Innovating US higher education: Arizona State University’s Michael Crow

A pace-setting university president explains why US universities need to become more productive, and how to advance reforms.

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When Michael Crow became president of Arizona State University, in 2002, the former Columbia University vice provost had ambitious plans to turn the school into a new American university devoted to educating a wider swath of students and focused on higher productivity in cultivating competitive graduates who can succeed in today’s volatile job market.

Nine years and a 25 percent increase in student enrollment later, Crow, 56, has delivered big changes in those areas and others at ASU and has garnered a growing reputation as a pace-setting thinker on higher education. He has made strides toward expanding ASU in areas such as ethnic and economic diversity, graduation rates, freshman retention rates, and in the number and intellectual reach of graduates. In fall 2010, ASU boasted an 83 percent first-year retention rate, up from 75 percent in the mid-2000s, and a record enrollment of more than 70,000 undergraduate and graduate students. A survey of recruiters by the Wall Street Journal in September 2010 ranked ASU as the fifth-best American university in terms of quality of graduates.

Crow has been outspoken on the topic of government support for schools, pushing for an output-based model that links funding with the ability of universities to produce large numbers of graduates with literacy across multiple disciplines. He has developed close working ties with businesses to develop a higher profile and value proposition for ASU in its surrounding community. In this video interview at his office in Tempe, Arizona, Crow sat down with McKinsey’s Lenny Mendonca to discuss the challenges of restructuring the intellectual enterprise of today’s public universities.