President Robbins: Teaching and research will lead the University to continued successes

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Fostering student success, developing groundbreaking research and making long-lasting connections throughout the community are three of the tenets that form the foundation for the University’s success, President Robert C. Robbins told the Arizona Board of Regents.

In his annual State of the University address, given to ABOR on Nov. 16, Robbins said he wanted to focus on the work the University does to prepare students with the skills and mindset to lead in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, develop lifesaving medicines and groundbreaking research, and generally "make the world a better place."

Preparing the next generation of leaders and scientific minds is the result of years of investment into students, faculty and staff, Robbins said, pointing to the increase in undergraduate and total student enrollment since 2019. Total student enrollment was more than 53,000 in 2023, up from 45,000 in 2019 – including an increase of more than 1,000 grad students over the same period of time. The University's one-year retention rate reached nearly 88% in the fall of 2022 – an increase of more than 7 percentage points since the fall of 2014.

“When I got here, one of the first things I said is that we've got to increase our retention rate,” Robbins said. “If we can't retain students after their first year, which is when they're most vulnerable, we can't graduate them.”

The University has invested in services like Think Tank and other resources that help students "maneuver through their journey," he said.

"I'm happy to report that, over time, these investments paid off," Robbins told the regents.

Robbins also highlighted this semester's first-year class – the most diverse in school history. About half of fall 2023 incoming students identified as nonwhite, and 30% are first-generation college students. The University also saw increased enrollment of Native American, Hispanic/Latinx and Black students. Roughly 4% of the first-year students identify as Native American – a 22% increase over last year – while 28% identified as Hispanic/Latinx and nearly 8% identified as Black.

"We sought to recruit the most capable students – the most diverse classes," Robbins said.

First-year students are also impressive scholars, Robbins told the regents. Nearly 400 are national scholars, including 172 National Hispanic Scholars and 85 National Merit Scholars and more than 1,300 had a 4.0 high school GPA.

Of the Arizona high school seniors awarded 2023 Flinn Scholarships – which cover tuition, fees, housing and meals at one of Arizona's public universities, plus study abroad – roughly half chose to attend the University of Arizona.

Enabling student success begins at enrollment, Robbins said, and continues through programming and counseling, student groups and extracurricular activities, and a steady investment in infrastructure and technology. Robbins highlighted completed renovations at the Old Chem building, the Bear Down Building and the 9-acre Student Success District as chief examples of the University's investment into its student body.

"We need to focus on our core mission, which is teaching and research," Robbins said. “I think we will see continued growth with continued investment.”

Investment leads to research and development, Robbins said, adding that the University prides itself on the hard work undertaken by its world-leading faculty and students. During his address to ABOR, Robbins highlighted several of the university’s recently completed or ongoing scientific undertakings.

- The University of Arizona led the way on NASA’s OSIRIS-REx mission, which successfully collected and delivered the first U.S. sample from a near-Earth asteroid. NASA has extended the mission, which will continue as OSIRIS-APLEX, to study another asteroid.
- The Richard F. Caris Mirror Laboratory is currently manufacturing the final segment of the primary mirror required to complete the Giant Magellan Telescope, the most powerful telescope on Earth.
- The Health Sciences Center for Advanced Molecular and Immunological Therapies, or CAMI, will bring together experts from the three state universities, and a variety of disciplines, to form the state’s newest biomedical research hub.
- Several University faculty members, including Regents Professors and astronomers Marcia and George Rieke, play integral roles in the instruments aboard the James Webb Space Telescope.
- The University launched a $70 million, five-year project alongside the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Bridgestone Americas Inc. to develop a new variety of natural rubber from the guayule plant.
The New Frontiers of Sound Science and Technology Center, supported by a $30 million grant from the National Science Foundation, will focus on topological acoustics, an emerging field in which researchers exploit the properties of sound in ways that could vastly improve computing, telecommunications and sensing.

Investing into the future of space exploration, medical research and a variety of other industries has led the University to grow its yearly research expenditures to nearly $1 billion, Robbins said. The University is ranked No. 20 in the nation among public universities and No. 36 overall in research expenditures according to the National Science Foundation's most recent Higher Education Research and Development survey.

"You've got to be able to put the seed money in to allow professors who write the grants and win these grants to get preliminary data, to develop collaborations," Robbins said. "Somebody has to put the seed money up for that, and that's why the (University) strategic plan looks so favorably on investing in these grand challenges and research projects – so that we could grow our research expenditures. It's great for not only discovering new knowledge, but for training the next generation of postdocs, graduate students – even undergraduates – to be leaders in research."

Creating a better world doesn't stop on campus, said Robbins, who also highlighted the University's work to strengthen its relationship with Indigenous and Native peoples, including the state's 22 federally recognized Native American tribes. Robbins specifically mentioned the University's initiative to add Indigenous languages on some campus building signs, the establishment a microcampus to serve the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Tucson, and scholarship opportunities for Native and Indigenous students.

"I'm happy to report that our Native American first-to-second-year retention is up to 87.4%," Robbins said. "That's up 12% over 2022, and I think it's because we've committed the resources to support these students."

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