

Changing Futures

An Interview with Gretchen E. Buhlig, Chief Executive Officer, Arizona State University Foundation for a New American University

EDITORS' NOTE Gretchen Buhlig is the Chief Executive Officer of the Arizona State University Foundation for a New American University. Since joining the ASU Foundation in January 2012, Buhlig has been a catalyst for transformational change by leading the advancement of the ASU charter, generating record-breaking fundraising success and surpassing campaign goals year after year. The ASU Foundation (asufoundation.org) exists to raise resources for the #1 university in the nation for



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innovation (U.S. News & World Report) focusing on five guiding principles: making education accessible for all; advancing research for the public good; serving the community; protecting the planet; and creating learners for life. Buhlig leads a team of fundraising professionals to create revenue generation for research to solve the world's most complex problems, create tomorrow's leaders who will lead the world by example, and build a culture of philanthropy across the ASU community and beyond. Buhlig is a member of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges Council of Foundation Leaders, the Fast Company's Innovation Council, and the U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students Funding Working Group. She previously served as a mentor in the Valleywise Health Foundation Emerging Leaders program. Buhlig holds a bachelor's degree from Augustana College, a masters in nonprofit management and leadership from Walden University, and a graduate certificate in authentic leadership from Harvard University.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I started my career in public relations, specializing in crisis communications for a for-profit company. At the time, professional fundraising

was not yet a defined career path. Soon after, I moved into the nonprofit sector because I was drawn to mission-driven work which better aligned with my values and desire to make a difference. I joined Girl Scouts in a dual role supporting both a Midwest council and the national office in New York City. At the time, the Girl Scouts organization was looking to diversify its funding sources from product sales and other traditional forms of revenue, introducing me to the emerging field of institutional advancement. This experience allowed

me to take on diverse responsibilities and ultimately led to a full-time role in fundraising.

Once I discovered my calling as a fundraiser, I committed to the nonprofit sector for its mission-focused work. I also knew that I wanted to support education, a passion I had nurtured through years of volunteer service. That opportunity came in the mid-1990s when I joined Arizona State University. That move marked the beginning of a dedicated career in higher education advancement.

Will you provide an overview of ASU's Foundation for a New American University?

The ASU Foundation exists to provide philanthropic and other resources in support of Arizona State University's mission. Established in 1955 as the Arizona State College Foundation, it has evolved into the Arizona State University Foundation for a New American University to reflect President Michael Crow's vision for a New American University. ASU's commitment to accessibility and excellence drives a student-centric model that embraces innovation, agility, change and collaboration to meet the evolving needs of our learners.

This approach has earned ASU the distinction of being named the most innovative university

in the United States by *U.S. News and World Report* for 11 consecutive years. As the foundation serving this forward-thinking university, we share that bold vision. We are at the forefront of advancing new ideas for resource generation, philanthropic and otherwise, positioning us as a model foundation for peer institutions.

Our previous campaign, Campaign ASU 2020, redefined higher education fundraising campaigns by focusing on impact for students, research, and communities rather than numbers. Building on that success, we launched the Changing Futures campaign with an even more ambitious approach to mobilize diverse resources to prepare adaptable leaders who can tackle complex global challenges. We are training our fundraisers, who hold valuable relationships, to be adept at engaging in conversations that extend beyond philanthropy to include innovative revenue strategies. We call our fundraisers advancement professionals because they are advancing the university.

How do you define ASU Foundation's mission?

The ASU Foundation's mission is to build partnerships and relationships, uniting ideas, people, philanthropic support, and investments to advance ASU's goals for inclusion, student success, discovery, and local and global impact. We are rooted in building core relationships and partnerships to empower the university and the communities it serves to thrive. This belief is anchored in the Arizona State University Charter which states: ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves.

ASU President Michael Crow instituted the Charter as ASU's north star two decades ago to

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shift from an exclusive, ivory tower approach to include and serve learners from all backgrounds with excellent and accessible educational opportunities. The ASU Foundation’s work centers on finding innovative approaches and partners who share our commitment to creating transformative opportunities for individuals and communities locally and globally.

How do you focus your efforts leading the ASU Foundation?

