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Design for a New College

Arizona State's President Says It's Time to Rethink Tenure and Other Academic Traditions

BY DOUGLAS BELKIN

Since taking over as Arizona State University president in 2002, Michael Crow has defied tradition and set out to design the "New American University."

He has pulled professors out of departmental silos and established more than a dozen new transdisciplinary schools and large-scale research initiatives such as the Biodesign Institute and the School of Sustainability, where faculty and scholars collaborate to solve challenges related to urban development, renewable energy and national security, among other things.

During his tenure, the university has tripled research spending and completed an unprecedented infrastructure expansion, all the while keeping tuition down despite significant cuts in state subsidies.

We asked Mr. Crow about his work, which has helped Arizona State earn a spot on three separate rankings of America's best colleges. Here are edited excerpts:

TENURE, REDEFINED

WSJ: Your time at ASU has been marked by radical change and big gambles. Is American higher education too risk-averse?

MR. CROW: In general yes, it's too risk-averse in that we've reached this moment where we have very large student populations and very high diversity, which means we're going to have to find ways to innovate, and innovation means taking chances.

WSJ: What traditions in academia need to be reconsidered?

MR. CROW: I think one needs to reconsider time and size as somehow being the key ingredients to learning. Perhaps one can learn more, and more quickly, in new ways. In terms of size, some classes should be two students and some classes can be an infinite number of students. It depends on the class.

WSJ: You've asked professors to be more entrepreneurial. Should tenure be reconsidered?

MR. CROW: Tenure should be defined more carefully and reconsidered from that. Tenure is basically an opportunity to pursue your agenda for your life without interference relative to the topic. It isn't a license for being lazy. It isn't a license for being nonproductive. It is a lifetime opportunity at the research university level to pursue highly disruptive ideas and innovations without fear. But it isn't a license to do anything other than work as hard as you possibly can.

WSJ: Is that what tenure has become?

MR. CROW: In some places it has become a shield or a protector for people who aren't performing at the highest possible level, and in those cases that tenure should be reviewed.

DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY

WSJ: Should Washington impose a rating system on U.S. colleges and universities and tie it to federal dollars?

MR. CROW: We definitely need performance indicators. If you go to college X, the people there have come into that college with critical-thinking skills level A and they've left at A-plus. And if they haven't, then there's some kind of issue. I support the notion of metrics and measurements and transparency.

WSJ: How do you get there?

MR. CROW: What one wants is Washington to say, "We're done investing without knowing what we're getting for the investment. We're going to hold you accountable for the investment. Tell us what return we are getting on the investment in you." Then each school can respond through a set of frameworks or guidelines.

WSJ: You've broken a lot of teacups at ASU. What has been your largest mistake?

MR. CROW: I think the largest mistake thus far has been to not understand some of the fundamental differences in some of the disciplines and how they need to be approached as one works to link those disciplines together.

WSJ: That's not an insignificant misunderstanding. Have those failures been humbling?

MR. CROW: They have been humbling because I take very seriously the notion of trying to do no harm. We're only trying to make things better.

We don't want to harm the experience of a student by them being involved in the institution during a period of too much disruption. In a sense we're redesigning the engines of the airplane while it is in flight. The plane has to stay in the air, so one has to make certain that the experience of an individual student isn't negatively affected by our intellectual re-engineering of the way we're structured and the way we operate. That takes a lot of attention and focus.

WSJ: You've developed new revenue streams. Are you afraid that will undermine your future base of public funding?

MR. CROW: That is one of the things we agonize over. Someone will say, "Well, you figured out how to do that," and we say, "Yes," and then they say, "Well, we don't need to invest in you."

We're at this complex moment in policy redesign where the innovators have to be alert to the fact that they may innovate in positive and creative ways that lead to positive and measurable outcomes, but then that could enable or empower those who don't want to invest in universities. That's something that we're dealing with right now.

WSJ: Any advice for shaking up entrenched bureaucracies while trying to maintain a sense of equilibrium through the rest of the organization?

MR. CROW: Equilibrium is an important thing to try and maintain, so I think some of the lessons I've learned that might be useful to others are that no matter what ideas you come up with in academic institutions, there will be people opposed to it for any number of reasons. All of those reasons have some legitimacy or some historical basis, but what one needs to do is to go to those people who are willing to look at the institution's objectives as opposed to the individual's objectives. The advice is to connect innovation to the specific objective the institution is attempting to achieve.

WSJ: That sounds antiseptic and bloodless, but one would think the decisions are much trickier.

MR. CROW: Anything involving highly educated human capital is quite complicated, but you can't make progress at your institution if in fact that isn't what you're talking about. If all you're talking about is what some of the literature refers to as "the invisible college"—so you're in a political-science department and what they're talking about is what the political-science department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison is doing, and since they're doing that, that's what we need to do—what does that have to do with what we're trying to do at this particular institution?

BATTLING ISOMORPHISM

WSJ: Those political-science professors might say it's worthwhile to pay attention to the ideas of our strongest competitors because ideas are our business and the ideas over there are a bit more polished than over here and if we emulate them we will improve.

MR. CROW: What we aren't trying to do is just become another one of them. One of the things that to some extent befuddles academia is a term I use called isomorphism. If everyone is isomorphic in their thinking, they think their job is to replicate other institutions and to pursue those that are offering the same services but just trying to offer them a little better or in a better environment.

To me that is a crushing force against innovation and adaptation because then everything is driven by the leader. Then there really are no innovations and no adaptations to changes because the leader sits in a different environment than all the other institutions sit in.

This is kind of a condition of higher

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