



The Role of Universities in Advancing Democracy

ASU President Michael Crow chats with Ben Sasse, president of the University of Florida, in a conversation moderated by Julie Young at ASU+GSV Summit 2024 in San Diego

April 16, 2024

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TRIX 24-23

Michael Cohn: As we talk about impact, affordability, reach at scale—certainly we just talked about that around India—as we now bring that home and focus on domestic impact and think about the role of higher education here in the U.S. No better conversation to follow Prateek and Alakh than to warmly welcome President Crow of Arizona State University and President Ben Sasse, former U.S. senator, who's now the 13th president of the University of Florida, talking about the roles of universities in advancing democracy in a conversation fittingly led by the only individual here who's also built large-scale programs across both Arizona and Florida: Julie Young, the former vice president of Educational Outreach and Student Services at ASU, but also the founding president of Florida Virtual School. Welcome.

Julie Young: Well, good afternoon, everyone. It is a pleasure to be with you today. This is super exciting for me, having had one foot in Florida, one foot in Arizona. As was mentioned, I had the privilege of starting Florida Virtual School years ago, and after 30-plus years in Florida, I retired from Florida, failed miserably at it, and was recruited by this guy and his team to come to Arizona and start over again. So it has been a joy, and it has been fun. This is my first introduction to Ben, so we're excited for the conversation. <Ben Sasse: Looking forward to it.> Yeah, so first of all, the other thing that's kind of interesting... Arizona and Florida, when you look at K-12, are often talked about, pretty much, in the same breath. They're seen as kind of movers and shakers in the choice movement. Arizona was the first state to enact ESA; Florida was the second. Oftentimes whenever there's a conversation about parental choice and options, Arizona and Florida are always talked about, but when you get into the higher ed area, from my humble position, they couldn't be more different. And so, that will create an opportunity today for some great dialogue.

Julie Young: So, the first thing that I wanted to talk about was public trust. And we all know that this has been a huge topic over the last couple of years in terms of our universities. I did a quick search on public trust in universities. And so a plethora of articles, as you might imagine, appear: "Americans' confidence in higher ed sharply down." "Americans' trust in higher ed has reached a new low." "America's colleges don't have a trust problem. They have an enrollment problem." "American confidence in higher ed hits historic low." You get the point, right? So I think what I want you guys to talk about, and you come from such different perspectives... Ben, I know that you and your wife have homeschooled your three kids. And for those of you that know Michael Crow, you may know that he was in 17 schools by the time he graduated from high school—

MMC: The ones that we stayed in longer than two weeks, yeah.

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Julie Young: You come from such a different perspective, always public servants. So, what can colleges and universities do? How can you collaborate, to restore the public trust and confidence?

MMC: What I'll say is that, yes, the trust in all our institutions in the United States is down, and probably for good reason on, on lots of fronts. Higher education still remains fourth or fifth among the most trusted institutions behind the military and religious organizations. Congress is at the bottom of that list, always is, and there are reasons for that also. But one of the reasons that trust is down is that our universities have not delivered sufficiently on the American dream. There are all kinds of people out there that are complaining about universities. When you delve into that in more detail, and for lots of different reasons, it's because they think that universities are filled with crazy people and then they think that universities are not listening to the public, and they also believe that universities aren't available to them that they're disappointed.

So, there's anger, disappointment, all kinds of things going on at the same time. And we're not particularly good listeners in our sector. We need to become much better listeners. And so, any time trust becomes an issue, that's a real problem. That trust is a core thing, and trust is down because the people of the United States want our universities to be more impactful for them personally, for their families, for their communities. And we're just not delivering that in a way where people can see it. So, I think there's merit in the declining trust, and it's something that we really have to focus on.

Ben Sasse: First of all, great to be with you, Julie. Michael, thanks for having me. Like everybody here, I'm a Michael Crow groupie, and so when you walk through the lobby with him and everybody's taking selfies, you feel like you shouldn't be on the stage with him. So, I will do the servant work first of making sure we have some shared facts. I agree with Michael's point that public trust is declining in every institution in public life. I think a huge part of that is because a hundred years from now, when you look back on this moment, we're not going to talk about politics. We're going to talk about the fact that we're living through a digital disruption, a technological revolution that's creating an economic revolution, which changes our relationship to time and place.

