

President Cheng: A timeline

ALLIYA DULANEY, MARK FABERY CAMILLE SIPPLE & TREVOR SKEEN

Between fall 2014 and the current semester, President Rita Cheng guided the university through a number of transitions, including construction projects, a school-wide rebranding and the COVID-19 pandemic. While the community moves forward in finding a new president, here's a look back on Cheng's career.



Courtesy of Andrew Collings

Cheng began term

“Dr. Cheng’s impressive career in higher education and her transformative leadership will advance NAU to even greater heights, enable the achievement of the university’s ambitious goals and foster enhanced student success,” said ABOR chair Rick Myers. “This is the beginning of a legacy that will serve the entire state.”
“I am truly honored to become the next president of Northern Arizona University and to be a part of the rich tradition and culture that has made NAU the university of choice for so many outstanding students and faculty,” Cheng said. “I look forward with great anticipation to working with the NAU community, as well as the local and statewide business and education communities to build upon the great successes NAU has achieved and continue its forward momentum.”

Aug. 15, 2014

One dead, three injured during on-campus shooting

President Cheng’s tenure at the university began with an unfortunate start during the fall 2015 semester, when freshman Steven Jones shot four students, killing one and injuring three. Jones’ court case continued for years — and he was eventually sentenced to six years in jail — in a trial that received national coverage.
Following the shooting, NAU’s Office of the President released an official statement to students, faculty and staff around NAU.
“Community and unity are so much a part of our campus culture, and I want to share my heartfelt appreciation with the Lumberjack family for coming together during this time,” Cheng stated. “I also want to extend my sincere appreciation to the greater Flagstaff community for its support and assistance. We are truly fortunate to live in such a close-knit, caring community.”
These remarks were delivered one day after the incident on Oct. 10, and Oct. 13’s campus forum was rescheduled in favor of a gathering. In the press release, Cheng also sent her sympathies to everyone affected by the tragedy, while continuing to ask for respect and privacy.

April 23, 2015

Oct. 9, 2015

July 1, 2016

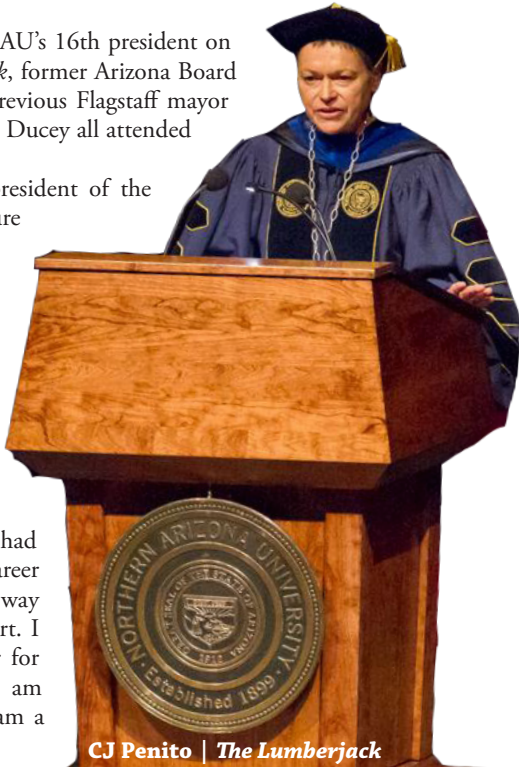
Fall 2016

March 29, 2017

Dec. 2017

Cheng installed as second female president

President Rita Cheng was installed as NAU’s 16th president on April 23, 2015. According to *The Lumberjack*, former Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) Chair Mark Killian, previous Flagstaff mayor Jerry Nabours and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey all attended the ceremony.
Cheng became the second female president of the university, following Clara Lovett’s tenure from 1994 to 2001. During a 2019 interview with *Sedona Monthly*, which discussed women in leadership roles, Cheng said she had to put great effort and focus into her career to be taken seriously.
“I never felt very strategic about this, but I always felt that I needed to work harder, work longer hours, put in more effort — and that was intrinsic to me,” Cheng said. “I’m not sure that it had to be that way but I approached my career and all the various steps along the way with a great deal of focus and effort. I felt I needed to do that in order for people to take me seriously. I am 4 [feet], 11 [inches tall] and I am a woman.”



