From Dream to Mission: Carrying Forward the Mashburn Legacy

Dr. Mark J. Cooper

September 2026

I am deeply honored to stand in the presence of my dear friends and former colleagues, the College of Education faculty, and Dean Dailey. We often gather to celebrate stories about personal achievement, and stories about personal achievement certainly matter. Yet beneath those stories, many of us are searching for something even more enduring: purpose, meaning, and personal fulfillment. And so, before I share stories about centers, endowments, lectures, partnerships, institutes, programs, or dreams, today is first a story about a man who found purpose, meaning, and personal fulfillment by turning his family's pain into a mission of hope for struggling learners. I see that same spirit in Drs. Renee Calhoon and Patty Kohler-Evans, Gia Taylor, and Dean Dailey. I also saw that same spirit in my former colleagues who are present today, Janet Filer, DeeDee Cain, Lisa Harrington, and ShouDong Feng. They are all reminders that Dr. Mashburn's dream did not end with him.

As I begin, I invite you not only to hear Dr. J.D. Mashburn's story, but I want you to hear your important place in the story. Dr. J. D. Mashburn was named a Distinguished Alumnus in 1994 by the University of Central Arkansas. He was also a distinguished physician whose medical career focused on pathology and laboratory medicine in multiple hospitals. His deep expertise in diagnostics shaped the way he understood human struggle, learning differences, and the importance of careful identification. Over time, that clinical insight became part of the foundation for his extensive work in special education.

Dr. Mashburn's mission was also shaped by his life with Mary Lou Johnson. They fell in love, married, and later moved to the Washington, D.C., and Maryland area, where they raised their four children: Mark, Joseph, Zack, and Molly. Their endearing partnership continued until Mary Lou's passing in 2013, two years before Dr. Mashburn's passing in 2015.

The Mashburn family's profound support for special education grew out of deep personal struggles. Before their two youngest children were diagnosed with learning disabilities, the family watched them struggle in school. Those struggles were painful and confusing. The pain deepened when teachers misunderstood those learning disabilities and mistook them for laziness or lack of effort. Determined to keep other children from facing the same hardship, Dr. Mashburn and Mary Lou dedicated their resources to help educators understand and support students with learning disabilities.
In 1985, Dr. Mashburn established the Christine Greenhaw Mashburn Lecture Series in honor of Dr. Mashburn's mother. Its mission was to bring nationally recognized experts in learning disabilities directly to UCA so local teachers could better identify, understand, and support students with learning disabilities.

Between 1985 and 1991, lectures were hosted annually, featuring ongoing remarks and academic presentations by a variety of nationally recognized educators in learning disabilities. Dr. Mashburn himself gave ongoing remarks and academic presentations during the annual lectures.

In 1991, Dr. Mashburn used the cash value of a one-million-dollar life insurance policy to establish the Mashburn Institute, named the Mashburn Center for Learning years later. It was at this time that UCA began formally hosting the annual Mashburn lectures in conjunction with one-to-two-week summer institutes. When Dr. Mashburn gave the endowment to UCA, he did not simply make a generous financial gift and step away. Dr. Mashburn acted as both the financial engine and the intellectual director of the program.

Because he was a UCA alumnus, Dr. Mashburn knew the university could become a meaningful home for this work. He also knew the center would need strong academic leadership from within the university to translate his vision into programs that could serve teachers and students across Arkansas. Dr. Jim Mainord, a professor of special education at UCA, became that essential academic partner. As early as 1985, Dr. Mainord

was advising Dr. Mashburn. Dr. Mainord's deep understanding of students with learning disabilities made him both a natural partner and the strong campus leader Dr. Mashburn needed. In fact, I recently learned that Dr. Mainord helped craft the original proposals for both the lecture series and the summer institutes. Dr. Mainord helped provide the academic bridge inside UCA that allowed the dream to take institutional shape.

Dr. Mashburn also understood that the work at UCA needed to be connected to the best national research available. His search led him to Dr. Don Deshler at the University of Kansas, one of the foremost national authorities on learning disabilities and adolescent learning. Dr. Deshler brought more than recognition; he brought a proven instructional framework through the Strategic Instruction Model, known as SIM. Through Dr. Deshler's scholarship, teaching, and ongoing involvement with the Mashburn Institutes, Dr. Mashburn found a research-based approach that could help educators teach critical content effectively while empowering students, particularly adolescents with learning disabilities, to become independent, active learners. Without question, Dr. Mashburn was the dream maker. Just as clearly, Dr. Don Deshler became the dream shaper, translating Dr. Mashburn's vision into research-based methods that Arkansas educators could learn, practice, and carry back to their schools. Interestingly, Dr. Deshler was one of the original lecturers, and his continued annual teaching helped give the institutes their national credibility.