Most people forever have had a local community, which is where they found almost all of their meaning. And we walk around with supercomputers in our pockets that transport our consciousness far from the place where we locally live. It's scary as hell, at the level of consumption. We are the richest people in any time and place in all of human history, but at the level of production, we have way less certainty than anybody's ever had before, that you're going to have meaningful work 15, 20, 25 years in the future. This is the first civilization ever where you have to solve the problem of lifelong learning because there isn't going to be lifelong work. People expect that these institutions of higher education should be solving that problem. And we don't even have a shared shorthand of how to talk about it—

MMC: We don't have a faculty that understands it either.

Ben Sasse: Fair. In 2015, 59% of Americans had confidence in higher education. 2015—Gallup and Pew, I'll bounce back and forth between the two—2019, it had declined from 59 to 48%. From 2019 to 2023, it declined from 48 to 36%, and that's before the congressional hearings of December 5. We don't have any polling yet, but this summer, when Pew and Gallup do their polling, I bet you big bucks, less than 30% of the public is going to think that higher ed is on net a value-adding set of institutions. And what's even



stranger, because I agree with Michael's access point as well... Even among parents who have kids who've finished college in the last decade, only 50% of them think higher ed is a value-adding institution. We have massive, massive trust problems we have to combat, and most of it is because of underperformance.

MMC: I agree with that.

Julie Young: Well, in addition to the trust issue and the confidence being down 21 percentage points in those eight years, the other major concern that we've seen played out in the media, a great deal, has to do with American democracy and the role that universities play certainly in that effort. And so we certainly believe, and I know I've looked at—I have lived—ASU's charter, I have looked at your mission, and both of those both these institutions value a university's role in how you effect democracy in the next generation. So, think about it. Talk to us about how can the universities do a better job in terms of ensuring the success of our democracy in America?

MMC: The colleges graduated many of the individuals who—think of this in the 18th century—college graduates were running around writing things like the Declaration of Independence, designing things like the Constitution. Nothing like that had ever happened before in any revolution in the past. So, it was not surprising then that a person like Adams, who was an author of large elements of the Massachusetts constitution in 1780, put into that constitution—which would then later influence the U.S. Constitution—the notion of the role of higher education as the seminaries of learning. There was one at the time in Cambridge called Harvard, where he went to school. But nonetheless, the centrality of education to the ultimate outcome of the democracy. And Washington, in his first State of the Union speech also outlined the necessity of education and the necessity of higher education also as critical to the success of the country itself.

If you look at the history of the country, the democracy as it has evolved and matured and expanded... The land-grants—University of Florida is a product of that, at least in part. All these things were on the notion that an egalitarian democracy would require an educated population for the democracy to succeed. But a successful democracy at our levels of complexity and our levels of economic aspiration and our level of pursuit of happiness would require education at the central foundational basis of the democracy itself. Now, the role of the universities is to make certain that we maintain that functionality, that we protect and defend the elements of the democracy, and that we become exemplars within the democracy of how it should work on things like freedom of speech and all kinds of other really complicated issues that are out there. And so all of those things are essential additional functions to the universities themselves.

Ben Sasse: Yeah, I mean, if a republic is going to succeed, if it passes along generation to generation, you have to be able to argue the other side or other sides. You need to believe in pluralism and the universal dignity of everybody else in the polity with you, and therefore in the institution with you. And so the over-nicheification of higher education, the fragmentation of disciplines into smaller and smaller groups that often become echo chambers, is sort of at odds with what a republic needs. You need students who go in. We're both *rational* animals and we're rational *animals*, right? We're both reason and passion. We like to think that we're 90% reason and 10% passion, but we often think, when we're debating our spouse or our kids, they're probably 90% passion and only 10% reason. One of the things you have to do to cultivate the sensibilities of a free republic is you have to be able to understand other perspectives and try on other views. And universities haven't been very good at this for a really long time. And so, there's a danger that



we're not doing the kind of institution-keeping and institution-building work that you need. If you want to say that persuasion and entrepreneurship and community and love are the great virtues, and power is only a framework to maintain order... But most interesting things have to happen because people come together and persuade each other and work together. And universities haven't modeled that very well for quite a while.

