Robbins Asks University Employees to 'Lean Into' Strategic Plan

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The University's people are its greatest asset, and its biggest challenge continues to be money, UA President Robert C. Robbins told members of the Appointed Professionals Advisory Council last week.

Robbins spent more than an hour speaking to the group during the Sept. 24 meeting in Crowder Hall, giving opening remarks before taking questions.

He gave updates on searches for several leadership positions, including provost, deans for the College of Nursing and the College of Medicine - Tucson, vice president for research, and senior vice president for business development and partnerships. He also noted that the structure of the provost's office has been reorganized. Some of the changes, he said, came from a white paper that a faculty committee presented to him shortly after he became president last year.

Most of his comments were about the UA's strategic plan, which has been taking shape over the past year.

Robbins thanked those who had participated in the strategic planning process, and said there is still time to share feedback before the plan is presented to the Arizona Board of Regents in November.

"We're not just thinking about incremental, evolutionary changes. We're thinking about transformational, revolutionary changes," he said.


He called the first pillar the one that's most important to him.

"Our students are why we're here," he said. "Our mission is to educate, train, mentor, support (and) help our students realize theirs hopes and dreams."

Robbins hopes the final plan calls for a "hard look" at the general education curriculum and takes into consideration how today's students learn.
"They do learn differently, so we've got to learn how to teach differently," he said, citing as a model the active learning and collaborative learning efforts championed by Gail Burd, senior vice provost for academic affairs.

Traditionally, he said, faculty members aren't taught how to be teachers and too few seek out feedback on ways to improve.

To be a top university, the UA needs to be student-centric, Robbins said.

While the UA is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities and is ranked highly among universities across the world, it lags behind in U.S. News & World Report rankings, he said.

One factor is student outcomes, an area where he believes the UA needs to be better.

The president spent a lot of time discussing the plan's fifth pillar and the need for the University to have systems, policies and procedures that enable everyone to work more efficiently.

While it's not a corporation, the University is a $2.3 billion operation, and "in many cases, we can learn from business about how to do things more efficiently."

Improving institutional effectiveness will save money and allow the UA to make better use of its limited resources, he said.

There has been heightened interest in the strategic plan since people returned from the summer break but only 200 or so comments on the draft have been received, he said.

"I would encourage everybody to lean into the strategic plan," he said. "There are plenty of opportunities to get your thoughts known."

The input given so far has helped shape the plan, which has been revised in response to feedback, he said.

"We're certainly listening," Robbins said. "We have pivoted. We have edited."

Robbins also asked for participation in the organizational health index survey, which UA employees have been asked to complete as part of the strategic planning process.

Although it can take 30-45 minutes to complete, Robbins emphasized how important it is that as many employees as possible complete the questionnaire in the spirit of "making the UA better."

"I want everybody to be excited about coming to work every day," he said.

Robbins thanked employees for everything they do for the UA and invited them to speak with him about any topic in the future.

"I continue to be appreciative and humbled that I get to do this job every day because I have the most interesting and most fun job that I could ever imagine having," he said.
APAC’s next meeting is scheduled for Oct. 30. See the APAC website [5] for more information.