Why ASU has a 'hall pass' to reimagine higher education

At W. P. Carey's annual Inclusive Excellence Lecture, COO Chris Howard explains impact of ASU's commitment to access and academic excellence at scale

By Molly Loonam, ASU News
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Over the past century, the number of people pursuing a college education has grown dramatically, but access to many of the nation's most selective institutions has not kept pace.

For ASU Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Chris Howard, that gap underscores the importance of universities that deliver both academic excellence and access at scale.

During the W. P. Carey's School of Business' annual Inclusive Excellence Lecture, Howard explained that ASU's commitment to measuring success by whom it includes and how they succeed gives the university a "hall pass" to reimagine higher education's role in society.

"Despite any challenges we feel are impacting education, ASU has created a hall pass because of our charter, our mission, our action and our composition," Howard said. "You are in a special place: a fifth-wave, national service university — an inclusive excellence university that has given us a hall pass to make a difference."

The annual Inclusive Excellence Lecture series brings together faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners to explore leadership, institutional innovation, service, access and higher education's role in expanding opportunity.

In his presentation, "My American Journey and the ASU Hall Pass," Howard explored those themes throughout his family history, describing how access to education and economic opportunity shaped his family across generations and informed his approach to leadership and service.

Howard's great-great-grandfather, Amos, was enslaved and gained his freedom during the Civil War. His grandson moved from sharecropping to factory work, a shift that transformed his life and the lives of future generations of the Howard family.

"He had an attitude, brains and grit. He got a job in a factory that made equipment for oil and gas, and just like the American dream goes, he instantly became blue collar," Howard said. "He had the ability to get a pension, to have benefits and what we all stress here, which is education."

Howard graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy and earned a doctorate from the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and an MBA with distinction from Harvard Business School. A Bronze Star recipient, he previously served as president of Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania and Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia.

When Howard became president of Hampden-Sydney College in 2009, he reflected on how dramatically his family's circumstances had changed since Amos' lifetime.

"How does that happen?" Howard asked, "How do you go from being that guy's great-great-grandson to running a school like Hampden-Sydney College, which is a fine institution, looking like me? Only in America, and that's a good thing, even with all its imperfections."

Howard connected his family's experience to ASU's charter, which states that the university is "measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed." What distinguishes ASU, he said, is not only that commitment to access and inclusion but also its ability to fulfill it at scale.

Unlike highly selective universities that admit only a small fraction of applicants, ASU combines broad access with rigorous academic opportunities at scale. In 2025–26, 40% of ASU undergraduates were first-generation college students, and more than 65,000 received Pell grants. In fall 2026, Barrett, The Honors College enrolled more than 2,200 first-year students.

For Howard, those figures show that access and excellence need not be competing priorities.

"There are certain things that only we can do, and that's our superpower," Howard said, referring to the university's accessible excellence at scale. "We are the ampersand university — we can do all that, and."

That superpower also carries a responsibility to use ASU's reach and resources to expand opportunity for people who have historically had limited access to higher education.

"The coolest thing about being a leader in a place like this is what you can do for the least among us," he said.

Howard's family journey illustrates how opportunity can transform one life and reverberate across generations. At ASU, he argued, the chance to create that kind of impact is not limited to a select few but extends to learners at scale.

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Main image



During the W. P. Carey's annual Inclusive Excellence Lecture, ASU Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Chris Howard explored leadership, institutional innovation, service, access and higher education's role in expanding opportunity. ASU photo

Gallery



From left: Jeffrey Wilson, W. P. Carey School of Business associate dean of research and inclusive excellence; Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, executive director of ASU Gammage and ASU vice president for cultural affairs; and Chris Howard, ASU executive vice president and chief operating officer, at the fall 2026 Inclusive Excellence Lecture.



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