Dr. Mashburn strongly expressed two very high expectations. First, he wanted to make sure the lectures were not passive-speaking events. In partnership with Dr. Mainord's campus leadership and Dr. Deshler's national research expertise, Dr. Mashburn structured the lectures into summer institutes that resulted in SIM professional development sessions. Dr. Mainord helped anchor the work within UCA, while Dr. Deshler helped shape what teachers learned through SIM-based instruction, apprenticeships, and professional development. Over time, the institutes expanded into apprenticeships and ongoing institute cycles, certifying approximately 50 specialized SIM Professional Developers across the

state. The intent was to extend the reach of the SIM methodologies all over the state. Four of those UCA Mashburn Institute graduates are present – Dr. Renee Calhoon, Gia Taylor, Mallorey Jones, and Dr. Michelle Buchanan. While teaching special education in Little Rock, Dr. Kohler-Evans became a Professional Developer earlier in 1987.
The second expectation was equally compelling. Dr. Mashburn never intended for the Mashburn Center to sit apart from the department, the College of Education, or the university. He did not imagine it as an add-on, an extra program, or a separate effort. He believed its greatest impact would come when it was woven into the life of the department, the College of Education, and UCA itself. These two expectations remain critical to not only Mashburn's capacity to survive, but more importantly, its capacity to thrive.

Although I had been a member of the UCA faculty since 1998, I did not become directly involved with the Mashburn Center for Learning until 2003, when Dr. Jim Mainord invited me to become its director. I'll never forget Dr. Mashburn's first lecture in the Fall of 2003. I remember looking around wondering if I was in the wrong lecture hall. Dr. Mashburn had a gift for weaving an intricate scientific narrative that in the beginning I could barely understand into a powerful lesson about learning and learning disabilities. No matter what topic, he always brought the audience back to helping us better understand students with learning disabilities.

His lectures generally centered on the argument that learning struggles appear as emotional and social challenges in our schools, higher education, vocations, and if left unattended, appear in our prison systems and homeless shelters. Every time I enter the Mashburn building, I stop beneath Dr. Mashburn's portrait and read the words that still define the heart of the Mashburn mission: "…to give you the vision that the ultimate goal of true education is to plant the seed of self-worth in the heart of each student." That sentence reminds me why Dr. Mashburn's work is as meaningful and relevant today as it was yesterday. It is not simply about strategies, programs, or partnerships. It is about restoring dignity,

awakening possibility, and helping struggling learners believe they are worthy of a future filled with hope and purpose. Dr. Mashburn also urged educators to move beyond labeling a student's difficulties and toward practical, research-based instructional strategies that help learners succeed.

One of my first priorities as the director of the center was to reach out to the Arkansas Department of Education. If the Mashburn Center's work was going to have broad statewide impact, we needed to become more highly visible and develop strong working partnership within and outside the university. I took Dr. Mashburn's conviction to heart. The Mashburn Center must be embedded into the very fabric of the department, the College of Education, university, and across the state of Arkansas.

The partnership with the Arkansas Department of Education became a turning point. Over several years, UCA's Mashburn Center for Learning received hundreds of thousands of dollars to strengthen professional learning for teachers and administrators across Arkansas. From that experience, we learned a lesson. Meaningful changes happen when leaders and organizations within and outside UCA work as a team.

During my tenure as Director of the Mashburn Center for Learning, I came to know Dr. Mashburn not only as a benefactor, but as a dear friend. I began to understand the depth of the man behind the dream. He combined the mind of a scholar, the heart of a father, and the persistence of someone called to a mission larger than himself. He was humble in spirit, gentle in presence, and unshakable in purpose. He was a man who carried both tenderness and tenacity. I grew to love both the mission and the man. That made it especially difficult when Dr. Mashburn stopped giving his annual opening remarks for the lecture series in 2008.

I remember a heart-wrenching story Dr. Mashburn once shared about his son Zach, whose life included seasons of despair. Zach had traveled to California to make a living. Sometime later, he called his father and said, "Dad, I have failed again. Please come and get me. I give up." Zach may

have given up on himself at that moment, but his father never gave up on Zach and in the end, Zack never gave up on himself. That refusal became part of Zach's lifeline of success and an example of the lifeline for others with learning disabilities to succeed.

Never giving up became my lifeline, as well. Like Zach, I was diagnosed with a significant learning disability. School often felt like walking through a minefield. There were constant threats of spelling bees, reading aloud, solving math problems at the board, reciting in front of the class, and taking timed exams. All carried the possibility of embarrassment and humiliation.

Years later, while pursuing a Ph.D. at Georgia State University, I still carried that same inner struggle. Outwardly, I appeared successful. Inwardly, I often felt inadequate. The pressure of "acting smart" eventually took a toll, showing up in unpredictable panic attacks.

