

Betsy Cantwell, New SVP for Research and Innovation, Hits the Ground Running

Research, Innovation and Impact
November 2019

Betsy Cantwell isn't one for sitting still, physically or mentally. With a treadmill desk and a whiteboard wall, she is moving, visualizing and expanding research at the University of Arizona as the new senior vice president for research and innovation.

The former rock climber, long-distance runner and mountaineer has one overarching goal: to make a different kind of difference in the world through what she calls a "panorama of knowledge."

"We want to create an entrepreneurial mindset for faculty, students and staff so that everyone understands the UA is a place where the research we do becomes something," Cantwell says. "By combining our research endeavors with our innovation endeavors ? our [tech parks](#) ^[1] , [tech transfer mechanisms](#) ^[2], corporate engagement and [new incubators](#) ^[3] ? we will be more intentional and focused on impacts for the community, the state and the world beyond."

To reflect that restructuring, a larger portfolio and new goals, she changed the name of the office from Research, Discovery and Innovation to Research, Innovation and Impact. Creating a fundamentally different organization, she said, also means RII will offer more career opportunities for staff across three functional areas: research, operations and economic impact.

"Our staff is critically important, and we think the new structure will offer a whole host of career opportunities that will help us keep staff longer and keep staff happier," she said.

Under Cantwell's leadership, the RII staff will work to boost the University's research and discovery capacity; streamline efforts to move technologies and inventions to market; deepen connections and collaborations with external entities; promote private-public partnerships; and increase research funding to position the University as the premier research and innovation center in the Southwest.

Cantwell grew up in Boston, attended high school in Manhattan and earned her first undergraduate degree in Chicago. She went on to earn a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley in mechanical engineering and an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. She worked in several national laboratories across the country. She was at Arizona State University before she joined the University of Arizona in July.

From these geographic experiences, she is mindful of the differences in culture between the Southwest and the rest of the country, especially the outsized influence of the Washington, D.C.-Boston corridor. With such beautiful and varied landscapes and rich traditions, she believes the Southwest ? and Tucson, in particular ? is a place that gives people permission and space to think in unique ways.

"Tucson has a great personality and unique culture that makes it stand out," she said. "We're not on the beaten path, but a lot of really interesting people have beaten their own path to Tucson's door. I think that's how the UA has become so robust and strong in scholarship. We have a lot of faculty thinking about their research in unique ways. That's where our broader definition of impact comes in."

Traditional research impacts such as startups, licenses, intellectual property, grant awards and publications are important ? and easy to quantify, she said. But she also wants to look at the faculty members who are embedded in communities and who can articulate meaning and impact in nontraditional ways. And that is in keeping with the UA mission as a service organization.

"Land-grant universities like the UA don't only exist to educate or create knowledge, although those are clearly core components of the mission," she said. "They exist to serve, and our imperative is to serve the citizenry of the state of Arizona."

Cantwell cites the Technology and Research Initiative Fund, known as TRIF, as an example of how the University serves the state. The initiative, funded by a portion of the state's sales tax, provides funding for Arizona's public universities to promote development and technology transfer related to the global economy, expand access to education at the postsecondary level, and improve workforce development.

With her past in what some would call extreme sports, it's no surprise Cantwell sprinkles her conversation with words like "thrilling" and "adventure." But it's working with a team and accomplishing a long-term, complicated goal that excites her most.

"There's nothing like it," she said. "And we have so many opportunities, so many things to accomplish. Working with a president like Dr. Robbins and with the leadership and staff RII has in place, I couldn't be more thrilled about the adventures that lie before us."

Source URL: <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/betsy-cantwell-new-svp-research-and-innovation-hits-ground-running>

Links

[1] <https://techparks.arizona.edu/>

[2] <https://techlaunch.arizona.edu/>

[3] <https://forge.arizona.edu/home>