

Interim President Al Smith Recipient of Distinguished Leadership Award from the American Kinesiology Association

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USU Interim President Al Smith at the AKA awards ceremony with Kim Graber, AKA president; Penny McCullagh, award recipient; and Tom Templin, AKA executive director.

Utah State University Interim President Alan L. Smith is the 2025 doctoral institution recipient of the Jerry R. Thomas Distinguished Leadership Award for exemplary contributions in the field of kinesiology. Prior to joining the President's office, Smith was the Emma Eccles Jones Endowed Dean of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS).

The Jerry R. Thomas Distinguished Leadership Award recognizes the outstanding administrative and leadership performance of an individual at an American Kinesiology Association (AKA) member institution who has showcased exceptional administrative and leadership capabilities. This individual must have served a minimum of three years as chair or director of an academic unit and made noteworthy contributions to the AKA's mission.

"Al has an extremely strong work ethic and a passion for his field and higher education," said Thomas Templin, executive director of the AKA. "His strong commitment to his students, colleagues, and institutions is certainly remarkable. He has demonstrated many notable successes within his scholarship, which resulted in his election to the National Academy of Kinesiology. In addition to all of these successes, Al has the ability to

help others and promote the field and institution, while remaining humble at the same time."

AKA selection committee members voted for Smith to receive this recognition based on several outstanding characteristics including his commitment to mentoring doctoral students, his dynamic leadership skills with an attitude of perseverance, and his ability to reduce barriers to success and create an environment in which people feel valued. As a former president of the AKA in 2020, Smith recognizes the importance of the AKA to advancing the field of Kinesiology and developing strong academic leaders.

"I am grateful to Eadric Bressel, our Kinesiology and Health Science department head at USU, for nominating me for this recognition and being such a strong model of department leadership," said Smith. "I am deeply honored to have his confidence and that of kinesiology leaders throughout the country who have enabled our field to thrive in producing scientific knowledge and well-prepared kinesiology and allied health professionals."

Shawn Whiteman, interim dean of CEHS, shared, "We are incredibly proud to celebrate Al for receiving the Jerry R. Thomas Distinguished Leadership Award (Doctoral) from the American Kinesiology Association. This national recognition honors his exceptional leadership and profound impact on students, colleagues, and the field of kinesiology. As a colleague, I continue to learn and benefit from his approach to leadership—committing to the difficult tasks at hand, acting with integrity and kindness, and communicating transparently. We are delighted to share this recognition with him and look forward to the lasting impacts of his leadership at USU."

Smith's academic career began at Purdue University where he advanced from associate professor to professor in sport psychology. AKA Executive Director Templin served as Smith's department head during that time. After Purdue, Smith went on to Michigan State University to be the department head of Kinesiology, where he served for nine years. An important development in Smith's career happened in 2021 when he became the dean of CEHS at USU. Next, Smith was named the first endowed dean in 2024 at the institution followed in 2025 by an appointment as interim president of USU.

While dean, Smith has remained committed to mentoring doctoral students. Last May, Smith graduated two doctoral candidates. His recent graduate student, Justin Worley, now a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at Ohio State University, said, "Al's mentorship played a huge role in my

development as a scholar. He is incredibly detail-oriented and holds high standards for himself and those around him. At the same time, he cares deeply about his students and their development, whether that be inside or outside academia. It's a rare combination that has made a strong impact on me and many others in the field of kinesiology."

Professor Travis Dorsch, a former doctoral student of Smith and now faculty colleague at USU in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, shared, "It was wonderful to learn that Al was recognized by the American Kinesiology Association as a Thomas Award recipient for his administrative and leadership performance. Al has maintained a distinguished record of thoughtful leadership for almost three decades as a mentor, graduate program director, department chair, dean, and now interim president. He has excelled in all these roles; this recognition comes as no surprise to those who know him!"

Smith holds a BA in psychology from the University of Rochester, an MS in exercise and sport science from the University North Carolina Greensboro, and a Ph.D. in exercise and movement science from the University of Oregon.