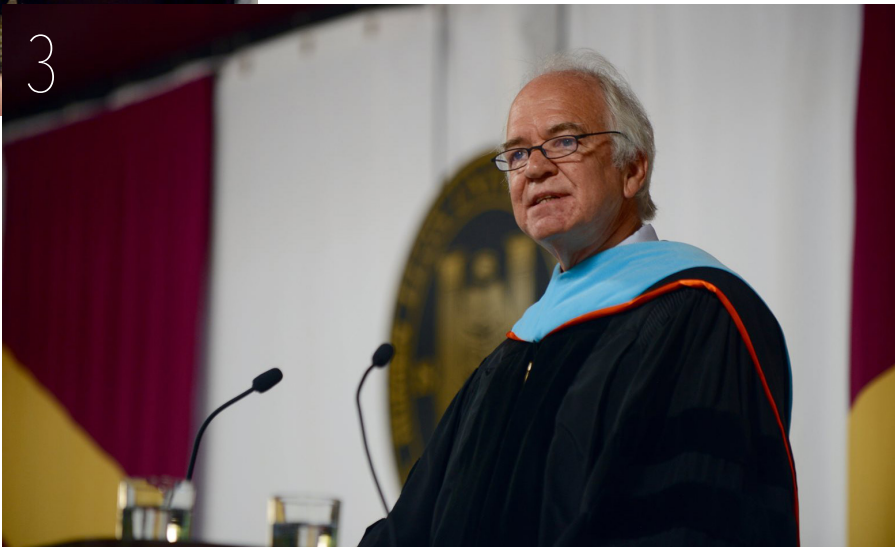




CAPTIONS: 1) Smith Jackson served Elon University for 24 years, most recently in his role as vice president of student life and dean of students (All photos by University Communications). 2) Jackson shakes hands with a student. 3) Jackson speaks at the 2016 new student convocation. 4) Jackson converses with students at a campus event.



leaving a legacy

THE MAN BEHIND THE EMAILS

The story’s been told dozens of times, from meetings to presentations and speeches, and now, with special circumstances, it’s being told one last time.

Smith Jackson and his wife, Rene, were driving along Interstate 40 with their sons on a spring break trip to Washington, D.C. Rene was reading *The Chronicle of Higher Education* when she saw a job listing for Dean of Students at Elon College. She pulled out their atlas book — this was 1994, mind you — and found out campus was just a few miles down the road.

They stopped by. They haven’t left. Until now.

Smith Jackson, then the dean of students at Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama, applied for and took the job at Elon. He’s been in student affairs for 43 years and here for almost 24 years — years that have seen unprecedented growth institutionally, and a renowned focus on integrating student life with academic affairs. On May 31, he’ll work his last day as Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students. Jackson will then transition to a different role, one where he’ll be working on some special projects in the president’s office and partnering with the School of Education to work on a master’s program in Higher Education.

Hallowed by students as the man behind the emails, heralded by faculty and colleagues as a genuine, compassionate visionary and treasured by loved ones and mentees as an open-minded, supportive confidant and adviser, Jackson leaves a sizeable legacy. It’s measured, in part, by his accomplishments with regard to inclusion and the growth of Student Life, his responses to emails and phone calls in the wee hours of the night and his willingness and commitment to put students’ best interests at the focal point of every discussion. Simply put, Jackson has played an instrumental part in making Elon what it is today.

“I’ll walk out the door saying, ‘Hey, we can do this,’” Jackson said.

When Jackson returned to Alabama after Spring Break, he decided to pretend his eldest son, Hunter — he was 12-years-old at the time — was a prospective student interested in attending Elon. He sent materials to the Office of Admissions, seeking more information about the school. Jackson was impressed with the immediate response and the depth and quality of the information. One small sign, too, of the sheer time and critical thinking that goes into each decision Jackson makes.

The nature of Jackson’s work is that he works long hours and deals with innately delicate issues. He meets with students facing potential expulsion from the university, families who have lost their son or daughter and situations that aren’t necessarily black or white -- they’re complex. Through it all, Jackson’s been a champion of due process, doing the right thing and willing to change course from procedure or precedent when he knows it’s in the best interests of a student. His emails are sent to the community after hours and hours of conversation, of planning and of painstakingly long meetings where he’ll first say, “OK, what do we need to do in the next five minutes? The next 15 minutes?”