CJ Penito | The Lumberjack

NAU kicks the habit by officially becoming a tobacco-free campus

After several years of student advocacy from a grassroots campaign and ongoing community discussion, NAU announced its mountain campus would become tobacco-free beginning July 1.
Making the switch came after years of lobbying and a commitment from the university to improving the health of students.
“This initiative reflects NAU’s strong commitment to wellness and public health, driving principles in what we do each day to create a healthy environment for our students and staff,” Cheng said in a press release. “Our current policies prohibit smoking inside university buildings and vehicles. However, they do not address the health risks associated with secondhand smoke, or the environmental issues caused by tobacco products.”
NAU joined a growing number of more than 1,400 tobacco and smoke-free campuses around the country, along with ASU, UA, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and Maricopa Community College, among others.



Illustration by Alanna Secrest



Science and Health building.
Michael Patacsil | The Lumberjack

Buildings completed on campus

During Cheng’s presidential career, a variety of multi-year construction projects were finished on campus.
The Science and Health building was completed in fall 2015. With its five-story structure, Flagstaff Business News reported the building consisted of “54 faculty offices, nine interaction rooms and 10 interaction spaces, 18 research labs and eight instructional labs, five classrooms and three lecture halls with a total capacity of 440 seats,” while also expanding STEM education.
The completion of the Wall Aquatic Center in fall 2016 served as a replacement for the original facilities built in 1981. Construction began in April 2014, and the entire project took a little over two years. The complex includes tennis courts, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, crowd seating and a recreation field, according to the US Builders Review.

Cheng receives \$180,000 bonus from ABOR

ABOR awarded President Cheng a \$180,000 bonus at the end of the 2017 calendar year, while ASU President Michael Crow and former UA President Ann Weaver Hart both received \$25,000. According to the *Arizona Daily Sun*, Cheng’s base salary that year was \$390,000, so the bonus put her at \$570,000 in total pay.
However, \$15,000 was subtracted from each president’s earnings for serving on the executive enterprise committee at ABOR.



Caleb Autry | The Lumberjack

The same article reported Cheng had a higher number of goals to achieve than her in-state counterparts, which included “a written plan on the future of NAU’s remote campuses and distance learning programs, reach[ing] a 75% retention rate, increas[ing] research expenditures and the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded and increas[ing] the number of community college transfers, among other items.”
Cheng’s base salary was raised from \$390,000 to \$475,000 after the 2017-18 academic year, which showed an increase of \$85,000 — or 22%, according to the *Arizona Daily Sun*.
“There has never been a greater discrepancy between those who are the highest paid and those who are the lowest paid. What higher education is doing is mirroring the behaviors of the corporate world,” William Tierney, professor and co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at USC, told *The Washington Post* in an interview.

Cheng’s campus forum leads to student protests

On March 9, 2017, NAU students protested in the streets following Cheng’s spring campus forum. The protesters said the source of their anger was the president’s position on free speech and safe spaces, which ignited controversy after the meeting.
During the campus forum, Cheng said the notion of “safe spaces” does not correlate with university goals. This statement was met with gasps from the crowd gathered at the High Country Conference Center. A live recording even showed dozens of students, employees and community members promptly walking out of the forum after hearing

Cheng’s remarks.
A few weeks after the forum — on March 29, 2017 — student activists were seen holding signs with captions reading messages like “Rita, your silence is violence.”
“She continually promotes diversity and promotes safe spaces in pretty much every speech she gives, yet when I ask her about safe spaces she denounced it explicitly and said that she doesn’t know if it’s her place to give an opinion on safe spaces,” Breanna Kramer said before she joined the protest.



Student activists gather outside the High Country Conference Center March 29, 2017. Michael Patacsil | The Lumberjack

NAU rebranding

Shortly before the 120th anniversary of its founding, NAU implemented a modified logo that combined the NAU Athletics emblem and the university name in 2018. According to spokesperson Kimberly Ott, this creation was credited to Chief Marketing Officer Ashley Chitwood.

Beginning in 2005, the university rolled out its long-used shield with a navy blue and sage green crest, which visualized a pine tree and mountains. The old logo was used for 12 years, and the new branding was fully incorporated Sept. 1, 2019.



