Interactive Strategic Planning Forum Draws 500 Participants From UA, Community

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The concepts of community and innovation emerged repeatedly as 500 people gathered Monday in the Student Union Memorial Center to share their thoughts about the University's future with President Robert C. Robbins and the executive committee leading the strategic planning process.

The afternoon was highly interactive, with participants using their smartphones to give real-time feedback and then working at their tables to collectively create a vision for the UA.

"For all of you who thought that strategic planning was not very fun, welcome to the kickoff," Robbins said at the start of the event as he stood among members of the UA Pep Band, which had just played "Bear Down, Arizona" and "All Hail, Arizona."

Robbins thanked the members of the audience and noted the initiative they took to make sure they claimed one of the 500 spots available at the event. Organizers said that those who registered for the event included about 100 undergraduate and graduate students and 80 community members, many of them alumni.

Their voices joined the 4,000 to 5,000 faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members who already have shared their thoughts about the UA as part of the strategic planning process.

"This is a really important process for the future of the University," Robbins said.

Robbins began calling for a new strategic plan since shortly after he became president in June. The event on Monday was part of his commitment to an inclusive process that draws on feedback from people inside and outside the University to create a roadmap for the next 10-20 years. Robbins also has emphasized the potential for the UA to be a leader in what is called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is characterized by a convergence of the digital, biological and physical sciences.

In fitting alignment with that idea, participants at the event used a smartphone app to provide responses to a series of questions, including: What word best describes the strengths of the University of Arizona? What word should define the University of Arizona 10 years from now? In a word, what makes you most proud to be a Wildcat?

With each question, the audience responses were displayed in a word cloud on a large screen above the stage. Among the most prominent words were "community" and "innovation."

Participants then were asked to work with the others at their tables to brainstorm responses to this question: What impact will the University of Arizona have on students, society and the
Each table was asked to agree on a single idea. The ideas were then posted on bulletin boards, and participants voted by placing orange stickers next to the ideas they liked most.

The event also included a Q&A with members of the strategic plan executive committee. Participants submitted questions via the app, and Robbins used an iPad to select from among the 384 submissions.

Below are some of the questions and responses.

Where do arts and humanities fit in your vision in importance for the University?

"We want students who not only can be able to solve math problems, but we want students who can actually solve social problems," said strategic plan co-chair Elliott Cheu, associate dean and professor in the College of Science. He explained that the arts and humanities will play an increasingly significant role in developing students with the skills to take on those issues.

"What corporations really want are individuals who will graduate with leadership skills, communication skills, creative and complex problem-solving abilities," Robbins said. "And that's all done from the arts and humanities."

What are the plans to unite faculty and students at UA Health Sciences with main campus?

"There's a lot of collaboration that goes on already," said Leigh Neumayer, interim senior vice president for health sciences. Instead of looking just at illness, UAHS is focusing on healthy aging, healthy environment and healthy airways, she said, and doing that work with colleagues on main campus, at the College of Medicine ? Phoenix and at UA South.

How do we distinguish ourselves from other institutions?

The UA should be "embracing this place," said Nancy Pollock-Ellwand, dean of the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture. "We have the advantage of geography. We have the advantage of culture here. And I think that we can expand on that."

Jeff Goldberg, acting provost and dean of the College of Engineering, said that he and other deans are looking at how the UA can develop "a culture of yes."

"Basically, if you have an idea and you come to us, we should be able to figure out how we make an idea reality," he said. "And there shouldn't be a lot of bureaucracy and there shouldn't be a lot of negativity."

Andrew Comrie, outgoing provost, said the UA needs to "have a signature student experience here that drives people to our door."

Where is the largest room for research growth at the UA?

"This is a complex and very tough question," Comrie said. "We want scholars ... who introduce the most exciting and most penetrating ideas to the world."

Those could revolve around how the world works, or they could be about the issues and
challenges facing society, he said. "We can also create great prominence as an authority, as a go-to place, for answering all those kinds of questions."

What do we need to do to improve student success?

One idea, Cheu said, is to make the general education experience "transformative," with a sense of community built into it.

Turning to student retention, Neumayer drew a parallel with a concept in medical education called "failure to rescue," which is the idea that harm can be caused not just by what someone did but by what they didn't do.

"If we could have ways to identify who is about to fail, and then we can rescue them, then we might be able to help more of our students reach their goals," she said.

That work already has begun at the UA, with researchers using data to understand why some students leave after their first year, said strategic plan co-chair Lisa Ordóñez, vice dean and professor in the Eller College of Management.

Money and academics certainly are factors, she said. But it also "has a lot to do with feeling connected."

Feedback is still being collected. To find out how you can share your ideas, visit https://strategicplan.arizona.edu/get-involved [4].

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