“Smith will sit down with students who are really vulnerable ... and Smith’s reaction has never been about retribution or punishment. It’s always been about fairness,” said President Leo Lambert. “How can we use this as an opportunity for growth for a young person? There have been dozens and dozens of Elon students who have been in Smith’s office, who have said, ‘That was a point in my life where he helped me figure out what I needed to do to get myself back on track.’ That permeates all the way down in the Student Life division.”

When Jackson arrived at Elon, he asked everyone involved in Student Life for their resumes. He wasn’t planning on firing anyone — he didn’t — but rather wanted to make sure the department was aligned and structured in a way that was most efficient. Soon after, he began putting the pieces in place to best integrate academics and Student Life, from meetings with deans across campus to lowering the proverbial wall in the classroom between learning and experiences.

He helped work to implement the Elon Experiences and the transcript associated with it. He expanded inclusion efforts, tackling issues of difference on campus and helping establish the Center for Race, Ethnicity and Diversity Education (CREDE) and the Gender and LGBTQIA Center (GLC). And he first helped install the two-year residential requirement for students, which led to a boom in on-campus housing interest and has now evolved into the Residential Campus initiative, a key part of Elon’s latest strategic plan. Jackson has worked to make Student Life a more cohesive unit, bringing all deans together for budget meetings and, in turn, making smart financial decisions in students’ best interests and determining where in the infrastructure are more positions needed.

“He really began to say we’re part of the learning process,” said Jana Lynn Patterson, dean of Health and Wellness and has worked under Jackson since he began at Elon. “You’ve got to be willing to work with faculty partners, willing to forge relationships with faculty partners. You’ve got to see yourself as an educator, not as someone doing fun things over here. If we’re going to have student activities, we need to help people understand why student activities enhance the academic experience. He began to lay those seeds for what now is one of those things that makes Elon distinctive in the academic world.”

Jackson’s current role doesn’t give him the opportunity to work with students directly on a consistent basis, but when the chance presents itself, he — and the student — capitalize.

Senior James Fariello was the Vice President for Administration for what’s now the Inter-Residence Council when he first interacted with Jackson to follow up on a town hall meeting they had with senior staff. That relationship blossomed when Fariello worked as the executive intern in Jackson’s office during his junior year.

“To a lot of students, I think he’s just kind of a mystical deity who just sends emails when school is canceled,” Fariello said. “But he’s so much more

than that. I wish every student had the opportunity to develop a relationship with him. I think everyone would foster from that.”

It’s a Wednesday afternoon, four weeks from Smith Jackson’s last day in his current office. After he turns the reins over to Jon Dooley, currently the assistant vice president for Student Life and Dean of Campus Life, Jackson will move to a new office in either Powell or Long, he says.

On this day, Jackson wears a navy blue suit with a blue shirt and blue tie, sitting by the table with a mini bottle of Diet Pepsi and stacks of papers from his earlier meetings. There are moving boxes by the window, but those are from when they redid the windows four years ago and Jackson never unpacked.

“I’m thinking about what I’m going to say,” Jackson says. “There’s going to be an event on May the 15th to mark me leaving this position. Some of it’s going to be talking about serendipity.”

He launches into the narrative of his accidental entry in the field of student affairs and higher education. He was a senior psychology major at University of Alabama when he passed a flyer advertising graduate assistantships in Residence Life at Kent State University in Ohio.

“If they have that at Kent State, I wonder if they have that here?” Jackson thought to himself. He went to the Residence Life office, and soon enough, he was enrolled and working toward his Master’s..

He reminisces about hiring Dooley, whom Jackson describes as an “outstanding national scholar practitioner.” His position was created in 2013, and he was hired to help lead the residential campus initiative. The transition has been intentional. The Student Life Vice President Council read a book on change, and had someone come and lead a change management workshop. Jackson and Dooley have met weekly.

“Our division is humming,” Jackson said. “We have a tremendous staff, tremendous programs. I feel really good about that.”

When asked about his legacy, Jackson balks at the idea of anybody talking about him at Elon in five or 10 years. He talks about the ability to design systems, put them into place and feel the satisfaction of having his hands on something that becomes successful.

And as he reflects on his time at Elon, the countless hours he’s spent in this seat, he smiles and says he hopes people remember him for moving student life into educational experiences.

“It’s been a real grand, thrilling ride to be part of something much, much bigger than any of us,” Jackson says. “To have been on that ride when things have just blossomed at Elon. So many positive changes. All changes for the right reason.”

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