

President

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Kesselman described Smith as a decisive leader who was willing to make tough decisions. However, he said, Smith's direct style doesn't work with everyone.

"I think students have a hard time with Dr. Smith because he is very direct, and he lays out on the table what he thinks," he said. "Some students respect that, and some have a hard time with him."

Kesselman said Smith had been criticized for not involving students in UCI decisions. An example, he said, was a task force examining ways to restructure UCI because of its budget crisis.

Smith should be commended for creating the task force, Kesselman said, but students were unhappy because they were not allowed to participate in the task force's early deliberations.

"There were concerns raised," Kesselman said. "Again, we didn't see eye to eye, but he did promise students would have access to the final deliberating process, and he has kept his word about that."

Kesselman said Smith also had friction with students when the Asian Pacific Student Association pitched a tent outside the administration building and held one-day hunger strikes to express their dissatisfaction with UCI's Asian-American studies program. The students thought the administration was not hiring faculty quickly enough to support the program, he said.

Smith was acting chancellor during the protest.

Kesselman said Smith told the students he was doing the best he could in difficult financial times, but Smith didn't promise more could be done. He said Smith's directness with the students may have been counterproductive.

"I think he could have done a better job in dealing with the frustration the students had," he said. "I think he attempted to be straightforward about the current budget crisis and the difficulty of hiring faculty."

"In some ways, because he was as straightforward as he was, he may have escalated things. But he was in a difficult position."

When Smith was selected as NU president, the student newspaper at UCI ran an editorial with the headline "Hasta la vista, baby." The editorial said Smith "exhibited an almost supernatural ability to avoid contact with any of the many students who crowded his office in search of answers" during the protest.

But Kesselman said NU would have a decisive leader in Smith.

"I think he will provide the leadership," he said. "I think he is very capable and strong in that sense."

Sandra Verdugo worked with Smith for three years when he was dean of biological sciences at UCI. Verdugo has served as assistant dean — a staff position, not an academic one — for 14 years.

Verdugo said she enjoyed working with Smith. She described him as "fair but firm."

"At first glance, he might appear a little gruff, and therefore people might not be inclined to carry forth with their arguments, but they should," she said. "Because he hears you and always tries to do the right thing."

Verdugo said Smith's "gruff demeanor" was his biggest weakness. His biggest strength, she said, is his future-oriented thinking.

"I think he is a man of vision," she said. "I think he looks out there into the future, not just at the present."

Smith has worked with 12 deans in Verdugo's 14 years. She said Smith impressed her because he was willing to make tough decisions during his time as dean.

"I'd say some of the sweeter (deans) were harder to work for than (Smith), who wasn't as sweet, because he was willing to take an issue and decide between things," she said. "He would make the tough decision about the vision ahead of him."

Smith will be a good president for NU, Verdugo said.

"I think he will sometimes be misread, but people should remember that this is a man who goes away and thinks and considers what is best for the institution," she said.



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