The inaugural TEDxUArizona will take on 'The Messy Middle'

University Communications  
January 2023

Faculty, staff and student speakers will take on the gun debate, entrepreneurship, the grieving process and more during the inaugural TEDxUArizona event, set for Jan. 31 at Centennial Hall.

Students and employees can now register to be among the 100 people invited to attend the event in person. Attendance is limited to 50 students, 35 faculty and staff members, and 15 University guests. Two lotteries – one for faculty and staff members[1] and one for students[2] – are open through Jan. 18.

The talks will be recorded and posted on the TEDx Talks[3] YouTube channel after the event.

"TED's brand promise is 'ideas worth spreading,' and we've got lots of them," said Misha Harrison, executive director of experience in Marketing and Brand Management. "The TED brand has skyrocketed during the pandemic. Videos of these talks have become a destination for people as they spend more time working remotely."

'The Messy Middle'

The theme for the Jan. 31 TEDxUArizona is "The Messy Middle," a concept inspired by the challenges we face as a country, and the unkindness that can result when people choose a side and close themselves off to other options, Harrison said.

"Embracing diverse ideas and ambiguity is at the heart of curiosity – the basis for our value of exploration," Harrison said. "It's harder to live with contrasting ideas than it is to peddle the easy extreme. In the middle of any big issue is where all the creativity happens. Everything that's exciting happens when you're in the thick of it."

Speakers for the inaugural event were chosen through an internal nomination process involving senior leadership at the University. The speakers are:

- **Jennifer Carlson**, Associate Professor, School of Sociology: "Beyond Partisanship: Toward a Better Gun Debate"
- **Kai Lepley**, Doctoral Student, School of Geography, Development and Environment: "How to Survive a Hotter, Dryer Future: Think Like a Desert"
- **Mary-Frances O'Connor**, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology: "What Happens in Our Brain When We Grieve"
- **Mónica Ramírez-Andreotta**, Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Science: 'Community-based Science for Justice and Action"
- **Patrick Robles**, President, Associated Students of the University of Arizona: "Gen Z's Chaotic Coming of Age"
- **Hona Vaioleti**, Undergraduate Student, College of Engineering: "Life Between Cultures"

"We've all been through a lot over the past few years, and with so much chaos and uncertainty, it's been easy to fall into a habit of thinking in all-or-nothing, black-and-white terms," said Carlson, an expert on gun politics, culture and trauma, who was recently awarded a 2022 MacArthur Fellowship[4]. "This event provides an important opportunity for us to reflect on how that kind of thinking doesn't serve us, because it misses out on the world's richness and disempowers our individual capacity to collaborate together for a better society."

The event will also include a performance by **Meow or Never A Capella**[5], a student a cappella ensemble.

Looking to grow

The Jan. 31 event begins a three-year pilot program for TEDxUArizona. Harrison said the success of the Wonder House[6] at last year's South by Southwest event in Austin, Texas, illustrated the viability and importance of providing University researchers and leaders with a prominent platform to share their ideas and expertise. TEDxUArizona, she said, will connect University speakers to a massive audience: the 37.2 million subscribers of the TEDx Talks[3] YouTube channel.

"If you believe your insights should be part of the national and international conversation, having a TED video to point to and share with funders, the media and potential collaborators brings a level of legitimacy," Harrison said.

As part of the pilot program, TEDxUArizona events will take place each spring and fall semester for three years. Beginning with the second year, in the fall, a larger, open application process will allow more people in the campus community to apply to be speakers. Later in the pilot program, the University plans to send a representative to a national TED conference, which will allow TEDxUArizona to have larger audiences in the future.

Harrison hopes faculty and staff from throughout the University will consider applying to be speakers in future events. In addition to the visibility, Harrison said, the public speaking training that participants receive ahead of their presentations is
also a significant benefit. The required format calls for 18-minute presentations with no notes, designed to be understood by the general population. Speakers are working with Diana Leonard, senior lecturer and director of public speaking in the Department of Communication, who also provided training to those who presented at South by Southwest.

The inaugural TEDxUArizona event is funded by the Executive Office of the President, the Office of the Provost, the Research, Innovation and Impact office, and University Marketing and Communications.

Those who are selected to attend will be notified by Jan. 19 and will have until Jan. 20 to register and lock in their seats. Those not selected will be moved to a waitlist, with the order randomly chosen. If someone who is selected is unable to attend or cancels their registration, the next person on the waitlist will be notified.

TED, a global nonprofit, began in 1984 as a conference featuring speakers discussing technology, entertainment and design. Today, TED conferences cover a broader range of topics in more than 100 languages. The TEDx program allows local organizations to bring people together to share a TED-like experience.

While there have been TEDx events at the University in the past – most recently TEDxUofA in 2019, which was organized by a student group in the Eller College of Management – TEDxUArizona will be the first event presented by the University as a whole. You can see playlists from previous TEDxUofA events below.

- TEDxUofA 2019 Video Playlist
- TEDxUofA 2018 Video Playlist

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