Meet the Dean: James Shockey

University Relations - Communications
February 2016

They're experts in their fields and essential campus leaders, but how well do you know deans across the University?

This regular Lo Que Pasa series introduces deans across campus and provides insight into their motivations, challenges and reasons for choosing to work at the UA.

This week, meet a dean who once auditioned to be a music major, and who says his college is like a family.

Name: James W. Shockey
College: UA South
Number of years serving as dean of UA South: Dean for six years; UA faculty member for more than 30
Fun Fact: When I was working as a short-order cook and studying chemistry at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania, I made a banjo by hand from plans printed in (the book) "Foxfire 3." I cut and carved most of it out of a slice from a very large maple tree. I learned to play well enough to accompany recorded performances, but I wasn't remotely good enough to be a professional folkie. I did play once at the weekly square dance held at the University of Pennsylvania, but my preference was to play for myself in the middle of the woods at Tyler State Park. The banjo was stolen shortly after I received tenure at the UA, and likely is now hanging on someone's wall with a clock inserted where the banjo head once was, according to folk performer Michael Cooney of Friendship, Maine.

What do you enjoy most about serving as dean of UA South?

I greatly enjoy working across the many different rural communities that make up the southern Arizona border region. Perhaps because I received my Ph.D. in sociology and demography, I enjoy observing the different micro-cultures that exist between and within communities. I am amazed to see what can be accomplished in rural parts of Arizona, which are often the last to see support flowing down from the Legislature. I am inspired by the number of residents who actively work to make life better in their own cities and towns.

When and why did you choose to join the UA?

I was fortunate to get a job in the sociology department immediately after graduate school. The department was, and is, a great nationally ranked program with great colleagues, tremendous graduate students and a collection of undergraduate students that I always found a joy to teach.

What are some of the challenges and rewards of serving as dean?
The challenges and rewards come from the same thing. UA South does not teach freshman or sophomore classes. Our students are more likely to be slightly older, married and working. We teach in multiple satellite locations from Douglas over to Yuma, and from Nogales up to Pinal County. We are a Hispanic Serving Institution, and many of our students are active-duty military. All of this creates a level of diversity that is extraordinary, and can create challenges to our ability to work with students the way that might be possible at other institutions.

Yet, this is also one of the most rewarding aspects of my job. More than any place I know, UA South is a family. The faculty and students develop a different relationship that is difficult to achieve in most departments and institutions. This shines through in our commencement in Sierra Vista – full of hugs, tears and the children of graduates snapping photos as their parent walks across the stage. More than any place I know, UA South is meaningfully embedded in the community, working hand-in-hand to foster an improved standard of living and enhance local economic development. More than any place I know, our graduates have an impact locally. For example, our amazing teacher education programs not only have an enviable graduation rate but place nearly all of the graduates in local jobs throughout Cochise, Santa Cruz or Pima counties.

What's one thing happening in your college right now that people should know about?

We are currently working with a variety of partners in Sierra Vista on a degree program in cyber operations and security, and are progressing toward designation as a Center of Academic Excellence by the NSA (National Security Agency). The community partnership involves the K-12 schools within the Sierra Vista Unified School District, a variety of representatives from business and industry, and Sierra Vista city government. The program is needed locally as well as nationally, and we anticipate that once this program is launched, it can significantly impact the economic development goals defined for the city of Sierra Vista and beyond.

What does the future hold for UA South?

I believe UA South has a significant role to play in the University of Arizona’s effort to serve students and communities in all parts of Arizona. UA South serves students who face constraints of work, place and family that otherwise might put a University of Arizona degree out of reach. Our aim is to work with communities to establish local educational and workforce needs, and to identify and minimize individual barriers to earning a bachelor’s degree. We have an established teacher education program that focuses on high-needs schools in our border region, but our flexibility allows us to respond to emerging needs, such as intelligence studies, administration of justice, organizational leadership, and a collection of programs related to computer operations and security. We are also working to revise several existing programs in order to better align with the needs of local communities.

What is your leadership philosophy?

I believe that organizations are most successful when you have the right people working in the right jobs, and then facilitate their efforts while not getting in their way. This is not a novel approach, but has been driven home through personal experience with a wide range of role models over the past 40-plus years.
What is something most people do not know about you?

I auditioned to be a music major in college, with the intent of teaching music to elementary or middle school students. To be accepted, I needed to pass auditions in voice and piano in addition to my primary instrument ? clarinet. Within a few months, I was able to learn enough piano to pass that part of the audition, but I never made it to the vocal audition because it was clear to the admissions team that my skill on the clarinet was not sufficient. In the words of the instructor at my audition: "I'm not certain how quickly you can learn." In retrospect, that was one of the most valuable experiences of my life, providing lessons about pursuing dreams as well as bouncing back from disappointment. In the end, some feel it was a blessing years later that my clarinet was stolen.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

The quick answer is that I'll be able to answer that when I retire in 10 years or so. I'd like to get back to the things I was once able to do: watercolor painting, music (appreciation as well as performance), travel, running, hiking, birdwatching, golf, reading for pleasure and actually sleeping a full eight hours each night.

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