Robbins speaks about student success, UCAP at APAC town hall

University Communications
February 2020

The University's greatest strength is its employees, and everyone has an impact on student success regardless of job title, President Robert C. Robbins said at a town hall held by the Appointed Professionals Advisory Council [1].

Robbins spoke to the group for nearly an hour on Feb. 20 in Holsclaw Hall. After the president's opening remarks, Jennifer Lawrence, chair of APAC, read questions submitted by audience members, and Robbins later took questions directly from attendees.

Robbins didn't hesitate when asked what he sees as the University's greatest strength.

"The people, flat out," he said. "No matter what we do, it's important."

Everything an employee does, regardless of whether they teach or interact with students, has an effect, he said.

"No job here doesn't affect students, which is the most important thing because without students, none of us have jobs."

Strategic Plan

Robbins said Pillar 1 [2] of the strategic plan ? which is focused on student success ? is going particularly well. He pointed to the University's Pell Pledge Grant [3], announced in September, which will cover the full cost of four years of tuition for all Arizona-resident, Pell-eligible freshmen attending the main campus beginning in the fall.

The president said he hoped to expand free tuition beyond just Pell-eligible students and to increase student scholarship endowments to $1 billion.

"At the end of the day, that's really what it's about ? it's about being able to provide our students with the tools they need to be successful," he said. "I think no matter what you do at the University, you can find yourself somewhere in the plan if you're focused on student success."

Efforts to make the University's processes more efficient, as laid out in Pillar 5: Institutional Excellence [4], are also progressing well, Robbins said, pointing to Trellis [5], the constituent relationship management strategy that was launched a year ago.

(The strategic plan was the focus of Robbins' previous APAC town hall. Read about it in this UA@Work story [6].)
Finances

The University's biggest challenges are almost always related to money, Robbins said.

The University's endowment, he said, recently reached $1 billion, and his hope is to see that amount double while he's president. University endowments comprise donations whose principal amounts are never spent so they can support the University indefinitely.

One attendee asked about plans to provide 2% salary merit increases over the next three years at the same time that budget cuts are being forecasted. The attendee also proposed that pay increases be directed to those making salaries below $50,000.

Robbins said discussions about budget cuts and merit increases are continuing. "It's still flexible. It's a fluid situation," he said, adding, "I love your idea that maybe if you're above a certain income level, you don't get any merit (increase)."

Money is always going to be important, he said, but attention also needs to be paid to culture.

"We can make a bigger difference in changing the culture. Because the money is finite," he said.

He pointed to the senior leadership team as an example of a positive change in the University's culture.

"By bringing a diverse group of people into the senior leadership team and hiring these people from all over the country and all over the world to come here and be leaders, I think it brings a different perspective and those voices need to be heard," he said.

Additions to the senior leadership team in the last year include Liesl Folks, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost, and Elizabeth Cantwell, senior vice president for research and innovation, whose appointments were announced in May.

They and other members of the senior leadership team, Robbins noted, have participated in the USC Equity Institutes, a professional learning series administered by the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center. The program, tailored for higher education leaders, teaches participants how to improve and advance racial equity on their campuses.

University Career Architecture Project

Another audience member asked Robbins if he was aware that the implementation of the University Career Architecture Project had adversely affected staff morale.

UCAP aimed to organize jobs into functions and families and to standardize job titles. Other goals included supporting employee career progression, providing market-informed data for pay decisions and creating a more cohesive culture for all employees by replacing the current classified staff and appointed professional categories of employment with a single employment category called university staff.

Part of the implementation included mapping positions to the jobs in the new architecture. After employees were mapped, they were informed of the pay range for their position, including the minimum, midpoint and maximum amounts.
The attendee asked why UCAP was allowed to move forward if there was no funding available to raise salaries to within the ranges identified by UCAP.

Robbins invited Celina Ramirez, vice president for University initiatives, to respond to the question.

Before UCAP, Ramirez said, there was no way for units to plan for raises because they didn't have the data they needed in order to determine whether people were being paid fairly.

Robbins said he understood concerns that some employees are being paid amounts closer to the minimum than the midpoint of the pay range for their positions, adding that salary decisions are made by deans, vice presidents and other leaders and not by central administration.

"We need to do a better job of paying everyone here higher salaries," Robbins said.

He and other senior leaders are considering ways to increase pay, he said. For example, when an employee leaves or retires, a unit's leader could opt to not fill the position and instead give raises to others in the unit.

Robbins thanked attendees for having the courage to question him about sensitive issues.

"I know it's intimidating," he said, adding that employees should feel comfortable expressing their concerns.

"I would say if people are intimidated or have a fear of losing their jobs (for) speaking their mind, call me," he said. "I welcome the dialogue."

Lawrence closed the meeting by inviting all employees to take a more active role at the University.

"It's more important than ever that everybody participates in our shared governance organizations."

APAC meets on the final Tuesday of each month. The next meeting is scheduled for 3-5 p.m. on March 31 in the Ventana Room of the Student Union Memorial Center. Visit the council's website[1] for more information.

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/robbins-speaks-about-student-success-ucap-apac-town-hall

Links
[1] https://apac.arizona.edu/
[2] https://strategicplan.arizona.edu/wildcat-journey
[4] https://strategicplan.arizona.edu/institutional-excellence
[5] https://trellis.arizona.edu/
[7] https://provost.arizona.edu/person/liezl-folks
[8] https://research.arizona.edu/about/leadership
[9] https://race.usc.edu/equity-institutes/