MONEY & MANAGEMENT

Raising Arizona

Michael M. Crow

Born
October 11, 1955, in San Diego, Calif.

Education
- Ph.D., public administration (science and technology policy), the Maxwell School, Syracuse U., 1985
- B.A., political science and environmental studies, Iowa State U., 1977

Career highlights
- Arizona State U., president, since 2002
- Iowa State U., director, Institute for Physical Research and Technology, 1988-91; director, Office of Science Policy and Research, 1985-89; assistant director of planning and program development, Ames Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, 1985-88
- U. of Kentucky, associate director, Institute for Mining and Minerals Research, 1984-85
- Southern Illinois U. at Carbondale, Coal Research Center, assistant director of program planning, 1978-82


Memberships
- Member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Business-Higher Education Forum; member of the Board of Advisers of the James Martin Institute for Science and Civilization at the U. of Oxford; member of the Arizona State Board of Education; member of the boards of trustees of Internet2 and Bowdoin College; and member of the boards of directors of Aquila Inc., the Translational Genomics Research Institute, the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, and In-Q-Tel

Books

Personal
- Married to Sybil Francis, M.D. Three children. Hobbies include hiking, mountain biking, and weight lifting.

SOURCE: CHRONICLE REPORTING

Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State U.: The typical university evolves slowly, but in fast-growing Arizona, “if we evolve slowly, we’re dead.”
Raising Arizona

Is Michael Crow’s remaking of a state university a model, or a mirage?

BY JOHN L. PULLEY

Tempe, Ariz.

Nothing sharpens a visionary’s inner eye quite like a desert sough. Here, where metropolitan Phoenix sprawls across a sun-baked landscape, one of the pre-eminent visionaries is Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State University.

Upon his arrival from Columbia University, in 2002, Mr. Crow stirred up the dust by announcing plans to transform Arizona State into the country’s premier urban research institution. Repudiating the university’s reputation as a party school of modest ambition, he vowed to “blow up the status quo” and reassemble the pieces into a model for higher education in the 21st century—what he calls “a new American university.”

Three years into his 10-year plan, he is laboring to achieve the twin goals of expanding the size and scope of Arizona State and raising its quality. Eager to abandon the ivory-tower model of higher education that has shaped many American colleges, he wants to transform Arizona State into a university embedded in its community, one that will serve as a powerful force for social, cultural, economic, and environmental progress throughout the state.

He says Arizona State will measure its success not by the proportion of students it rejects but by the educational attainment of the students it accepts. To accommodate the state’s fast-growing population of college-age men and women—many of whom are minority-group members from low-income backgrounds—he plans to increase enrollment, already the nation’s fourth-largest, from 61,000 to 95,000 by 2020, a 15-year growth of 56 percent.

In Arizona, as elsewhere, state support for higher education has withered in recent years. Mr. Crow says Arizona State will become more entrepreneurial and less reliant on state funds, which cover 31 percent of its annual budget. He expects the university’s annual research budget, now $183-million, to double in the next three or four years, with new funds coming from industry, foundations, the state, and federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the Defense Department, and the Department of Homeland Security.

At the same time, he says, Arizona State will revile downtown Phoenix and help it to diversify the region’s sluggish low-tech economy, which can no longer rely on the sources of revenue described by locals as “the five C’s”—cattle, cotton, copper, citrus, and climate.

Arizona State will be “the new gold standard” for American research universities, Mr. Crow says.

Fool’s gold, detractors say. It’s not that excellence and bigness are mutually exclusive, they argue. Ohio State University at Columbus, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and the University of Texas at Austin are excellent institutions, of considerable size. No American university, though, has become both bigger and better on the scale and the timeline envisioned by Arizona State’s 16th president. No American university has tried.

“His plan won’t work,” says Geoffrey A. Clark, a professor of anthropology. “It’s a pipe dream. Arizona State University will come out of this as a poorer university.”

Critics complain that Mr. Crow has run roughshod over the faculty and others with whom he does not see eye to eye, and that his reform agenda diverges too much from core academic values.

Even his supporters suggest that he may be doing too much, too fast, at too high a cost. He rejects such criticisms, and suggests that he may have no other choice.

The typical university evolves slowly, Mr. Crow says, but “if we evolve slowly, we’re dead.”

Big Challenges

The challenges that Mr. Crow must overcome are substantial. They include institutional inertia, rapid cultural change, and a local economy based on cheap land and cheap labor.

Phoenix is growing explosively. Maricopa County adds more than 100,000 residents every year, and the metropolitan area is projected to have as many as eight million people in 25 years.

The face of Phoenix is changing as well. As Arizona’s population increased 40 percent in the 1990s, the number of Hispanic residents swelled by 88 percent. The city’s population born outside the United States grew by 136 percent, with many being poor and uneducated illegal immigrants.

