

ASU president: Universities must 'upgrade' to meet the demands of the workforce

Summit explores how work-integrated learning, a fusion of academics and employment, will better prepare students for new workforce

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
February 24, 2026

Arizona State University is part of a new movement to fuse students' academic experience with meaningful work — and the goal of expanding that initiative nationwide will likely require change from both employers and higher education.

The concept, called work-integrated learning, combines classroom learning with project-based experiences and employer partnerships to better equip students for the job market.

ASU President Michael Crow said that universities must change their rigid structures to meet the new demands of the workforce.

"We need to upgrade. We need to move out of the 19th century. We need to move out of these simplistic and, in some cases, cruel ways that people are assigned and sorted and moved forward," he said.

"We need multiple measurements of success."

Crow spoke at a panel that kicked off the Work-Integrated Learning Summit on Monday.

The summit, sponsored by ASU and McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, included sessions on how employers benefit from work-integrated learning, how it boosts higher education outcomes and how AI can play a role.

Bob Sternfels, global managing partner for McKinsey & Company, said he's hearing frustration from CEOs at the way graduates are prepared for the workforce, and there are millions of unfilled jobs.

"We did some work that said that at the lower end of our range, in the next five years, 15% of the current employed workforce is going to need to radically re-skill," Sternfels said.

"We actually have to think about bringing private sector and educators together to try and make this work and probably redefine the rules of both halves."

In 2025, ASU launched the [Work-Integrated Learning Accelerator](#), in partnership with other universities and education-technology companies, to measure success through learning experiences, employer engagement and post-graduation employment outcomes.

In addition, ASU launched [Work+](#), a program that works to make employment more than just financial compensation by training supervisors to mentor and coach and by helping student workers to clarify career goals. Building on the success of the program at ASU, the [Work+Collective](#) now scales that work to 37 institution partners across higher education.

Chris Howard, executive vice president and chief operating officer at ASU, moderated the talk with Crow and Sternfels. He said that Work+ is a way to measure job experience.

"So people can work with a supervisor who's trained to codify and communicate what they learn in that job, and they can use that to get a bridge to the workforce," he said.

"I might work in the library, and I can have a great experience that could be validated by a McKinsey or an IBM or whatever company or organization."

Sternfels said that on the employer side, companies should rethink the way they screen applicants, a process that McKinsey undertook a few years ago.

"If you didn't have a certain background, if you didn't go to a certain institution, if you didn't take a certain degree, we were systematically screening you out," he said.

But analysis found that employees who actually made it to the partner level at McKinsey had other characteristics that weren't considered in applicants.

"We were looking at the candidate with a perfect record versus the candidate who had a setback and recovered — kind of a marker for resilience," he said.

There were two other markers for leadership ability: success in team sports and the experience of working in retail during high school.

"And then the last one was, do you have the ability to learn new things? And when we started changing that criteria, we radically widened our sources (for applicants)," he said.

Sternfels also said that employers should consider universities not just as a source of graduates, but as partners.

"If you then start to embrace this partner notion, you start to figure out, 'How do we think about experiential learning ... so that it isn't get a degree and then come to us,' but it's blending for life.

And so you have a degree for life and maybe multiple employment opportunities for life,” he said.

Crow said that about a quarter of the ASU students on campus work for the university, about 16,000 students, who earn an average wage of \$15,000 a year.

He said that the paradigm of learn-then-work must be broken because today’s students will likely have several careers that require different skills.

“So there’s elementary, secondary and postsecondary. And then unless you go to graduate school, you’re 21 or 22, you’re done, you’re a finished product. But our estimate going forward is each person will have 12 jobs and four careers,” Crow said.

“And so we have to find a way to become much more adaptive, much more quickly.”

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

Main image



From left: Bob Sternfels, the global managing partner at McKinsey & Company; ASU President Michael Crow; and moderator Chris Howard, executive vice president and chief operating officer of

ASU, lead the opening session for the two-day Work-Integrated Learning Summit at the Omni Tempe Hotel at ASU. Educators and industry leaders discussed how to ensure every learner has access to work-based learning experiences before entering the workforce. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



ASU President Michael Crow (center) speaks as Bob Sternfels (left) of McKinsey & Company and ASU's Chris Howard listen. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News