

President's Staff Sack Lunch Q&A May 2, 2019

Questions were answered by UNT President Neal Smatresk unless otherwise noted.

1. UNT has had an interim vice president for research for more than a year. Any updates on the search for a permanent VPR?

No. I believe that the research enterprise here is really doing well. It's taking off and what we need is the next visionary leader who can drive us into the middle of Tier One rankings. This is important. I think there's been opportunities for us to maybe get a couple of good people, but the market is so red hot that they've been grabbed, in some cases before they even got to campus to search, and in some cases shortly after they got to the campus. I've determined not to settle. That doesn't mean we didn't see some good people, but I'm not looking for good. I'm looking for great and if we're going to lead ourselves forward and we're going to build this collaborative spirit, then we need to get a superb candidate. And if I have to wait, I'll wait, but we're still gathering names and we're still looking at individuals now. Maybe we can sneak in in the summer before the next hiring cycle starts and identify a good candidate. So, there you go.

2. There's been talk of discontinuing the faculty/staff tuition benefit. Is that seriously being considered or is it, hopefully, just a rumor?

Purely a rumor.

3. How many construction projects are currently ongoing?

Per Dave Reynolds, associate vice president for facilities, we have 24 projects occurring right now. You can read about many of them online at <https://facilities.unt.edu/projects>. You also can view Facilities' Construction Report (<https://facilities.unt.edu/resources/construction-report>), which is a helpful resource.

4. Is buying buildings around the campus affecting departmental budgets and, if so, what steps are we taking to combat that?

That's a really good question and kind of a tricky question. We tend to buy properties out of other pots of money than the normal academic budget parts. However, all money flows, so if we have a critical acquisition to make and there's a very narrow window for us to do so, we're going to do so, because in the long run, it makes for a stronger, better university.

I just want you all to picture at some point in the future, having a beautiful gateway that celebrates the university, that's visible from Interstate 35. Something that when you drive in makes you proud, makes you feel really good about how the university has displayed itself to the public that brings people in and is kind of a front porch. That is the goal and while these properties may appear to be expensive from a budgeting perspective, there are relatively few of them and their overall impact is relatively minor.

Our bigger budgeting issues are around things like providing graduate stipends, around financial aid for our students who are increasingly being hard pressed, and around hiring up the people that we need, both in the staff side and the faculty side to make sure that we're serving a growing student population. Those are where we

spend the majority of our money and if you take a look, the academic budget and the financial aid budget have been the two fastest-growing budget sectors in this university. And we're going to keep it that way.

6. Decisions are being made by upper administration in the cabinet with no understanding or knowledge about areas that are affected by their choices, or in some cases, a complete lack of understanding about process or the choice being made. What avenues are available to staff and disciplines that are unable to provide guidance to the cabinet, VPs, senior VPs, AVPs, in a non-threatening atmosphere so that choices are productive, and it's not driven to burn out staff?

I'm glad to hear that opinion. I think most of the decisions that we make are done so in consultation with the individuals in the department. For example, on the academic side, I don't believe there's a decision that Jennifer would put forward that hasn't been talked through with the deans and thereby generally with the chairs, which doesn't mean everyone's going to love the decisions. On the staff side, your vice presidents are in communication with us and each other, and are hopefully in communication with the various leaders of the units that they govern. So, when we hear that decisions are being made with no regard or knowledge or anything, I probably take exception to that comment. I think that we do try very hard to make sure that decisions that are made don't cause harm to our mission to improve our research, the education we offer, the learning outcomes for our students and for their success. If you believe that we're causing harm in a decision that we make, there are several avenues I would like you to take. We are incredibly open to your feedback. I hope by now you know you can say pretty much anything you want to me, and I'm going to listen and I will accept that as a great way of informing us and getting us closer to grassroots information.

First, send me an email or send a Cabinet member an email. We respond, we listen. As long as you don't say, "Hey, dummy. You did this," you'll probably get a pretty thoughtful response back from us offering whatever path we use to make a decision, or offering you an understanding of the details that went into having to make a certain kind of a decision.

If that's too intimidating, and I understand that it could be for some folks, we have town hall meetings periodically. Feel free to chime in.

If you don't like that approach, then contact the [Problem Solving Concierge](#), which is headed by Deb Rohwer, the VP for Planning and my Chief of Staff.

I would strongly recommend anybody who has a strong opinion about something going awry, to call and let us chew on that and see if we have, in fact, made the highest quality decisions that we want, but we never make a decision with the intent of hurting any unit or interrupting process, and I understand sometimes that decisions are made do ruffle feathers. And there's going to be times where we continue to ruffle feathers because we think it's in the best interest of the university as a whole. I invite and am open to any criticism that you may have of us, and I also am always fixing things that we do poorly because I can't fix it unless I know it's broken. So, please share and work with us in a positive and constructive spirit to make the university better.