The local economy lags behind those of other large metropolitan areas. Phoenix has a comparatively large number of factory jobs and relatively little corporate investment in research and development. Craig Barrett, CEO of Intel, decided against relocating a research facility here because Arizona State’s engineering school was not good enough, the university’s own officials say.

The city is home to four Fortune 500 companies, yet Arizona State is its only nationally known not-for-profit college. Phoenix is the largest city in the country without a traditional medical school. By comparison, Mr. Crow says, Philadelphia, with a comparable population, has 16 Fortune 500 headquarters and numerous colleges of distinction, including Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Arizona’s public schools are troubled as well. Less than 60 percent of the state’s high-school graduates graduate, and of those who do, only 42 percent go on to college. Nationally about 57 percent of high-school graduates enroll in college. Most college students from Arizona’s 22 Indian tribes drop out.

Yet the sheer numbers of students enrolled in the public-school system guarantee a continuing surge of men and women seeking higher education. The state Constitution stipulates that an affordable college education be available to residents, and the Arizona Board of Regents requires Arizona State to admit all state residents who have graduated in the top half of their high-school classes. The university enrolled a record 8,467 first-time freshmen this fall, a 10-percent jump from one year ago and double the number in 1995.

Even without an improvement in Arizona’s dismal high-school-graduation rate, the state’s public system of higher education will require an estimated 180,000 seats in all by 2017 to accommodate demand. The state’s three major public institutions—Arizona State, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona—now have combined enrollments of about 120,000 students.
There’s angst. That kind of shake-up has sent some people adrift. I’ve seen more dynamic change here in the past three years than I’ve ever seen in a long time. It’s hard to sit in a room with him and not be captivated,” Ms. Allen says.

BIG IDEAS

Arizona’s regents didn’t look far to find this president. Mr. Crow had been a part-time consultant to the university for a decade while working as a vice provost at Columbia University. There he was known as an entrepreneurial leader who didn’t shrink from risk or controversy. He persuaded Columbia to lease Biosphere 2, the artificial, self-sustaining, enclosed environment for humans built in the Arizona desert; he pushed the university to capitalize on its intellectual capital by aggressively patenting inventions and selling rights to the private sector; and he created Fathom, an online-learning venture that was supposed to enrich Columbia through the sale of Web-based courses and seminars (The Chronicle, February 9, 2001).

Results of those ventures were mixed. Columbia leads American universities in patent revenue, but the university shut down Fathom, which lost millions of dollars, and prematurely discontinued research at Biosphere 2, which had cost it at least $25-million.

Despite his record at Columbia, Mr. Crow “exhibited the leadership style that we thought would be good for the university,” says Christina A. Palacios, president of the Arizona Board of Regents. “He is a person who is creative and energetic and who thinks deeply.”

Mr. Crow brings more to the job than professional experience. His mother died when he was 9, and his father, a career Navy man, moved the family often. By the time he enrolled in college, he had attended 17 schools. His peripatetic childhood taught him how to navigate the social and cultural complexities of new environments. As a science-program administrator at Iowa State University, he earned a reputation for funneling federal pork-barrel spending to the U.S. Department of Energy’s Ames Laboratory there. At Columbia he controlled the largest pool of discretionary money on the campus. He says that he has “learned how to acquire resources,” and that he is at his best when things are in flux.

“I’ve always been attracted to fast-moving, complex things,” he says.

Throughout his life, he has been drawn to sports that tested his individual skill and grit—wrestling in high school, playing nose tackle on the football team, throwing the javelin in college, hiking and mountain biking today. He often gets only four hours of sleep a night.

“Crow has quickly become the Energizer bunny,” says Carolyn S. Allen, a Republican state senator.

The president is an excellent pitcher. His gift for explaining complex subjects makes him “irreplaceable at being in front of the State Legislature, the City Council, and the business community,” says Kenneth Bennett, president of Arizona’s State Senate.

Mr. Crow rarely stops selling his vision, on a typical day promoting it to the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce at breakfast, the Economic Club of Phoenix at lunch, and once more to a crowd gathered for a dinner banquet. “It’s hard to sit in a room with him and not be captivated,” Ms. Allen says.

LOOKING AHEAD

Whether or not Mr. Crow’s vision will succeed is not yet clear. That he is off to a fast start is without dispute.

He has rejuvenated Arizona State’s efforts to increase support from private donors and legislators. He brought in the largest gifts ever to Arizona State, a pair of $50-million donations, and he scored a legislative coup early in his tenure, successfully lobbying state lawmakers to appropriate $440-million to bolster research at state institutions, of which $188-million went to Arizona State. He told lawmakers that if they provided the money now, the university would become more self-sufficient and need less state money later.

Tuition revenue is surging as well, and not just from enrollment growth. Since the 2002-3 academic year, Arizona State has increased its tuition by 70 percent, prompting State Sen. Thayer L. Verschoor, a Republican, to say he worries that the university is “squeezing out” middle-class students who are ineligible for financial aid.

