

Candidate's Statement: James McLean, 2nd ed.

Recently I wrote in an email (regarding a campus issue), “Leadership means guiding the body, not controlling it.” As a governance leader, it is my highest goal that every voice can be heard, while the decision of the majority, so informed, moves forward. I generally support gradualism. Even while in the small subcommittee to “blow up and completely rewrite” the UFS Bylaws, our main goal was to systematize existing practice. But within that Bylaws effort, I aimed to support the agency of those who write the resolutions, the committees and sectors and individuals. It was important to maintain the strong oversight role of the Executive Committee, but to keep senators and committees in the driver’s seat.

I like that my house is 170 years old—with wifi.

Those who know me, especially on my campus, would surely attest that I am a parliamentary wonk. Many seem to think of Robert’s Rules as limiting, but to me they are the opposite: instructions on how to reach nearly any goal, while maintaining legitimacy and protecting the rights of minority views. In four years leading the Geneseo College Senate, there were several opportunities to put this to the test. The most significant was presiding over the 50% reduction of a general education requirement which had stood for decades as Geneseo’s signature core curriculum. The Senate meetings were standing-room-only, and debate was heated. But the change passed, the minority could accept defeat gracefully, and I was humbled to receive a standing ovation after the final vote.

I like to “dress the part.” I own a kilt. In the proper tartan, of course.

More than for a campus presiding officer, the UFS Presidency demands external advocacy. Our power comes primarily through influence on those who make decisions, based on their respect for both our wisdom and, just a little, our potential to cause disruption. I’ve always been comfortable with speaking truth to power, but it’s that much more potent when representing a group like the UFS, in all its unity and diversity. I certainly bring my own opinions to the UFS table, but as President I will leave that table forcefully advocating for the will of the body.

My favorite plants are trees.

But even in advocacy, listening and collaboration are key. More progress is made by finding the common ground, than by taking the high ground. At the spring UFS Plenary, I was struck by the acclamations from when Gwen had helped individual campuses. I hadn’t realized that was such an impactful part of the position, but it is a role I would relish: sorting out how multiple pieces, varied interests, can best fit together—not so different from effective advocacy.

Willows are particularly nice, although oaks have their strengths.

If history tells us anything, it’s that many of the largest issues that the UFS will face cannot be anticipated. I don’t just mean the pandemic. Who could have predicted the active learning mandate, or sanctuary needs for DACA students? SUNY’s financial challenges keep coming, but in ever-shifting forms. Flexibility and responsiveness are key.

Dogs are great. Cats are slightly better.

However, issues are already clamoring for our attention: perfection of the new SUNY Gen Ed and its rollout on a manageable timetable; system-level enrollment management, to support financially embattled campuses; keeping remote learning modes under control, to preserve intellectual property, student satisfaction, and educational quality; the failed promise of state budget “maintenance of effort;” continuous improvement of UFS internal and external communications; the ever-present need to diversify the faculty and support our URM students; the list goes on. The UFS needs to be a juggling team, not a juggernaut, and I am ready to lead that team.