7. What incentives can you offer to positions with high turnover rates?

We've just gotten to the point where we have the beginnings of enough HR data to actually scan the whole university now and identify high turnover areas. We've also talked about potentially making market-based adjustments on a local level for where we see high turnover. I mean, you could imagine some areas; certain IT areas that are very competitive in the private sector we might have a high turnover in. There's some other areas akin to that, some in business areas and elsewhere. Now that we finally have HR data that we can start to use to

drill down into these, we can also begin to make some market rate adjustments around that. I won't tell you that every turnover is fixable. I will tell you that we're sensitive to the issue and I don't like losing good talent any more than anyone else does. And so, we recognize that if... for example, a few years back, we were losing advisors to the community college because they were paying more. Clearly, a market rate adjustment was required. And these are the types of changes, as an example, that we are very willing to make.

8. How do you intend to improve communication in our departmental collaborations?

If you've been to any of the town halls, you know that collaboration's an overarching theme that we're going to be emphasizing going forward. It's going to take some practice for us to learn how to get out of our silos and doing our specific tasks, and actually work more effectively and view ourselves as part of a team that has to deliver on some very complex things.

I think some of it's going to take training, where we actually learn how to think a little differently about the roles that we play and we need to view ourselves as part of a system, as opposed to individual agents of productivity.

The other pieces are beginning to come out now as part of our planning session. Do we need to hold more interdepartmental meetings? Do we need to have broader discussions about challenges and then get each of your perspectives on it?

I believe that in the upcoming year, you're going to see a concerted effort to have us work together and to have the VP areas work not only within their units, but begin assembling critical cross-unit teams. So, for example, I can imagine a team of people in Elizabeth's shops in career, people in Jennifer's shop focused on curriculum development and career development and people possibly, like the folks out in Frisco and some private employers getting together along with Adam's digital research folks, who are developing new curricula and online courses to talk about how we meet certain challenges in career counseling, whether it's for online or face-to-face students, and how we can be better at helping students to find their career path in a shorter period of time, gain internships, and move on successfully.

As far as process things go, we'll continue to try to use the Toyota process, which is one way for systematically identifying error. And again, what we have to do to really make this effective is first identify where we can do better as a university and what we need to fix. And when we know what is the most urgent process that we need to fix, we'll be putting teams together that span disciplinary units to try to find sensible ways to deal with them. Some of those challenges, by the way, also harken out to our system colleagues, where they, too, are committed to helping us improve our processes, but there are some communication barriers there that we want to bring them closer to us so that they can be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

This is tricky stuff, by the way, but if y'all commit yourself to collaboration and communication and not being afraid to talk about it when a process doesn't work well, then we'll all get better.

9. We've all heard about the Varsity Blues admissions scandal. What do you think? What are we doing to ensure that doesn't happen at UNT?

We're a university that kind of prides ourselves on bringing people in and giving them a chance, even if they aren't primarily the top 25-30 percent of their class. This is kind of a non-problem for us. We don't see athletes having to come in here because they are so poorly qualified that their parents are willing to give millions of dollars of donations to the university.

I actually sat down and as soon as this came out, I asked the folks over at athletics to take a good look at what we were doing and try to ascertain. Are there situations where we have conditional or special admissions that are actually done without ordinary oversight and Shannon also weighed in on this, our VP for enrollment. The answer is whenever there is a student who may be marginally qualified who hasn't achieved the regular standards of the university, there is a rigorous, holistic review process available for all students where we look at their motivation, determination and the other things they've done to determine if they will be successful at UNT. I don't believe it is violable by someone trying to bribe us, and certainly not by a coach who has vouched saving someone. And by the way, the students who we accept into the athletics program, particularly scholarship award winners, generally actually play that sport, unlike the Varsity Blues scandal.

So, it's really not much of a problem for us. It's a much bigger problem for very elite institutions with extremely hard admissions standards.

10. Will we be able to develop a better system of distributing new high-quality photo and video content to all departments and if so, when should we expect to see new updated footage and photos?

URCM produces exceptional material. It lives online, but based on past comments, we are looking for ways to distribute some of it down to the department level by providing pre-loaded flash drives (for select videos). That way, if you're going to talk at your kid's high school or anywhere with a projector and a computer, you can plug in the flash drive and share the great materials that we've developed. There's a ton of brilliant video and photographic material in our library. Downloadable options are available from identityguide.unt.edu once you sign in with your EUID.

If you have specific requests, send them forward to URCM or a Cabinet member. If it's for an academic department, send them to Jennifer, and we'll make sure you get what you need.

Jim Berschiedt, our new VP for URCM, begins May 14 and I'm sure there will be continuing discussions on how we can best make sure you're fully loaded with the best marketing materials that we can find for you.

11. Why was spring break cut to nothing?

So, there isn't a spring break for anybody on the staff level. All we get is the option for a half day on Friday and unlike past years, I didn't wait until that Friday to announce it, which I had been told in the past was the rule. Turns out, it's not the rule. And so, I'll just say informally at this point, one can always count on a half day on the Friday prior to Easter as part of our spring break reward period for all the hard work and service that you've given. But that is what we have and that is what the state allows.

