

FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY



## ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

In 2002, Arizona State University welcomed a new president with a broad vision for both the University and the region. Just barely into the start of the new millennium, ASU embodied the promise and the challenge of that time. With populist roots tracing back to its early days as a teachers' college, ASU held a coveted Tier I research status, which offered prestige and helped attract acclaimed faculty and well-funded research projects. A rapidly-expanding population and a booming regional economy were swelling the ranks of ASU's student body, which had an enrollment of more than 60,000 and was projected to grow to 100,000 in less than two decades. ASU's largest campus located in Tempe was home to approximately 55,000 students; two other campuses had been created in recent decades: ASU East (renamed ASU Polytechnic) in Mesa, and ASU West Campus in Glendale. (In 2006, ASU would also open ASU Downtown Phoenix.) The three campuses operated under the "One University, Many Places" approach, with each campus housing distinctly different focus areas. In addition to a comprehensive roster of undergraduate and graduate degrees, ASU offered professional degrees in business, law, nursing, and social work among others.

### PROJECT DATE:

2004 - 2008

SECTOR: *Higher education*

### FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:

*Research, interviewing, analysis, and synthesis; community engagement; institutional visioning; group facilitation*

*Located in the Greater Phoenix Area and with a total enrollment of more than 70,000 students, at four campuses, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY is working to create a model of the "New American University" that recognizes inclusion as a core measure of success.*

## ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Throughout this period of enrollment growth and increased tuition, ASU was committed to educating lower-income and first generation college students. The University offered financial assistance to a significant portion of students and was continually grappling with state budget constraints along with the need for ongoing fund development to meet its aggressive growth plans. Growth in the region brought additional civic problems as a burgeoning and diverse population pressed for economic development, improvements to K-12 education, workforce development and diversification, new housing, cultural opportunities, and myriad social services.

As part of a new educational platform, ASU's president pushed for innovative ways to create "the New American University," including the potential to define the relationship between the university and the Phoenix community. The president dubbed this nascent concept "social embeddedness" – yet he was unsure how to implement this vision and change the culture of such a massive institution. In 2004, ASU engaged FTA to help define the concept, develop a vision, and engage the University and the greater Phoenix community in this pioneering new practice of interconnectedness.

In order to assess the community and local landscape, FTA conducted in-person, one-on-one interviews with more than 150 individuals in the metropolitan Phoenix region, including ASU faculty and administration; representatives of the Board of Regents; nonprofit leaders (predominantly at social service agencies); business leaders; policy analysts; philanthropic organizations; elected

*In 2006, residents of the City of Phoenix voted to approve an unprecedented \$223M in funding that would enable the development of an Arizona State University campus in downtown Phoenix. The vote was historic in that city residents agreed to fund a state institution which they recognized would greatly benefit the city itself.*

## ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

officials; and a diverse group of community-based leaders. FTA also reviewed ASU's mission, history, academic, and community-based programs; and gathered initial secondary data. An early observation noted that ASU's mission did not encompass any concept of community involvement. In fact, at that time, ASU was commonly described by community leaders as "an island," that was more likely to simply inform the community about the University's plans rather than seek input.

In addition to interviews, FTA attended sessions of ASU presidential councils; faculty meetings; and community presentations related to campus development. ASU's printed materials, press releases and press coverage were also reviewed and assessed along with its website for messages, ease of navigation, and topics presented.

FTA then embarked upon the second phase of the project to learn about programs at other universities, and to discover what components were most critical to successful, "empowered" partnerships. FTA studied more than 170 universities and colleges across the country which shared characteristics with ASU, based on educational vision and philosophy, student enrollment, urban location, and/or earned reputation for particularly effective university/community relations. This list was narrowed to 15 key institutions across the country from Portland to Los Angeles; Milwaukee to Atlanta; Hartford to Baltimore. FTA researched and then visited each institution for several days, walking neighborhoods, meeting with community leaders, and interviewing five to ten stakeholders in each location to learn about effective

*"Social embeddedness means having long-term, reciprocal relationships with the community. I don't think the university should be a brain bank that the community makes withdrawals from. It should be a partner, blending into the neighborhood... intermingling."*

*– External*

## ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

programs and relationships, successes and pitfalls. The most effective of these programs were imbued with a spirit of partnership and shared similar characteristics, especially regarding community capacity-building; offered a curriculum that pragmatically addressed local issues; and placed an emphasis on community-focused economic development. But to sustain these elements, the intentional, ongoing support from the top echelons of the university was required.

Armed with this first-hand data, FTA turned to the task of trying to define an appropriate model that could solidify ASU's efforts — addressing the expanding ASU profile and the sprawling Phoenix area.

Following numerous productive, engaging discussions with diverse University-based committees and a voiced commitment to continue with the process, the president designated a small group of faculty and administrators to support FTA's work as it formulated and articulated a vision for social embeddedness at ASU. FTA presented its ideas and concepts to a 60-person steering committee, comprised of deans, vice presidents, and center directors. In Spring 2006, FTA guided ASU to formulate a shared definition of social embeddedness as *“a University-wide, interactive, mutually-supportive partnership with the communities of Arizona”* and

*“The university’ shouldn’t be an ivory tower, but an enterprise that’s an equal partner in the community. That could be demonstrated in a number of different ways, but it means that they are an integral part of the community, not separate and distinct from the community.”*

– External

*ASU’s president articulates eight “design aspirations” for the New American University: leveraging place, transforming society, valuing entrepreneurship, conducting use-inspired research, enabling student success, fusing intellectual disciplines, being socially embedded, and engaging globally.*

## ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

developed a framework to guide ASU's implementation of this plan based on five integrated themes:

- *Teaching and Learning* involving faculty and students in community problem-solving
- *Research/Development* prioritizing community input, knowledge, and needs
- *Community Capacity-Building* providing community-based institutions with support, training and access to information
- *Economic Development/Investment* responding to university and community needs
- *Social Development* enhancing the well-being of Arizona's people and communities.

Within this framework, FTA developed a set of integrated goals and implementation strategies, emphasizing University-wide changes to institutional culture; strategic partnerships with Arizona communities; and becoming a national model. The comprehensive *Plan for Social Embeddedness* provided a series of options for implementation.

It can take a long time – sometimes years – to change institutional culture. But there have already been signs that this culture shift has taken root at ASU. When the University planned and launched its latest ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, it incorporated many of the concepts of the plan into its buildings, its programs, and in its approach to the neighboring communities.

*“Social embeddedness is a value... It's not a list... It's not a program... It's not a center... We're talking about instilling a value in the faculty and staff, and in the culture of this university... It's a call to action for us to use our full ability and capacity to be more relevant in the community in which we reside. And it's up to everyone at the university to think that through and then do something about it.”*

– Internal