



CU President addresses campus concerns about Chancellor Sobanet’s appointment

BY: NICK SMITH AND ELLA BARRY / ON: JANUARY 16, 2024 / IN: NEWS

During a forum on Dec. 12, CU President Todd Saliman discussed and answered questions on the unexpected appointment of Jennifer Sobanet as the new UCCS chancellor, overruling the two finalists that were nominated after months of searching.

Many upset and frustrated voices filled the room as more than 400 faculty and staff members attended the event either in person or on Zoom. Saliman’s answers would sometimes be faced with harsh comments or laughter, but the environment was something he had been expecting.

“I felt like I needed to make a decision so that the campus could be in a position to effectively move forward into the future, and I did that knowing that I was going to take hits from all of you,” Saliman said.

The forum was organized by Faculty Assembly President Monica Yoo and President of the UCCS staff association Matthew Beckwith, and it was made to address faculty concerns and frustrations regarding Saliman’s decision to appoint Sobanet as chancellor.

Saliman began by explaining how the process worked, noting that he followed it “to the letter” because he consulted with CU’s legal team to ensure he was following policy correctly.

According to Saliman, the search committee in charge of finding chancellor candidates gave Saliman five names. Sobanet was not on that list, which surprised him, but he was confident at the time that the next chancellor was on the list.

The pool was narrowed down to the two finalists, Susan Elrod and Mahyar Amouzegar, after Saliman and the regents interviewed each candidate separately.

The two finalists were then put through [chancellor forums](#) that gave students, faculty and staff the opportunity to ask the candidates questions and hear from them.

Listening to everybody’s feedback from the chancellor forums, Saliman noted it was very mixed and neither candidate had the broad support needed to be successful.

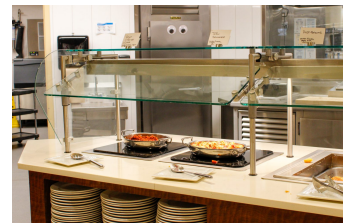
“I interviewed those candidates and had opinions about them, but ... I really wanted to know what people thought. I wanted people to attend the meetings on the campus, and I wanted them to fill out the surveys,” he said.

Christopher Valentine, assistant vice chancellor of marketing and communication, said the search firm had received 417 survey responses split almost evenly between the two candidates after the forums. The responses were anonymous and were provided only to Saliman.

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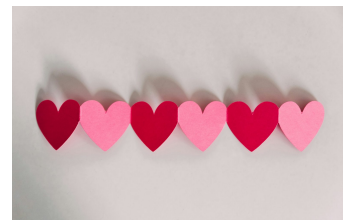
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Saliman decided to not move forward with either of the candidates because of the feedback he received and his own initial thoughts.

“They’re awesome people, very accomplished individuals, but they just weren’t the right choice for UCCS at this point in time,” he said.

According to Saliman, going through the search process and hearing the feedback from both the committee and the chancellor forums played a role in his decision.

“It didn’t have the outcome that I think I was anticipating or that people were hoping for, but that’s the process at work, and it helped inform that decision,” he said.

After deciding to not follow through with the finalists, Saliman considered restarting the search process again, but he said it was a “risky proposition.” He was concerned the pool of candidates would not be of the same quality as the pool they had just received.

Saliman spoke with the search firm in charge of finding candidates for the search committee to look at, and they said finding a pool of qualified candidates would be difficult due to the ongoing budget crisis at UCCS and the lack of state funding.

“So, I chose not to go down that path.” Saliman said, “I could have asked Jennifer to just stay on and wait until the next cycle — wait a year, essentially — but I was concerned that Jennifer was looking for a job.”

Saliman would later discover that Sobanet had been looking for another job and had accepted another position somewhere else four hours before he had contacted her to let her know she was the new chancellor.

Appointing another interim chancellor was unappealing to Saliman because he wanted to provide stable leadership and decided Sobanet was the best fit to address the challenges the campus is facing.