MMC: One point Ben, what you were saying there on how we were in the past... It was a lot simpler when the country was either physically less diverse or culturally less diverse. Now, with the way that we have evolved, the notion of the complexity of our democracy has scaled dramatically and definitively. The universities have not yet figured out how to be these foundational institutions within this unbelievably complex transformation of the country to the idealized outcome, which is that "hey, we're gonna have a country, everybody's gonna be equal". But no one ever imagined exactly all the complexities of what that might mean and how you make that work. The universities have got to play an unbelievably important role in being this foundational rock about how the democracy never slips into some negative trajectory.

Ben Sasse: I want Julie to take the mic back, but I'll add one more on that too. I think that we often pretend there's this deep cleavage between pre-vocational or pre-workforce portions of the mission of higher education and the pre-citizenship pieces. What does it mean to have liberal arts that prepare you for the arts of liberality and freedom? And I think that the divide between these two is often overstated, but it is clearly the case that we need to be having a big debate about what the purpose of a core curriculum is in an economy as specialized as ours. People are going to gravitate toward more and more and more STEM majors. There needs to be a purpose for the humanities and the liberal arts that isn't just pre-workforce. But you don't just get forced demand through the core. You don't get to say, "Well, no, students wanna major in my stuff and I really want to teach super-niche, unified narrow classes because that's my research interest and why don't you just compel students to come and take my classes even though they're not interesting, they're not persuasive, and the students don't want to. That's not the purpose of—"

MMC: And there's a chance that person is wrong also.

Ben Sasse: There's that. <Laugh>

Julie Young: Keeping this as a backdrop, let's go global. For years, it has certainly been said, thought and reported that the higher education system in the United States is the best in the world. There are some that believe that dynamic is changing. Although we are considered the best in the world, our outcomes of people who graduate and test and all those good things that we all love and hate demonstrate a little bit of a dynamic there. So I would like to know a little bit from you guys, just what do you think? How are we comparing globally and what do we need to do to make sure we maintain that competitive edge and that global level of quality?

MMC: So, I've probably been to—I counted this up once—more than 800 universities in more than 70 countries physically myself. And then, just in the last year, I've been on three or four continents in universities. And that's just in the last 12 months. I still am of the view that there are no institutions that are as capable as American universities in adaptability, in driving forward the society in creativity—as capable. There are a lot of institutions around the world that are much more capable than they used to be, but we still have this notion within our culture of competition.



And so, in some countries, even industrialized countries in Europe, the universities receive their grants as a formula; in Japan, they receive lots of their resources as a formula. Institutions are driven and controlled by ministries of education in most countries of the world. It just means that, in the U.S., you have more diversity, more competition, more willingness to innovate, more adaptability, unbelievable competition in all things from sports to faculty acquisition, to faculty activities, to salaries. It has created for us an opportunity to have fantastic institutions. Now, having said that, the U.S. is also filled with lots of underachieving entities or types of institutions that could be made much better. And having said that, no one ever imagined that the rest of the world would then also be building fantastic institutions and what they might be able to do. So, it's a process by which a long dominant position of the American institutions remains dominant, but less so with many, many, many, many competitors out there. And we just have to up our game on a continuous basis and find a way to avoid that path to complacency that's been common in, in some of our allies across the Atlantic Ocean.

