New UA Faculty Chair Seeks to Create 'Marketplace of Ideas'

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Jessica Summers has dedicated her professional life to seeking answers to this question: How can we best create environments where people feel engaged, involved and motivated?

As an associate professor of teaching, learning and sociocultural studies, Summers' research focuses primarily on what motivates students to continue learning. She hopes to apply what she has observed as an educational psychologist to her newest role: chair of the faculty.

"One of the primary things I study is classroom community ? how one forms, how to define it, how to measure its effectiveness," Summers said. "What I've come to find is that a positive classroom community is not that much different from any group that spends time together to share ideas. People want to feel comfortable and know that it's a safe space to express their thoughts. That's what I'm aiming to achieve in this position ? a marketplace of ideas where everyone's input is valuable."

Summers was elected chair of the faculty in March and will officially assume the role June 1. She succeeds Lynn Nadel, Regents' Professor of Psychology, who has served as faculty chair since 2014. Summers joined the UA in 2007 after serving on the faculty at the University of Missouri for five years. She earned her doctorate in educational psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 2002 with a focus on learning, cognition and instruction.

Her interest in shared governance can in part be traced to the changes taking place on campus, starting at the top with UA President Robert C. Robbins, who came to the UA about a year ago.

"It's a pretty exciting time to be at the University of Arizona," Summers said. "We are seeing a lot of positive things starting to happen on our campus."

Summers sees her role as a "campus thermometer" of sorts, constantly taking the temperature of faculty and assessing which issues matter most. She seeks to become a hub or liaison for all faculty members, connecting those with shared interests, passions and concerns. Summers is particularly interested in Title IX issues, campus diversity, students' rights and opportunities involving the UA's status as a Hispanic Serving Institution.

"The other day, I met with some folks in the Department of Astronomy who are passionate about diversity on campus, so it's my role to help connect them to others on campus who share this passion," Summers said.

Summers says that, similar to her experiences in education, communication barriers and logistical issues can impact the flow of information among faculty. Summers sees it as her responsibility to remove as many of those barriers and generate as many open
communication channels as possible.

Summers also is a member of the strategic plan executive committee, which has given her a front-row seat to learn about Robbins' key interests and his vision for the UA.

"It's been a fascinating process, in that it seems to be a constantly shifting conversation," Summers said. "The more we discuss it, the more excited we get and the more ideas we contribute. The root of it is President Robbins' vision of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and how we can match it with our initiatives."

Summers added that the strategic planning process has given her valuable insight on how to create an environment where people feel engaged, involved and excited.

Sound familiar?

"So much of my research seems to dovetail with what I'm finding in the strategic planning process and with Faculty Senate," Summers said. "I can't wait to officially get started."

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