12. Can the first floor hallway in Hurley near the women's restroom be painted? It looks terrible.

Yes.

13. There is a pothole or two on the entrance to the faculty and staff parking lot behind the Highland Street parking garage, near Welch Street, on the side entrance from Maple. Who do I contact about that?

Dave Reynolds in facilities. You can call 940-565-2700, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to report things that need to be addressed.

Additional information provided by Bob Brown, senior vice president of facilities and administration:

Facilities also now has an online form that is easy to use and allows for full tracking of your work order from receipt through work progress to completion. You can find it on their website at facilities.unt.edu – there is a big button on the home page that takes you to the work order form.

14. Can the parking spaces in Lot 1 for people from offices that moved to the new Services Building be made available to staff from any office on campus who have meetings in Hurley?

Information provided by Bob Brown, senior vice president of facilities and administration: When someone says they're coming over to Hurley Hall, Nicole in the parking booth can typically find them a parking spot. Please make that connection in advance, if possible. When you call, Nicole or her staff reserve a spot in the lot right next to the parking booth.

15. What else can be done to ensure employees who report discriminatory practices are protected from retaliation, especially if supervisors are part of the problem?

If you ever feel victim of discrimination, harassment or retaliation, file a report with the Office of Equal Opportunity. That office will investigate and partner with HR and management to address any issues.

<https://edo.unt.edu/equal-opportunity>

If you are more comfortable reporting anonymously, you can report it to the Trust Line at 877-606-9187. Your report is confidential to the extent allowable by law and will be overseen by Clay Simmons, our Chief Compliance Officer. Please be aware that reporting anonymously may limit the ability of the university to fully investigate your allegation. <https://www.unt.edu/notices/use-unt-trust-line-report-compliance-and-ethics-issues-official-notice-president>

Lastly, if it's more of a interpersonal issue, you can call it into Debbie Rohwer. She is the head of the mediation team and will arrange mediation for you. <https://mediation.unt.edu/>

16. Even after the salary study, UNT staff are some of the lowest paid amongst our peers in the state of Texas. Is there any plans to be competitive with other universities in our area?

We do salary studies, and I won't tell you that they're always perfect, but we use broad data; both from regional institutions as well as from national averages, and we attempt, in the many salary studies that we've done, to make sure that we're remunerating people at a level that is competitive. There are local market irregularities that pop up and you do see those, if I reference the first question, around areas where we're showing a fair amount of turnover. And those are things that we need to get better at addressing, but if you say are there plans to be competitive with other universities in our area, I think if anyone's got a specific complaint, let us look into it.

HR at the system level is conducting another system-made, system-run salary study next year. We do this every three years with faculty compensation and we do it on an ad hoc basis as well as on a regular basis with system for staff compensation. But we just did the staff equity exercise two years ago and again, it resulted in a very large number of people getting changed salaries.

I don't believe that we're far off local competition by any measure and if we are, then that's a great thing to report and we'll go ahead and look into it. If you feel that a position is undercompensated, report it to Denton campus HR Director Katy McDaniel or Associate Vice President for Administrative Services Brandi Renton, so

we can take a look at it.

The questions below were submitted but not answered during Staff Sack Lunch due to time limits.

17. Are faculty/staff meal plans eligible for payroll withdrawal yet?

Not yet – in order to institute a payroll deduction option for employee meal plans, it requires approval from Board of Regents, then setup in the ELS payroll system, if approved.

18. Why is there only one lactation room at UNT? Are there plans to add more rooms to other buildings on campus?

Lactation rooms are available in the following locations:

- General Academic Building 542A
- Sage Hall 261
- University Union 431
- Willis Library 145C
- Gateway Center C058B
- Discovery Park B145A
- Woodhill Square 4120
- Kristin Farmer Autism Center 122
- Support & Services Building 112

A map of these locations is available online: https://edo.unt.edu/sites/default/files/unt_lactation_areas.pdf

If you are not located in area where a room exists, please visit with your supervisor regarding options to ensure privacy.

19. Something must be done about parking in Lot 26 / F5 Lot. Way too many passes were sold – especially “TF”s. No one I know that parks there has been able to leave for lunch since last Aug. If you leave, you can’t come back to work! Meanwhile, Lot 4 is always 85 – 90% empty!

We have shared this feedback with Transportation and Parking Services.

20. Any plans for more parking options? Struggle most days to find a spot I pay for...

When the Fouts Field project is complete, we will add 1,100 parking spaces to campus.

21. Does President Smatresk have a dog?

Yes, his name is Riley.

22. Is Bob Brown retiring?

Fortunately, not at this time.

23. My professional association (Gerontological Society of America) has created an initiative plan for universities to be able to become more “Age Friendly” in their environment, their students, faculty and staff, and in their marketing. As a professor teaching a 4/4 I can’t even think about working on this initiative for UNT, but would the university be interested in this initiative and provide support?

We are always interested in exploring ways we can participate in projects like this. Thank you for making us aware of this.