Ben Sasse: Julie, I would distinguish between the educational and the research missions. I think at the research level, the top 50 to 100 U.S. higher ed institutions... We have 5,000 accredited institutions in the country. About 1,600 are comprehensives. The top 50 to 100 have an unbelievable research output. It's the glory of the world. Nobody can compete with it. At the level of pedagogical use of four and a half or five years of your 18-year-old's life, I'm not persuaded that very many of our institutions are in their keep. We talk a lot about student loans or X, Y, or Z, that are financially measurable things. I think the most significant thing that an 18- to 23-year-old are giving to the institutions is the most interesting years of their life. And I don't think we spend nearly enough of their time well enough.

I think one of the great opportunities, and ASU does a lot of this... One of the great opportunities of the ed tech revolution will be to separate assessment from what happens inside the classroom precisely. Think how weird it is that we allow professors to grade the outcome of their students in their own classes. Imagine any other place in the world where you would say, "Yeah, I'm gonna do the oil change, or I'm gonna perform the surgery—and I'll also be the one who decides to give myself the grade." At Harvard, right now, the average GPA is a 3.82—complete BS, right? And when you distinguish by disciplines, hard sciences are about 3.6 and humanities are 3.9. That's not real, right? We should be doing a lot more to assess whether or not we're spending our time. Well, and part of the problem is the formulaic nature of a calendar where we say every student should go to eight semesters, every semester has 14 weeks, every semester has four classes a week, three contact hours. We need a lot more differentiation—

MMC: 50 minutes per class.

Ben Sasse: 50 minutes per class, and a 3.9 grade for everybody, even though we know the academically adrift literature from the University of Chicago... Students in class right now, or in a semester, work less than half as hard as students did 30 years ago in classes with the same title.

Julie Young: Wow. Interesting. Well, we couldn't get out of a presentation today without talking about artificial intelligence, right? Talk about something that's going to change our world, already has, is certainly in the process, but we know that no technology is inherently good or bad: they are all developed and in some way and adopted in the context of existing human values in terms of how do we want to use them? What do we want to do? What are we trying to change? What are we trying to accomplish? And I think the other thing is we think about technologies that tend to magnify aspects of our existing norms and values.



We tend to work on ourselves with them, and they become an enhancement. So, I'd like to understand from your perspectives how you're seeing this play out in both of your institutions and how are we going to ensure the responsible development of AI as this train has left the station so furiously.

MMC: So, we have a thousand faculty being trained in AI or have been trained. We have a hundred projects that are underway. We're embracing it in every possible way because it's just another way to accelerate learning and learning outcomes. And there's all these people... I think they've watched too many science fiction movies that somehow believe that this thing can become a sentient, independent, self-guided creature driven to outcomes that will be deleterious to our species' outcome. Only if we designed it to do that, meaning it can only do what we ask it or design it to do so. So in our School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence—we don't use the word "artificial" in that school's name—we have over 11,000 students. We use "augmented" because all we're actually doing is we're using advanced, unbelievable, ultra-fast calculating capability to take all knowledge that exists in any subject, boil it down to a calculable thing, and calculate anything that we'd like to know in the form of any question, in any language, in any format, in any way and produce some kind of answer from that. Fantastic. I never knew I'd have access to that. That's going to allow me as a learner to learn faster, deeper, broader, in every possible way. How can that be anything other than additive? Now, that doesn't mean that there don't have to be rules or guardrails or guidelines or mechanisms or ways to, you know determine what's shinola and what's not. And so—

Ben Sasse: I didn't have "shinola" on my bingo card!

MMC: So, we're embracing it. Flashing green light is what we say. We think that there's huge, huge, huge opportunity. And if done right, it will also do one other thing. It's going to highly individualize. Back to Ben's point about the structured life of a college student who's in a fully immersive learning environment at a university. Why aren't we asking them to study five subjects instead of one subject? Why aren't we asking them to take on design problems and solutions and work on things on behalf of the society that's supporting them to be there? So, if you're at a public university or at a private university... If you're at a private university, you're paid for by the tax policy of the United States, which is allowing the endowments to be grown. So, why can't all these universities, with these brilliant students that are there from every background imaginable, start doing something for everybody else and using that as a part of their learning process? Well, these AI systems will allow us to do that. They allow us to speed, to scale, to intensify, to do all things that we can to make the learning process more productive.

