

University presidents encourage Arizona cities and towns to be active partners

Roundtable discussion touches on how universities can help build thriving communities

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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Story highlights

University presidents speak at League of Arizona Cities and Towns annual conference

Towns and cities need to encourage partnership with universities, presidents say

ASU President Michael Crow says he sees hope and aspiration in the faces of current college students.

What gets Arizona State University [President Michael Crow](#) out of bed in the morning isn't the hike he's about to take or the chicken taquito he says he eats for breakfast at a nearby Circle K store.

Instead, it's the faces — and the future — of the students he sees every day on one of ASU's campuses.

"We have 16,000 first-year students," Crow said. "You see in them something that is not expressed in the media, which is negative, negative, negative. You see hope. You see aspiration. You see ambition. You see anxiety. You see potential. All these things."

“So, all of us that are running cities, towns and universities, we have to get over this notion that everything is falling apart. Are you kidding me? You should talk to these kids about their ambitions.”

Crow made his remarks at the [League of Arizona Cities and Towns](#) annual conference Thursday at the Arizona Biltmore resort in Phoenix.

In a roundtable discussion hosted by the league, Executive Director Rene Guillen, Crow, University of Arizona President Suresh Garimella and Northern Arizona University President José Luis Cruz Rivera shared their vision for the state's future and talked about how Arizona's cities and towns can better leverage university assets to attract talent, drive growth and build thriving communities.

All three presidents said one of their biggest challenges is dealing with the perception held by some that a college education has lost its value.

“We have to stop buying into a rhetoric that's being advanced by forces who have special interests that somehow college is worthless and everything else is valuable,” Crow said.

“All tracks are valuable. It's not one against the other. We need as many college graduates as we can produce. We need as many technically skilled technicians as we can produce. We need more of everything for the economy to be successful.”

Garimella said it's imperative that universities explain to parents and potential students that higher education is more accessible than they may think, given the “national conversation.”

Rivera said that NAU offers free tuition to students who have at least a 2.0 high school GPA and come from families making less than \$65,000 annually.

“With all of the pressures against going to college that Michael just mentioned,” Cruz Rivera said, “if an Arizonan raises their hand and says, ‘I want to go to NAU, further my career and live a life of purpose,’ you're going to get a letter that's either going to admit you to NAU or one that's going to admit you to one of our community college partners across the state with a guarantee that you will transfer to NAU. So, from my perspective, it's a no-brainer.”

Guillen asked the presidents how Arizona's 91 incorporated cities and towns could better take advantage of the talent and technology available at ASU, UA and NAU.

Garimella said every city or town should designate a representative to be a liaison to the closest university and be able to call on help when needed.

“I think partnership is the only way to fly,” Crow added. “My view is that all of you should have relationships with at least one, if not all three, of the universities. We have thousands of faculty members and supercomputers and everything that you can possibly imagine.

“(You might say), ‘We need this, we need this, we need this.’ And 95% of the time, we're already doing it or can easily deliver it.”

As an example, Garimella said UA recently mapped every single groundwater basin in the state and provided more than 50 strategies for how to conserve groundwater.

“Our researchers are happy to sit down and talk to you about this,” he said.

A university's assistance, Crow said, can range from a single student's initiative to the latest technology. Crow pointed out that it was an ASU student from the university's Luminosity Lab who [won the \\$500,000 grand prize](#) in the international XPRIZE Next-Gen Mask Challenge in December of 2020 for designing the FloeMask, an innovative face mask that stopped glasses from fogging.

Today, thanks to philanthropic and industrial interactions, Crow said, ASU has [an AI supercomputer](#) that can be used to address issues cities and towns cannot afford to.

"A city or town is not going to build a supercomputer that costs \$300 million or more," Crow said. "But we ended up with one. And we have experts. So we now have thousands and thousands and thousands of AI projects and hundreds and hundreds of teams using AI.

"We're actually solving problems, and we need more of your problems to work."

While the hourlong discussion ranged from technology to partnerships, the role of a university and the important position it plays in a student's life was the final note sounded by Cruz Rivera.

He said that in his first few months as NAU's president, he met a student who was a fourth-generation Arizonan but a first-generation college student. The student told him that his parents and grandparents wanted to get a college education, but they didn't have the opportunity to do so.

Later that year, Cruz Rivera said, the student graduated and walked NAU's commencement ceremony inside the Walkup Skydome.

"That image is what I keep thinking about every single day because there are so many talented, ambitious, high-aspiration students in our communities that deserve a chance to meet their full potential," Cruz Rivera said. "And that's what the three universities are here for, and that's why we do the work we do."

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

Main image



From left: Arizona State University President Michael Crow, University of Arizona President Suresh Garimella, Northern Arizona University President José Luis Cruz Rivera and League of Arizona Cities and Towns Executive Director Rene Guillen participate in a recent roundtable discussion. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Board of Regents

Text image(s)



At the recent League of Arizona Cities and Towns annual conference, ASU President Michael Crow says he sees hope and aspiration on the faces of students attending college today. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Board of Regents



From left: ASU President Michael Crow, UA President Suresh Garimella and NAU President José Luis Cruz Rivera at the League of Arizona Cities and Towns annual conference on Aug. 20 at the

Arizona Biltmore resort in Phoenix. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Board of Regents