Aug. 2018

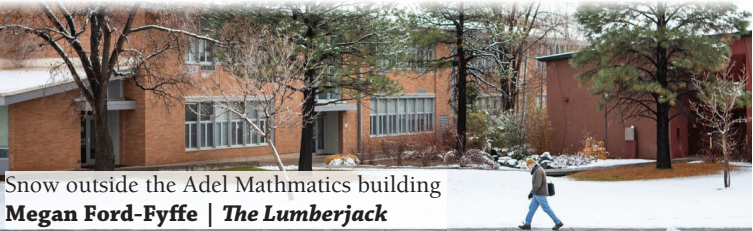
Snowpocalypse

Spring 2019 brought many surprises, including a historic snowfall that some labeled as the “snowpocalypse.” According to the National Weather Service, a storm system covered the majority of northern Arizona from Feb. 20 to 22.

After the storm dumped multiple feet of snow around NAU and Flagstaff, some students expressed their opinions about Cheng canceling classes at the last minute. The school was closed two days in a row due to these weather conditions.

“I’ll forever remember how Rita Cheng waited until 11:30 the night before Flagstaff’s biggest snowstorm in history to cancel classes,” a tweet from “katee_hurst” read. “The next day we had 35 inches of snow on the ground. Since the beginning she’s only cared about her paychecks instead of student safety.”

According to the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the snowpocalypse left Flagstaff with 35.9 inches of snow over a 24-hour period and 40.8 inches of snow in total. Furthermore, these accumulations cost the university at least \$100,000 in snow removal efforts.



Snow outside the Adel Mathematics building
Megan Ford-Fyffe | *The Lumberjack*

Aug. 2018

Feb. 2019

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

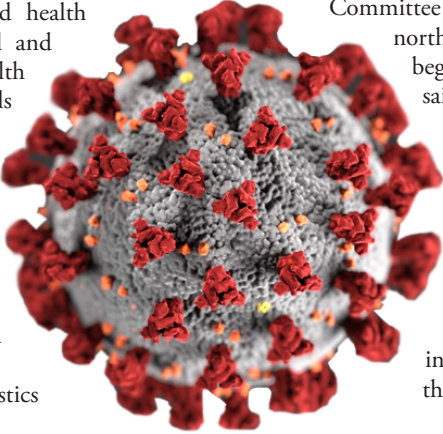
In early March, the COVID-19 pandemic surged in Arizona, resulting in the early shutdown of the NAU campus and an abrupt transition to online learning. According to *The Lumberjack*, Cheng sent an email to the NAU community at the start of the pandemic regarding the coronavirus and how its spread could affect students and faculty.

Following the closure of the Flagstaff Mountain campus, Cheng released another email statement in late April that announced the school’s plans to reopen for the fall semester. Although NAU eventually hosted three weeks of remote instruction before implementing the hybrid learning model, some face-to-face classes are still happening.

“Consulting with state and federal leaders and health officials, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Arizona Department of Health Services, we are developing and implementing protocols to ensure your safe return to campus,” Cheng stated.

Furthermore, the university’s use of in-person coursework during the health crisis incited anger among some students, faculty and staff. A “Die-In” hosted at the north quad on Sept. 18 specifically showed graduate students’ fear of teaching in the classroom. Other staff members were terminated before the summer’s conclusion, which also generated resentment around the Flagstaff area.

NAU continues to release its COVID-19 case statistics on a weekly dashboard.



March 2020

ABOR appoints Search Advisory Committee chairs, welcomes community input

In a press release, ABOR Chair Larry E. Penley appointed Regents Lyndel Manson and Fred DuVal as co-chairs of the Search Advisory Committee for the next NAU president, with committee members set to be selected at a later date.

Penley shared his assurances that Manson and DuVal’s leadership will lead to a successful search for Cheng’s replacement.

“I am confident that Regents Manson and DuVal will be outstanding leaders of the Search Advisory Committee and believe their commitment to NAU and northern Arizona will be tremendous assets as we begin this important search process,” Penley said in the press release. “I extend my sincere appreciation to them and am confident they will devote the time necessary for a successful search.”

As a part of the search process, the board announced that NAU stakeholders — including students, faculty, staff, residents and the general public, along with community, business and tribal leaders — are invited to participate in sharing their vision on the university’s future.

Penley noted that he expects the

Sept. 8, 2020

Sept. 10, 2020

NAU Honors College opens

The Honors College welcomed its first year of residents during the 2018-19 school year, when a combination of freshman, RAs and some upperclassmen moved into the dormitory. According to its website, the 204,656-square-foot building allows students to “live, study, congregate and collaborate with others.”