Ben Sasse: We talk at events like this about AI and what marginal compute costs falling towards zero means, but I think the public really isn't thinking about it enough yet. To the question of, "Is AI gonna bring dystopia or utopia? Is it gonna bring heaven or is it gonna bring hell?" My answer is yes. I think it's both. I don't think it's one or the other. When you are a disciplined user of these tools, there's unbelievable opportunity, right? When you bring math to bear on every discipline and you have large datasets coming to the life sciences revolution, the stuff that's going to happen is going to be extraordinary. But it requires self-discipline, self-restraint, and self-control. My fear about these technologies is not... Technology is not some runaway killer robot. It's the inability of us as individuals to navigate a world of abundance.

We've gone, in the generation and a half or two generations from our grandparents to our parents to us, from mainframe computers at MIT that were larger than the volume of this room to desktops, to laptops, to mobile parables, to wearables, to we're right on the precipice of implantables and at the level of nanobots,



swimming around in your bloodstream, diagnosing cancers before you have any symptoms. I think the next phase of the revolution is going to be continue to be awesome at the level of sort of hijacking your consciousness. I think the vast majority of us are not prepared for this at all. So, I think utopia and dystopia are both coming at the same time. And we need more thick institutions that give students more coming-of-age, 18- to 22-year-old experiences and starting even well before age 18, to think about what it looks like to turn off the consciousness theft that happens—as Jonathan Heidt says, phones are experience blockers. They steal you from the best parts of what you're at in the moment, the vast majority of the time. And so, we're going to need citizens and a republic that know how to manage super tools that have never been available to the average individual before. It's both great and horrifying at the same time.

Julie Young: Yeah, for sure. We have two minutes left, gentlemen. So, very quickly, I would like to ask both of you to talk a little bit about what do you see colleges and universities not doing that you think they should be doing? And conversely, what do you see colleges and universities doing that maybe should be reconsidered?

MMC: In all the time we have left here, so—

Julie Young: Quickly. I know this is hard for you.

MMC: I think it was Mitch Daniels—former president of Purdue, former governor of Indiana—that said, how would he get Purdue into every family? The universities need to be in every family, every household, every business, helping people, not just helping educate their 18- to 22-year-old kids or producing great graduate students. We need to get the universities so that they're in every family. That's something that I think that we could find a way to achieve. And then, in terms of what are we doing that we should be doing less of... We're far too, in general, critical, far too focused on negative, negative, negative, negative. We're far too willing to not advance American exceptionalism, in my view. And I can argue with any of you about that. But I mean that in a particular way. This is a fledgling democracy on a planet that has lived through autocrats and dictators for tens of thousands of years in which most humans suffered immensely as a function of all the governments that existed before this government and this republic. And so this republic has to make it, and the universities need to do more things to help it to make it.

Ben Sasse: That's pretty good. It's kind of putting the rookie on the spot as the clock expires, have to follow the hymn to America. <Laugh> I guess I'll just say in closing... These are super tools, right? Arizona State University is the most important tool. It's the most important piece of infrastructure in the state of Arizona. In Florida, we're blessed that the University of Florida is both flagship and land-grant, right? So we're Texas and Texas A&M, UVA and Virginia Tech in the same institution. That's pretty special. But what a university is not doing well enough, we still let people, parents and taxpayers perpetuate the myth that you have nothing to do with the university. If time is your x axis, you have 0% of your time involved at the university, and then you hit 18 and you go on a straight upward cliff and you're there for four and a half years, and then you have a straight downward cliff and you leave. That's absurd, right? We should be spiking and coming and going forever. And we need to build a come and go institution where this architecture, this piece of infrastructure, is something that's meaningfully connected to people's lives. But that's not full-time, in residence, for four years, and then one-and-done, you're gone forever. You're going to have to come and go forever now.



Julie Young: Awesome. We will end on that note. Join me in thanking these guys. <Applause>

Ben Sasse: Thank you.

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