My leadership focus at the ASU Foundation centers on two guiding principles: the ASU Charter and our mission. A recent example is our Changing Futures campaign, which launched in spring 2025. It spans locally, regionally, nationally, and globally to create transformational opportunities for learners, researchers, future leaders and society as a whole. We collaborated with ASU leaders, faculty, staff and external partners on six pillars. These pillars are:

- Transform global education
- Reshape our relationship with the planet
- Inspire tomorrow’s game changers
- Empower community resilience
- Build the future of health
- Advance technology for good

The pillars reflect urgent priorities as we navigate an increasingly complex world shaped by technological, geopolitical, and environmental shifts. My role is to ensure these themes translate into actionable strategies that elevate ASU’s impact.

Equally important to us is investing in talent through hiring, professional growth, and retention. We hire and develop professionals who embody ASU’s Charter and the Foundation’s mission. These individuals must not be afraid to work hard and must have grit to discover and navigate unforeseen opportunities to raise resources. By empowering our team to innovate and lead, we strengthen ASU’s ability to serve learners and communities worldwide.

How critical is it to build a culture of philanthropy across the university?

Building a culture of philanthropy across ASU is not just important; it is essential to our ability to innovate and lead. Over the past 20 years, we have been building a culture of philanthropy and collaboration, both within the university and externally, engaging alumni and the communities that ASU is a part of regionally, nationally, and globally. It has been critical to our success, especially now as rapid shifts in technology and geopolitics continue to shape learner preferences and higher education globally.

We have partnered with ASU’s leaders, faculty, staff, and alumni to demonstrate how philanthropy fuels educational and research goals and how their success is tied to the success of our communities as a whole. School, college, and department leaders are aware that resource generation is a critical part of their portfolio; they collaborate regularly with their dedicated fundraising teams. We have developed special informational programs that share with faculty the importance and different styles (from federal or other governmental agency funders) of working with individual and organizational donors. We launched a specialized program that faculty and staff members with ambitious and/or unique ideas can enroll in to further develop or refine their approach and then share them with executives from philanthropic organizations for valuable feedback. This commitment to serving our faculty and staff has laid the groundwork for them to see us as a valued partner in the inception of ideas and how to grow them in bold ways.

Our Changing Futures campaign, along with other university-wide initiatives such as Sun Devil Gratitude Week and Sun Devil Giving Day, continue to play an important role in raising awareness and inspiring action among individuals within and outside of the ASU community every day.

What was the vision for establishing the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures?

The original vision stemmed from a pivotal conversation between ASU supporter Rob Walton, ASU President Michael Crow, and Peter Schlosser, the vice president and vice provost of the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory at ASU. That conversation centered on the question: Which university is the most valuable in education, research and practice for the field of conservation? The answer was clear: such a university did not exist. Rob challenged us to imagine how ASU could be the institution to build such a university. ASU has a legacy of pioneering sustainability education, including launching the first school of sustainability in 2006 and earning top global rankings in planetary health research, education and practice. We were uniquely positioned to lead.

To bring this vision to life, we embarked on a yearlong design process. With the help of the Rob Walton Foundation, our team engaged governments, non-governmental organizations, indigenous communities, other universities, and private sector leaders worldwide to understand

conservation needs from diverse lenses. It led to us co-creating the concept for the school with the Rob Walton Foundation and other partner organizations. This collaborative approach ensured that the school would address global challenges while honoring local insights and priorities.

How valuable has it been to have such deep engagement from ASU President Michael Crow and the Foundation’s board in the work of the ASU Foundation?

The university’s president, provost, and executive team, and your foundation’s board must believe in your ambitious goals and partner with you on advancing them. A true partnership with these stakeholders is essential. They must be champions for the work that we do. We have been able to generate the kind of big ideas and investments that we have seen over the years because of strong advocacy from the ASU executive team and the ASU Foundation’s board of directors.

Over the years, we have shaped the ASU Foundation board of directors with care to be representative of the values, expertise and mindset that are true to and woven into the framework of ASU and the ASU Foundation. To recruit the right fit of leaders, we have also taken into consideration the demographics and geographies we serve as a public higher education institution.

What are your priorities for the ASU Foundation?

Our priorities are to continue to be a valued resource partner for ASU, and to be in alignment with where the university is headed both nationally and internationally so that we are set up for success. We are continuing to grow our endowment to ensure the long-term health of the institution.

We have very ambitious goals for the Changing Futures campaign. By its end date on June 30, 2029, we would like to reach 250 million learners worldwide, reach and sustain \$1.5 billion in annual investment in research, and grow the university endowment to \$2.5 billion. The campaign’s success continues to be a priority.

We want to continue to build and grow a workforce that is inspired and successful at what they need to do year over year. I wake up every day inspired by the new directions the university is taking and honored that we get to be a key valued partner on that journey. ●