“I feel like she has been doing an excellent job addressing the issues I asked her to work on with the campus. You know; enrollment, budget [and] morale,” he said.

Upon hearing “morale,” the crowd laughed. “I get that. I get the irony here,” Saliman said.

Many faculty members pointed out that Saliman’s decision to appoint Sobanet as chancellor undermined the concept of shared governance. The main concern was that Sobanet did not go through the forums — thus faculty, staff and students weren’t able to interview her, and faculty members felt unheard.

“You all laughed, right? When I talked about morale, and, obviously, I knew that people ... might be frustrated that you didn’t get a chance to interview her,” Saliman said.

Saliman acknowledged that evaluating her time as interim chancellor is not the same as going through the forums. “It’s not the same because you don’t get to ask her questions about doing this job, and I completely get that,” he said.

Once he realized the two finalists weren’t a good fit, Saliman considered reengaging the forums and having Sobanet go through that process, to which people in the crowd said he should have.

“Obviously, I didn’t choose that option,” Saliman said, “I was worried about timing. I was worried that would take a while ... and it was also pretty clear that I thought she was the right choice, and, honestly, I just wanted to get on with providing the stability and continuity for the campus.”

One of the factors Saliman took into consideration when deciding to appoint Sobanet as chancellor was the amount of unsolicited positive feedback about her as Interim.

“The feedback that I received from the campus community — from students, faculty and staff — and from the broader community had a direct impact on all of the decisions I’ve made along the way,” Saliman said.

A concern was pointed out that the unsolicited feedback mentioned was one-sided instead of both for and against Sobanet’s appointment. Saliman said this was not the case.

“It wasn’t only one side ... UCCS is not a monolith, right? Lots of opinions. So, I did get feedback from both perspectives — it was overwhelmingly positive.” Saliman said, “[the feedback] was a big factor, but it wasn’t a determining factor.”

One determining factor in Sobanet’s selection was her performance in addressing challenges UCCS is facing. Saliman explained she has identified significant budget issues, been working to improve the pipeline from K-12 schools and community colleges to UCCS and meeting regularly with shared governance leaders.

The other determining factor was the need for stable leadership.



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“We have some significant issues that need stable leadership to address. I was really worried that if I delayed, we would be in a position where we didn’t have that stable leadership, and it would put the campus at significant risk,” Saliman said.

During the forum, Saliman mentioned he will open up an anonymous chancellor survey asking the campus to provide feedback on Sobanet, but he acknowledged the feedback will not be the same as the chancellor forums.

The [survey was sent out](#) via campus email on Jan. 3 and will close on Jan. 19 at 5 p.m.

While Saliman emphasized that he was not changing his mind on Sobanet as chancellor, he noted the feedback will still inform how he works with her and how she works with the campus. “It has the same impact as other feedback,” Saliman said.

Many faculty members laughed at the comment, one pointed out that he had already made the decision, making the feedback from the survey less important.

“To cavalierly dismiss that, I find it offensive from all of you. I mean, give me a break,” Saliman said, “I’m showing you the respect you deserve, and I expect you to show me the respect I deserve as well. What you tell me matters to me. I listen to what you tell me ... to imply that when you fill out that survey I’m not going to pay attention — I find that offensive.”

To give people the opportunity to provide additional feedback and hear more from Sobanet, Saliman and Sobanet are working on expanding a listening tour composed of a series of meetings where Sobanet answers questions.

“It’s not just listening, but also her talking. Her answering your questions. The same questions that you would have asked during the process,” Saliman said.

Looking at how the campus will move forward, Saliman emphasized the need for Sobanet and the campus community to engage collaboratively to address UCCS’ challenges.

“My ask of you, and all of you, and everybody on Zoom and everybody in the community is to engage and support and help be part of those solutions. You’re mad at me, and I appreciate that, don’t take that out on her. Please work collaboratively with her,” Saliman said.

This is part one of a two-part series on the forum involving CU President Saliman. [Part 2](#) covers the student and faculty response to the forum and the appointment of Sobanet.

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