks not just a milestone for national security research at ASU but also a commitment to see the next Sputnik moment coming — before it's flying over our heads.

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Main image



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