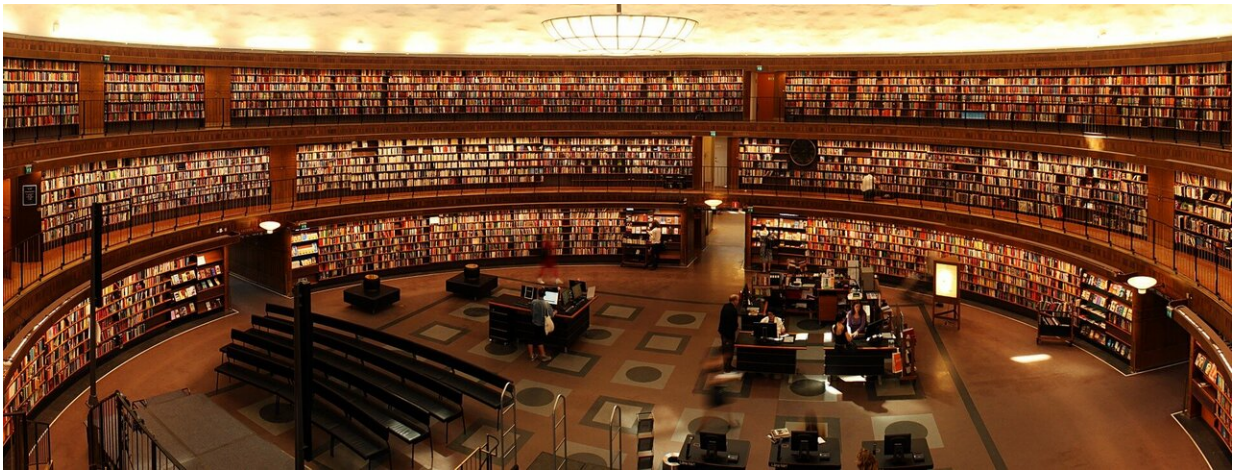


# A new type of university is emerging to meet the challenges of today

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The world is changing rapidly and in order to serve the human population dealing with those changes, American universities need to change, too. In fact, their role is to model the resiliency that all institutions need to embrace, according to Arizona State University President Michal M. Crow.

While many leading universities are poised to advance [society](#) and help respond to the challenges of disruptive change through their traditional role in education and discovery, many face a number of barriers that make them less prepared to respond to the rapidly changing conditions

and the demands they create.

What is emerging is a new type of university, one that steps beyond the American research university model and is nimble and responsive, takes responsibility for what happens outside its walls and can scale up to meet the demands and challenges of modern society. ASU President Michael Crow says they are part of the "fifth wave" of universities.

Crow's comments came today (Feb. 9, 2021) at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Crow's presentation, "A new evolution of research universities," touched on the history of universities, outlined the challenges they face today and explained how new universities of the fifth wave will rise to meet those challenges.

In his recent book "The Fifth Wave," (written with ASU senior research fellow William Dabars) Crow describes the emerging standard of research universities that will better align them with the needs of society in many ways, including contributing solutions to global problems.

The fifth wave is a manifestation of a new wave of American universities, a model embraced and advanced by Arizona State University. These universities are egalitarian, accessible, based in community impact and measured against social outcomes. They are scalable, they are technologically sophisticated and advanced. They educate not hundreds of students, but thousands and tens of thousands of students, Crow said.

Many of today's leading universities are American research universities, which emerged nearly 140 years ago—the fourth wave of university evolution. These universities have a long history of contributions to society, such as breakthrough advances in the fundamental understanding of nature, advancing applied science on a multitude of

fronts, and advancing [human culture](#), human's sense of place and sense of self.

"This has all has been fantastic, but inadequate," Crow said. "Because what happened during the evolution of the research university is that it has become more exclusive, more limited to smaller and smaller fragments of society, and more and more isolated from larger aspects of society itself."

The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point on the limits of the traditional research university.

"America's universities were about as unprepared for this pandemic as one could possibly imagine," Crow said. "Suddenly, we didn't know how to communicate science well enough, we didn't know how to engage in complexity well enough, we didn't know how to cut and cross between disciplines well enough, and we didn't know how to build confidence around knowledge well enough."

The pandemic shows that what is needed is an additional type of university, not a replacement for the ones that exist and are exemplars today, but an additional type of higher educational institutions. "The fifth wave will allow us to do it," Crow said.

The "new" universities are responsive to the rapidly evolving needs of society. Their hallmarks include being inclusive in their educational philosophy and understanding that all people are lifelong learners; contributing to the challenges humans face today on a grand scale, like climate change and the current pandemic; taking stock in their immediate surroundings and being responsible for the success of that setting and of society as a whole.

"We are faced with an evolutionary moment. The role of the university,

its role in discovery, its role in creativity, its role in innovation has never been more important and also its limits have never been clearer," Crow said. "The significant role going forward is figuring out the role of existing research universities and the role of emerging universities, including those that need to operate at a new scale, a new speed and a new egalitarianism."

Crow warned, though, that certain barriers exist that can thwart the evolution of fifth wave universities.

"We form athletic leagues, but we don't form climate change research leagues," he said. "The current model is to have faculty largely work in small centers and small groups, each attempting to advance their fields in a highly competitive way to beat out their competitors. This leaves little room for working on the scaled problems, like how do we manage our relationship with the planet, how will we facilitate cultural and economic competitiveness and do so to the benefit of a highly diverse population. How do we map between Western science, Western culture, Western technology and Indigenous science, Indigenous culture and Indigenous technology?"

Crow explained that in shaping the New American University model is the idea that the university will take responsibility for actions outside of the institution itself.

"If K-12 is underperforming, the institution is partly responsible," Crow said. "If 50% of students graduating from high school are inadequately prepared for the society in which we live, the universities and colleges are partly responsible."

Once the institution takes on that responsibility outside of its walls, then its contribution to society becomes real in a daily way.

"Then we will have the emergence of a new type of American research university, one which is devoted to the actual measured success of the society in which it is embedded," Crow added. "Not in an abstract intergenerational way but in a functional way. In a day-to-day way."

Provided by Arizona State University

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