



UCCS faculty responds to the unexpected appointment of chancellor Sobanet

BY: ELLA BARRY AND NICK SMITH / ON: JANUARY 18, 2024 / IN: NEWS

The appointment of UCCS' newest chancellor, Jennifer Sobanet, came as a surprise to the campus and was met with frustration from staff and faculty members.

CU President Todd Saliman held an open forum on Dec. 12 to answer questions and ease tensions among faculty and staff.

Karin Larkin, President of the UCCS chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), felt like the forum left faculty and staff feeling worse about the situation.

"I don't think that the tone that President Saliman took in talking to faculty and staff or the answers that he gave eased much of the reservations that we had going in. It might have actually aggravated them slightly as well," Larkin said.

"The real issue for most of us is that we feel like there is no transparency in the decision-making process, and we feel like we were excluded from the decision-making process," Larkin said.

Larkin also raised concerns regarding the appointment process, explaining that faculty were mostly frustrated by not having the opportunity to evaluate Sobanet at the same level that they evaluated the finalists.

"I think that if she had gone through that same process, there would not be this level of frustration and shock and sort of outrage related to the appointment," Larkin said.

During Saliman's forum, faculty members raised concerns regarding morale on campus. Philosophy professor Robert Welshon had concerns about how the Chancellor Search Committee's advice was used.

"It is really disturbing and eye-opening to watch a president take all of the information and all of the advice provided by the search committee — and all of the recommendations and advice provided by the faculty — and reject both the candidates," he said.

Welshon also commented on overall university morale.

"You've acted like a king, not a president of a university," he said. "You're concerned about morale here, and it's low, I can report that. There's also widespread cynicism. Low morale is caused by multiple factors, among them is administrative overreach," he said.

Charles Benight, executive director of the Lyda Hill Institute for Human Resilience, provided a more positive outlook on the situation. He recognized his colleagues' frustrations but encouraged them to look at the bigger picture so the campus could move forward.

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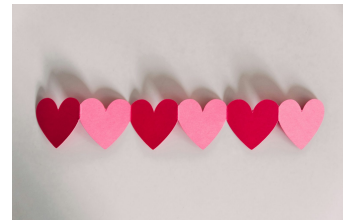
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“We also have, now, a chancellor who has a background that’s perfect, in my mind, for what we’re facing, both community-wise, legislature-wise, as well as working with a strong provost to manage this campus to get us forward. We have some serious problems. The serious problem I see is as long as we have bad morale on this campus, we’re going to lose students. Students feel it and they’ll respond to it,” Benight said.

Larkin believes there are multiple factors contributing to low morale, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that faculty are asked to do more with fewer resources.

“Staff are seeing a lot more things piled onto their plates. Faculty are seeing a lot more things piled onto their plates because ... we’re always — for as long as I’ve been here it seems like — we’re in a budget crisis.”

“Even when enrollment was growing, going up, we were still in a budget crisis. So, we’re sort of exhausted with having to work sort of in this atmosphere of scarcity all the time where it’s sort of the expectation that you do more with less,” Larkin said. According to Larkin, the biggest contributor to low morale is faculty feeling like their input is not being heard by administrators.

“We feel like our administrators aren’t listening to some of the concerns that we’ve been voicing ... and [we’re] not included in some of these big decisions that impact us,” Larkin said. “I don’t know that there is a really good mechanism in place for communicating between faculty and administrators.”

Larkin expressed her desire for more direct communication between faculty and administrators. She thinks that the current method, which resembles trickle-down communication, isn’t working well.

Some faculty claimed that nepotism was involved in appointing Sobanet because Saliman and Sobanet are good friends.

“We are good friends ... we have known each other for a long time. We were CFOs together at the CU system, so we have worked closely together,” Saliman said. “I absolutely did not hire her because she was my friend, I hired her because she’s going to do a good job for UCCS, and I feel like she’s already been doing excellent work for the campus.”

According to Larkin, faculty members were upset with the tone that Saliman took in his response to another rumor claiming that he hired Sobanet because she was good friends with his wife.

“For folks who are coming up with these stories I just say, ‘knock it off.’ That is unbecoming, it’s inappropriate and I don’t appreciate it. And, if you’re making up those stories about me, you’re probably making up those stories about each other too, and I tell you: stop it,” Saliman said.

While Saliman did hear many concerns brought up by faculty and staff, Larkin says there is no way to know whether those concerns were truly heard until they see results that address them.

Though Sobanet’s appointment was met with frustration among faculty members, according to student body president Axel Brown, many students were in support of it.

While he acknowledged that there was no formal feedback process for Sobanet as a candidate, Brown and student body vice president Aidan Clark heard unsolicited feedback from students that was overwhelmingly positive.

The search for a new chancellor began back in June, and an 18-person search committee was officially formed in September. The committee was made up of faculty, staff, administrators, community members and two students: Brown and track athlete Audrey Bloomquist.

According to Bloomquist, the committee reviewed [93 applicants](#) before narrowing it down to 12 individuals who were interviewed by the committee, including Sobanet. The search committee then passed along five finalists to Saliman, but Sobanet was not a finalist.

“Our job was essentially done when we handed [Saliman], or presented him with, the five candidates. That was the extent of our job and then from there it was his decision,” Bloomquist said.

As to why Sobanet was not selected as a finalist, Bloomquist attributes that to the number of candidates up for consideration.

“I think that her value was maybe a little bit overlooked because we were presented with 85 candidates essentially that could have done the job amazingly,” she said.

Brown approves of Sobanet’s appointment and likes how much she has valued student perspectives during her time at UCCS.

“Sticking with Dr. Sobanet was the best option because she goes around to students and she makes them feel valued, heard and appreciated. You can’t ask for more than that.”



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President Saliman has provided students, staff and faculty with a survey in which they can provide feedback on Chancellor Sobanet. Feedback can be submitted [here](#) until Jan. 19 at 5 p.m.

This is the final part of a two-part series on the forum with CU President Saliman. [Click here](#) to read Part 1.

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