Among the facilities are classrooms, offices, the Honors Writing Center, student support center and an exercise facility. According to a statement from President Cheng, the new building could help to engage bright students from around the state, country and world.

“We are pleased to see an increasing number of top-performing students choose NAU, and programs like the Honors College play a major role in attracting and engaging these students,” Cheng said. “This facility is a commitment to make NAU home for the region’s best and brightest.”

Honors Dean Kevin Gustafson also began his tenure at NAU when the new facilities opened. During an interview with *The Lumberjack*, he discussed the combination of living and learning in the same building.

“The building is a great opportunity in so many ways,” Gustafson said, as referenced in the article. “The new Honors [College] residential hall and classrooms will most obviously build upon an already strong sense of community for the college, both for those students living here and for those taking the more than 90 honors classes scheduled in the building this fall.”



Honors College during construction.
Jason White | *The Lumberjack*

#RitaResign coalition calls for Cheng’s resignation

At the start of 2020, the NAU community learned through an [audit](#) that Cheng had accumulated \$40,000 of improperly documented travel expenses. \$30,641 of the aforementioned funds were reimbursed to Cheng after she purchased business and first-class plane tickets to Russia on a trip she claimed was advantageous for the university’s international relations.

As a result of the public audit, NAU’s Young Democrats club, College Republicans club and several other organizations signed a joint letter calling for Cheng’s resignation. Through this letter and formal statement, the #RitaResign coalition was formed. In an interview with *The Lumberjack*, Young Democrats former President Calli Jones expressed worries about the money in question, along with discussing the lack of trust between Cheng and the student body.

“There’s a lot of questions on transparency,” Jones said. “Students want to know where their money is going.”

In response to the #RitaResign coalition’s letter, Cheng addressed the varying concerns regarding the audit and her use of university funds in January. Cheng said her Russia trip was beneficial to NAU because it strengthened the university’s international ties, specifically regarding internships and exchange programs.

ABOR also released a statement in response to the letter calling for Cheng’s resignation in early January, which explained that the presidents of Arizona’s public universities are expected to travel abroad periodically for international engagement. However, ABOR also recognized the error that occurred in failing to properly document university expenses.

“Foremost, the board holds itself accountable to ensure compliance with the law and policies at the highest level,” ABOR Chair Larry E. Penley stated. “Strengthened policies and procedures in NAU’s travel documentation are critical. The board is working closely with NAU to take every precaution to prevent any future lapses.”

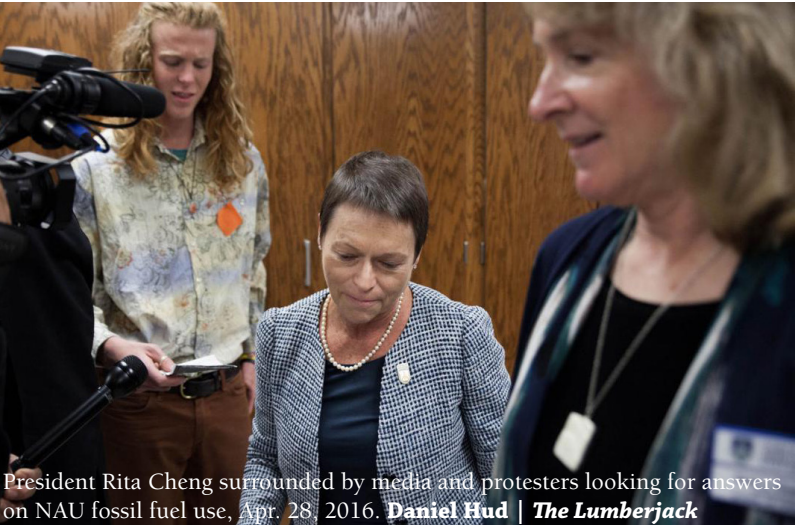
Cheng announces her plans not to pursue a contract renewal

An email sent to students, faculty and staff from the Office of the President stated that Cheng will not be pursuing a contract renewal for her position as president, which officially ends June 2022. According to *The Lumberjack*, she provided ABOR with significant notice of her decision and allowed them a sufficient amount of time to find a replacement.

