

## **UCA FALL CONVOCATION ADDRESS 2024: Keeping Promises.**

**Delivered 8/21/24 by President Brent Shires.**

Congratulations again to all the outstanding staff and faculty who have been recognized this morning. It is good to celebrate excellence, and there is a lot of that to be found in our university community!

It's a good time to be at UCA. In spite of smaller high school graduating classes, our freshman count is one the strongest in over a decade. We navigated the disastrous seas of the FAFSA debacle. The UCA Commitment is setting us apart as an institution that removes barriers for students. We have a number of new world-class facilities (such as Windgate, Health Sciences) and others have been completely re-born (Veterans Resources and Student Success, Snow Fine Arts mid-section, Schichtl Hall).

This year, the faculty senate will be striving for a primary goal: Keeping Promises.

**The first promise** we have made is in our Mission Statement. "...to promote shared governance by representing faculty interests, questions, and concerns in support of UCA's commitment to academic vitality, integrity and diversity.... The senate is motivated by a commitment to support student learning, facilitate communication, protect academic freedom, and advance faculty welfare."

In keeping with this mission, your Faculty Senate worked last year on a number of initiatives – some noble, some – scuttled. (haha) This is the year of fleshing out the details, and putting initiatives into action. Making good on our words.

**The promise** of setting up a Research Empowerment Grant program, administered by the faculty senate is another initiative that needs to grow legs in order to move. Using a re-discovered one-time fund that has been collecting dust in the senate closet, our plan is to inaugurate a grant program to support research presentation, conference travel and start-up support for faculty-led affiliation groups that serve an academic function. We hope to be ready for applications later this fall.

**The concept of an Ombudsman** will continue to be studied this fall. There is a distinct perceived need for a neutral perspective point-person to be the face for faculty with concerns. This position exists at other universities in different forms, and we want to determine what might be the best way to make this happen at UCA.

**We continued our efforts** for the second year now, to connect and communicate with new faculty on campus. By meeting them at New Faculty Orientation and Adjunct Academy, we hope we've helped to make greater connections all around for those just settling in to their new teaching jobs here at UCA. The senate's Welcome Committee is always pleasantly surprised at

the number of Conway-area businesses that are excited to support our efforts and we thank them for their part!

**Another promise to keep** is the commitment we made to communicate and work more collaboratively with UCA's Staff Senate. We have had the opportunity recently to rediscover why it is so important to keep communication channels open and active. To follow up, the presidents and vice presidents of both senates will be meeting on a regular basis to share concerns and discuss ways of supporting each other for mutual understanding and benefit. We know that a rising tide lifts all boats in many ways.

**And we are keeping the promise** of caring for our faculty's compensation and equity. The Faculty Salary Review Committee was brought back to life this spring, and this group will be working to identify faculty priorities in light of salary and benefits. I am serving as well on the university's Salary Study Implementation Team, which meets with the Gallagher firm to help them assemble copious amounts of data that can be used for benchmarks against peer and aspirant institutions. This work affects all of us, faculty and staff, by wrangling with the forces of inflation, creating fair and equitable salary decisions, and making us more competitive as a university.

I want to say a few words about Shared Governance. It is imperative in higher education for all stakeholders to have a meaningful part in decision-making processes. It is an amazing concept when it works well; the invitation to address you here and now is a direct example! But shared governance is never something to take for granted; like freedom, it isn't free. It requires continual attention, energy, and tweaking in order to operate correctly and beneficially. We've seen examples at other universities very recently of how this concept has not been respected, and seen how quickly trust, morale and job effectiveness have all been drastically impacted as a result. I'm proud of the willing spirit here at UCA that administration, staff and faculty have cultivated, to work with one another in order to arrive at decisions together, in our efforts to offer the best education, and create the best educational setting, for our students. The duty falls on each one of us to do our best to keep this great ship moving in the right direction. Faculty Senate serves YOU, the faculty. Your involvement, your input and feedback are essential in order for us to keep the promise. I encourage you to be an active part of shared governance here at UCA.

I want to thank President Davis, Provost Hargis, our Board of Trustees and others in the administration who also value and prioritize shared governance. But I especially want to thank you, the faculty of this outstanding university, for doing such an incredible job. Even in my 26<sup>th</sup> year here at UCA, I can never really understand all that goes on in many of your disciplines – my work as a musician is so vastly different from those in chemistry or accounting. But I am so inspired by the teaching and research that so many of you are invested in every day. It's an honor to work for YOU as your senate president. Please feel free to reach out to me anytime with your concerns or celebrations. I promise you that this year is going to be exciting - because we are an amazing community. Have a fabulous year. Go bears!