

Ames Tribune

First ISU finalist talks transparency, mental health

By Austin Cannon Staff Writer acannon@amestrib.com

Posted Oct 9, 2017 at 5:57 PM

Updated Oct 23, 2017 at 11:40 AM

In his first introduction to the community he could potentially lead in a few months, Sonny Ramaswamy, a finalist to become the next Iowa State University president, emphasized transparency — a point of criticism for ISU's most recent leader.

Sonny Ramaswamy, the director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), pledged transparency to the crowd of about 250 people sitting in front of him in the Sun Room at ISU's Memorial Union on Monday. Ramaswamy was the first of four presidential finalists to visit ISU this week as the Iowa Board of Regents prepares to choose the university's 16th president. University of Georgia Provost Pamela Whitten will visit and hold a forum today, and the two other finalists will visit the following two days.

Monday's hour-long forum was, for the most part, the public's first introduction to Ramaswamy. It came at the end of his day of meetings on campus with different students and staff. Before taking questions from the audience, he said that in order for ISU to keep its promises and advance, it will have to be open and accessible in its decision-making.

"We've got to make sure we are completely transparent in everything that we do," he told the audience. "I heard this many times today, that a lot of the conversations, a lot of the challenges we've got are the consequence of the lack of transparency in the things that we end up doing."

The man who would be Ramaswamy's predecessor at ISU, Steven Leath, faced scrutiny for a lack of transparency when new reports revealed he flew university aircraft for personal use and didn't publicly disclosed that he damaged one of the

planes on a hard landing in 2014. The incident led to an inquiry from the Iowa Board of Regents, and Leath apologized.

Ramaswamy said there is an “aura” around Beardshear Hall, the main administration building on campus, and decisions have to be made “in concert with each other,” collaboratively.

“Without that, we’re not going to make a whole lot of progress to achieve that next level,” he said.

He said that also means the decision-makers at ISU need to hold each other accountable. He said the university needs to work toward creating an equitable environment for everyone and sticking to its land-grant university mission.

During the question-and-answer session of the forum, Ramaswamy, who was appointed to his position at NIFA in 2012, was asked about how he would deal with a controversial speaker coming to campus, someone, perhaps, that a large part of the campus community might not want to hear from. It’s become an point of contention at multiple universities across the country.

He lamented the current divisiveness in the political arena but said ISU shouldn’t turn away a speaker just because he or she might say something not everyone likes. The school, however, should set some ground rules, no violence for instance, that if violated, would end the event, Ramaswamy said.

“We should say, ‘Yes, but these are the rules of the game,’” he said.

That was welcome to the ears of Bradlee Fair, who’s in her third year at ISU. She was impressed Ramaswamy brought the U.S. Supreme Court into his argument for the “rules of engagement” for those speakers.

“I was really glad that he sounded like he has a game plan in mind and one with legal backing,” she said.

Fair was also glad Ramaswamy spoke about student achievement, but he also talked about students’ mental health. He mentioned the opioid epidemic across the United States, calling it “mind-boggling,” and said it was a consequence of the economic downturn. ISU, he said, has a responsibility to address that.

Responding to a question from Andrew Allen, the president of Youth and Shelter Services in Ames, Ramaswamy said ISU “must absolutely commit” to providing help to students who’ve struggled with drug and alcohol use.

Robert Bingham, who serves as the ISU student liaison on the Ames City Council, said the opioid problems affects students at ISU and Ames as a whole. He said he couldn’t see Leath talking about something like that.

“Making sure (Ramaswamy) has a closer approach to student wellness and student outcomes is, I think, a very good sight,” he said.

The conversation also ventured into students’ mental health. A student who works in one of ISU’s residence halls said there had been “several” suicide attempts over the past week. She asked what Ramaswamy and ISU should do to help students who are struggling.

He urged people to pay attention to their friends’ or students’ behaviors to maybe catch warning signs. Making resources available for the campus health center should be another focus, he said

“We’ve really got to be paying attention to that,” he said. “If we don’t pay attention to that, we’ll end up not catching those symptoms and those signs in those young people.”

After the forum, Ramaswamy said he wasn’t surprised by any of the questions he fielded. He ignored the stage behind him and strolled back and forth on the floor, occasionally calling out to the students and staff he’d met earlier in the day. He began his remarks with an easy crowd pleaser: lauding the ISU football team’s massive upset over Oklahoma this past weekend.

He admitted several times that his ISU knowledge was limited at best, but he was still impressive to some in the audience.

“It just seems like he was all-encompassing with his answers of the different facets of the university,” said Barbara Atkins, an ISU alumna.

Ramaswamy’s six-year term at the USDA will end in spring of 2018, and he said if the regents pick him on Oct. 23, he won’t hesitate to take what he called his dream job.

“I’d do it,” he said. “There’s no ifs or buts about it.”