Mr. Crow has also forged strong ties to Phoenix’s business and political establishments, hiring a number of business leaders for positions in his administration. His most important ally may well be Phil Gordon, mayor of Phoenix.

In what may be an unprecedented investment by a city in a state university, Phoenix plans to pump hundreds of millions of dollars into the development of Arizona State’s downtown branch campus. Voters will go to the polls in March in a bond referendum to decide whether the city should help to pay for Mr. Crow’s entrepreneurial vision. The bond issue would include $223-million for the downtown campus. David A. Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, says it was “smart” to limit the vote to the city, whose residents typically pass such measures. Still, voter approval is hardly guaranteed.

The mayor “is betting a lot of his political capital on this,” Mr. Crow says. Arizona State’s president is selling the downtown campus as a spark that will revitalize the city’s core by attracting new business and residents.

He envisions moving existing components of the university, including the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, and creating new ones. Arizona State is also collaborating with the University of Arizona, its longtime rival, to locate an extension of its medical school in Phoenix. The downtown project will be connected to Arizona State’s main campus, in nearby Tempe, by a light-rail transportation system, along which an “enterprise zone” would attract new businesses, says the president and the mayor.

Arizona must move “away from the paradigm that ASU is only an agency of the state government,” says Mr. Crow, “and move toward a paradigm that casts the university as an enterprise responsible for its own fate.”

Jack W. Harper, a Republican state senator, demurs. “I’m not sure that is the best thing for the state of Arizona,” he says. “Our state’s Constitution gave us a vision, and that is that we are not to borrow money and run our state into debt.”

The most imposing manifestation of Mr. Crow’s plans is a partially completed project called the Biodesign Institute. When finished, it will comprise four interconnected buildings and 800,000 square feet of research
space devoted to applications of advanced bioscience. The institute’s
director is George Poste, who led research and development at Smith-Kline
Beecham, the pharmaceutical company that became Glaxo-SmithKline. He
says Mr. Crow’s plan for the university is “one of the most radical
experiments ongoing in American higher education,” and that its realization
will not be without pain. “Anytime you impose radical change on an
organization, you have some people who are unsettled by it,” Mr. Poste says.

Mr. Crow sees the Institute as a fertile environment for public-private
partnership that will bring new money to Arizona State. Its researchers will
be required to generate annual revenue equal to $225 per square foot, “a
stiffer financial metric than most campuses impose,” Mr. Poste says.

Not everyone is thrilled with the arrangement. “I’m not a big fan of
public-private partnerships,” says Senator Verschoor. “You end up taking the
universities and competing with the private sector. To me it goes beyond
the proper role of government.”

**DECISION PENDING**

Mr. Crow’s supporters appear to outnumber his critics by a substantial
margin. Perhaps they are simply more vocal.

At Columbia he was criticized for taking on too much, for moving too
fast, for trying to edge the institution away from its core mission. That
reputation has followed him to Phoenix. There are those who say Mr.
Crow’s enthusiasm for realizing his agenda leaves little time or tolerance for
other points of view. He alienated Arizona State faculty members early in
his presidency when he took control of tenure decisions that had been the
de facto province of the provost, and altered the process in a way that
resulted in more denials and deferrals of tenure. He has called on
faculty members to advance his goals for the university, in part by more
aggressively seeking outside financial support.

His relationship with the faculty upon his arrival “wasn’t really a
honeymoon,” says Susan D. Mattson, president of the university’s
Academic Senate and Faculty Assembly. “He didn’t invite dissent a lot at
first. It was very difficult to disagree” with him.

“Some people probably thought I was a jerk,” Mr. Crow says of those
skirmishes.

Mr. Clark, the anthropology professor, accuses Mr. Crow of viewing
Arizona State as a failed company that must be reorganized for greater
efficiency and financial stability, academic values be damned.

The professor says he is concerned that the new American
university will have a faculty caste system. At the top will be researchers
who bring in money; at the bottom will be “slave labor” needed to teach
courses to tens of thousands of new students. Arizona State, the
professor warns, “will become a grotesque combination of a
Cal State Tempe-type institution and the world’s largest community
college.”

Mr. Crow is misusing his authority over tenure decisions to intimidate
faculty members who might object, Mr. Clark argues. “Crow is a thug in a
business suit,” he says.

Mr. Longanecker, of the interstate higher-education commission, who
describes himself as “quite a fan of Michael Crow’s,” says “the big
challenge is getting the employees to buy into the vision and getting the
stakeholders to buy into the vision.”

“You can’t run an organization effectively with malcontents doing the
work,” he says.

Supporters of Mr. Crow say that they are not put off by resistance, that
reaching an oasis can require a long slog in the sand. “You can never be
bold and visionary,” says the State Senate’s Mr. Bennett, “without stirring
up some resistance.”