Because I had lived the life of a struggling learner, becoming Director of the Mashburn Center for Learning was never just a professional appointment. It was a call. My own struggle became a sacred responsibility to help others find their way.

Since my retirement in 2016, I have watched with deep gratitude and admiration as Drs. Renee Calhoon and Patty Kohler-Evans have continued to extend the reach of the Mashburn Center for Learning. Their brilliance that I relied on every day continues to strengthen the Mashburn Center.

During the past 10 years, the Mashburn Center has not stood still. Thanks to Drs. Calhoon and Kohler-Evans, the Mashburn Center has grown stronger, expanded its reach, and deepened its impact through new initiatives and partnerships. That growth is visible in its relationships with state agencies, educational cooperatives, school districts, and private and local partners. One example of growth is in the collaborative initiative between the Arkansas Department of Education and the Mashburn Center that introduced the Arkansas Adolescent Literacy Intervention, and a

second example of growth is in the Arkansas Co-Teaching with SIM Project.

The recent contracts from the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, one for $300,000 and $100,000 from additional contracts, represent more than financial support. They are a vote of confidence in the center's work. They affirm that the Mashburn Center is trusted, relevant, and increasingly essential to the future of teaching and learning in Arkansas schools.

Thanks to the College of Education's Dean Dailey, the Mashburn Centers impact is also taking shape:

- By supporting the College of Education's year-long clinical residency.
- By preparing College of Education juniors for meaningful field experiences.
- By offering a micro-credential that strengthens tutoring skills and employment readiness.
- By partnering with Mallorey Jones in the Department of Teaching and Learning to bring SIM and Xtreme Reading expertise into middle school preparation and classroom instruction.
- And by partnering with UCA's Department of Student Transition to provide developmental support in writing, literacy, and math, while helping students build essential academic and non-cognitive skills.

I am especially encouraged to see Dr. Mashburn's dream extended to university students. Dr. Mashburn was right. Learning struggles do not simply disappear after high school graduation. For many students, those struggles follow them through the Colleges of Education, Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Business, Health and Behavioral Sciences, Science and Engineering, and yes, the Schedler Honors College.

That was certainly true in Zach's life and in my life, and it is certainly true for many students whose needs cross our UCA paths every day. The Mashburn Center has the potential for greatness when it is given the opportunity to be great. If this potential is to be fulfilled, the College of Education must become its visible champion and natural steward.

In conclusion, the Mashburn Center's dream will require more than appreciation. It will require participation. Today, I extend seven heartfelt invitations:

- **First, claim the mission together.** Let us weave the Mashburn mission into the work we already do.
- **Second, steward the next chapter.** Let us leave this room willing to carry it forward with shared responsibility and co-ownership.
- **Third, build a more connected university.** Let us help create a university where educational initiatives, especially educational initiatives that support at-risk students, do not stand alone or function in silos.
- **Fourth, remember the learner beyond graduation.** Learning struggles continue as vocational, emotional, and social challenges in adulthood.
- **Fifth, honor the whole student.** Let us remember the importance of social-emotional learning, considering the toll that classroom struggles can take on learners.
- **Sixth, work as one team.** Meaningful change is possible when leaders, programs, initiatives, and organizations work together.
- **Finally, work for a cause.** When we work for a cause larger than ourselves, our daily tasks become part of a lasting purpose, and our individual efforts become a shared legacy of hope.

My friends and colleagues, there is something deeply meaningful about pursuing your own dream. But there is something extra special about helping fulfill the dream of another, especially when that dream was born out of love, pain, sacrifice, and hope. Dr. Mashburn gave UCA more than an endowment. He entrusted the university with a vision. And when people like Drs. Calhoon and Kohler-Evans, Gia Taylor, and Dean Dailey give their time, leadership, imagination, and energy to that vision, they are not simply doing their jobs. They are helping complete a dream that began in one family's struggle and now belongs to all of us.

Dean Dailey, I am grateful for the way you have welcomed and strengthened this work alongside Dr. Calhoon, Dr. Kohler-Evans, and Gia Taylor. Together, you are helping give the Mashburn dream fresh momentum and a wider home within the College of Education and across the broader university.

For me, this is truly a day that the Lord has made. After years of retirement and a diagnosis of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia, I did not expect to stand again in this place, before people I respect so deeply, with one more opportunity to give voice to a dream that has shaped my life. Dean Dailey, with your invitation, I have been brought back for this moment, and I have received it as a gift of grace. You have given me more than a place on the program. You have given me a renewed sense of purpose, meaning, and voice. You have allowed me, once more, to stand inside Dr. Mashburn's dream and to share in the sacred work of helping students across Arkansas and across the UCA campus soar like eagles dare.