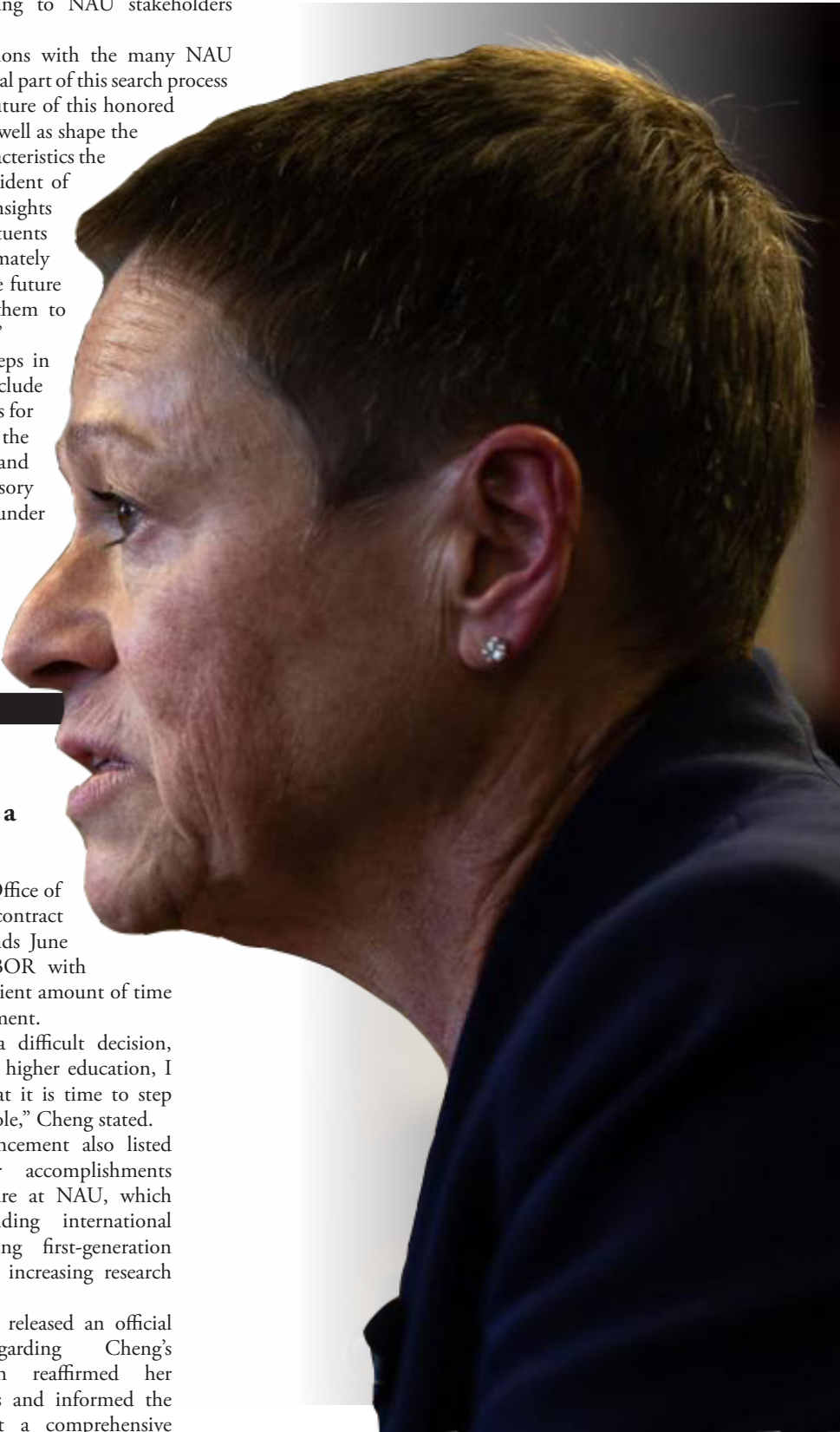
“Although a difficult decision, after 40 years in higher education, I have decided that it is time to step away from this role,” Cheng stated.

The announcement also listed several of her accomplishments during her tenure at NAU, which included expanding international relations, growing first-generation student aid and increasing research funding.

ABOR also released an official statement regarding Cheng’s decision, which reaffirmed her accomplishments and informed the community that a comprehensive nationwide search is underway for finding her replacement.



President Rita Cheng surrounded by media and protesters looking for answers on NAU fossil fuel use, Apr. 28, 2016. Daniel Hud | *The Lumberjack*



Rita Cheng addresses a letter calling for her resignation, Jan. 29. Shannon Swain | *The Lumberjack*