

# How ASU became the gold standard in journalism

Christopher Callahan, AZ 1 See It 12:22 p.m. MST August 7, 2015

*Viewpoints: Ten years ago, the Cronkite School was struggling to remain relevant. Now, it's on the cutting edge.*



(Photo: Photo by Nick Oza/The Republic)

The journalism school at Arizona State University has proudly carried the name of Walter Cronkite since 1984, when a group of Valley media leaders convinced the former CBS News anchor to lend his considerable reputation and household name to a program little known outside of the region.

Over the next 15 years, the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication built a solid foundation for professional journalism education by embracing the iconic name – and values – of its namesake. But the school failed to reach the top echelon of major journalism programs, despite repeated efforts by then-Director Douglas Anderson, media executives and Cronkite himself to make it an independent college.

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Anderson left in 1999 to become dean at Penn State, and by the summer of 2005, the school was struggling. Cronkite had four leaders within half-a-dozen years. Only 20 full-time professors taught more than 2,000 students. The school was shoe-horned into an aging and decidedly low-tech building.

Arizona's main PBS station was located next door, but there was little professional or academic connectivity. A modest university budget received little bolstering from private donations. The school even had a scare with its once-every-six-year national review, needing a reversal of a preliminary recommendation of provisional accreditation.

But President Michael M. Crow saw great possibilities. Early in his presidency, he put the program on a trajectory to create a robust, innovative and world-class journalism school for the digital age. Encouraged and supported by the former CBS anchor, industry leaders and then-Regent Donald Ulrich, Crow made the Cronkite School an independent college within ASU and set in motion plans to make it a centerpiece of his newly envisioned downtown Phoenix campus.

That was 10 years ago. Today, Cronkite is heralded nationally by news leaders and journalism educators alike as one of the best (some say *the* best) and most innovative journalism schools in the country, unabashedly embracing the digital age and an innovative, entrepreneurial mindset while refocusing on the "Cronkite values" of traditional journalism – accuracy, objectivity, fairness and integrity.

Cronkite now has nearly 50 full-time professors – many fresh-from-the-newsroom industry leaders and award-winning journalists and communication professionals. More than half of the new cohorts of freshmen are from out of state, and a quarter of them are honors students – nearly triple the percentage from a decade earlier.

More than 37 percent of the student body is made up of students of color, also a dramatic increase. The school's freshman retention rate, which had been below the ASU average, now leads the university at 90 percent. The four-year graduation rate, meanwhile, has nearly doubled. Regional and national employers regularly visit the school to recruit the best and brightest.

Cronkite students dominate student journalism competitions and have the nation's best record in the Society of Professional Journalists' Mark of Excellence Awards over the past 10 years, finishing first in eight of those years. Students now are even competing in contests for professionals.

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They have won professional honors for a 30-minute special on the scourge of heroin that was simulcast on every Arizona TV station and for Carnegie-Knight News21, the multi-university investigative team based at ASU and led by Pulitzer Prize winner Jacquee Petchel and longtime *Washington Post* Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr.

A tripling of the university's financial investment in Cronkite over the past decade has been coupled with more than \$50 million in fundraising. Fourteen of the school's 15 gifts of at least \$1 million have come in the past 10 years, and overall fundraising has increased nearly 2,000 percent since the period prior to independence – nearly matching the university's investment dollar-for-dollar.

The new resources have led to dramatic growth and the creation of the school's signature – a series of intensive professional newsrooms and laboratories. The design is analogous to a teaching hospital in medical education, with immersive learning environments for students that simultaneously provide an important service for the community – in this case, news and information – as well as a place to experiment in real time with new ideas.

All of this is occurring in a state-of-the-art media complex – the envy of many news organizations, let alone other universities – that is a cornerstone of the new downtown Phoenix campus in the heart of the nation's sixth-largest city.

"If you want to see the power of shifting mindsets in journalism education, look toward the Cronkite School," [Kathleen Bartzan Culver](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/author/kculver/) (<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/author/kculver/>) wrote in a recent edition of *MediaShift*. "In the last decade of teaching within and observing the often fraught and bedraggled world of media instruction, I've seen no single program as ascendant as ASU. ... (Cronkite) has spent the last 10 years amassing stunning resources, leading talent and novel programs in service of students."

Clark Bell, until recently the longtime head of journalism initiatives at the McCormick Foundation, one of the discipline's leading funders, said simply: "Cronkite has become the gold standard of journalism education in America."

**Christopher Callahan is the founding dean of Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.** (Photo: Madeline Pado/Cronkite School)

Despite the transformation and dramatic growth, we believe we are just getting started. And our goal is not just to change journalism education but journalism itself in the process.

Cronkite News, with 15 full-time editor/professors, a team of more than 120 advanced journalism students and news bureaus in Phoenix, Los Angeles and Washington, today is the second-largest news organization in Arizona. With the recent acquisition of Arizona PBS, the largest media outlet operated by a journalism school in the world, the Cronkite News daily newscast reaches 1.9 million households, while mobile and social media

platforms engage news consumers digitally.

The immersive learning environments of Cronkite News give ASU students a powerful advantage in a highly competitive media marketplace. But in keeping with the mission of our regionally embedded, globally engaged university, this journalistic "teaching hospital" does much more.

It provides critical news coverage on issues such as the region's economy, business, law, race and justice, education, science and technology, and sustainability, providing an important service to our state and its citizenry. And it serves as a national test bed for bold news experimentation and innovation, serving a news industry that is struggling but one that remains essential to our democracy.

*Christopher Callahan is the founding dean of the Cronkite School, vice provost of the downtown Phoenix campus and CEO of Arizona PBS.*

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