Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

Ep. 74: Transforming Higher Ed, Live from SXSWEdu

(MUSIC INSTRUMENTS PLAY)

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Transformation is a buzzword in today's world, and it's easy to talk about why it's necessary. But how do you actually do the hard work of bringing about change within a college or university? Hello and welcome to the Key Inside Higher Ed News and Analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Letterman, editor, and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of The Key. Thanks for being with us today. This week's episode is a little different from our norm. It's drawn from a session I moderated at the annual South by Southwest EDU conference in Austin, Texas, this month, where a lot of interesting discussions unfolded. I made really good barbecue tacos and Lonestar beer. Side note it was really nice to be out among three-dimensional human beings again. This particular conversation involved three people who've made their higher ed careers so far around innovation and transformation. And a large audience showed up to hear practical advice and tips about how they do their work. Joining me for the discussion were Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College, Michelle Weiss, vice chancellor for strategy and innovation at the National University System, and Bridget Burns, executive director of the University Innovation Alliance.

They talked from their very different perspectives about whether transformative change is best driven from the top or dispersed throughout an organization, whether the discomfort is a necessary precursor to people in organizations changing, and the importance of experimentation and yes, failure. Highlights from the discussion follow. Before we begin today's program, here's a word from the sponsor of this week's episode.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:
Our discussion began with each of the panelists talking about how the COVID 19 pandemic had influenced both the work they do and the higher Ed landscape nationally. Here's Michelle Weiss.

MICHELLE WEISS:
One of the initial learnings from the pandemic is, and I think it's continued learning for all of us within higher ed is unlike other recessions of the past, we didn't see that retreat to post-secondary education in the way that we have in past recessions. Right? And part of it is there's this huge constraint on time. We don't have that. We didn't have sort of the benefit of being able to outsource our child care or our caregiving of elders or whatever the thing may have been. And so and you saw actually how more working adults were actually hoping for more short burst training opportunities. I think at one point there was a different poll survey showing that over 60% of adults wanted something that was just going to kind of give them that quick fix before moving on. And so that kind of bundled offering of a degree program was kind of a bridge too far for so many of them. So I think that's a real opportunity for us to think through how do we actually bring the idea of a stackable credential to life?

Because I think for many institutions it's still aspirational and we haven't fully figured out actually how to modularize and give people the right-sized educational pathway at the moment that they need it so they can make progress and advance and not be forgoing wages at the same time.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Michael!

MICHAEL SORRELL:
I have been a college president for the last 15 years and I spend my time really asking two questions. The first is just why? Why do we do things this way? Why do we have to do things this way? Why isn't there a better way? And then the second thing that I spend my time doing is asking people, my constituents, my students, and the communities they come from. What do you need? At Paul Quinn, We think that this idea that things have to be done the way they've always been done is just backward. Things don't work, right? They don't work for the majority of people who are having to deal with them, right? The majority of people coming out of public education now are coming out of poverty. So to continue to design systems built for the middle class and affluent kids and asking the other students who, by the way, are the majority of people now coming to school to abide by that just doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to us. So with the pandemic, we treated it as more of a strategic planning process instead of trying to find ways to shoehorn students back to campus.

We said, What if we don't bring students back until there's a vaccine? What could we transform our institution into if we looked at it from that approach? And we built new buildings, we designed new academic programming, we created a brand new model of higher education, again, to couple with our work program model. And now, you know, one of the things I'll talk about today is we've created something called the Village Philosophy in Admissions. And what we're doing, we're saying to Pell Grant students with 3.0, is it better when you are admitted and students from now in that category are automatically admitted, you get to bring two family members or friends with you to college. And the reason that we've adopted this philosophy is that it's a bit ridiculous to ask the people with the least amount of resources to be the heroes in their own narrative. We don't ask affluent students to lift their families into greater affluence or middle-class students to lift their families out of things.

We always are asking first-generation students and Pell Grant students, it's on your shoulders to lift your family out of poverty. And then when they break down under that stress, we treat it as if it's their fault. It's a system flaw, right? You need support. So if you can bring two family members or two friends with you and you have a support group, then you have more help. That just makes more sense. People always talk about the way out of poverty is education. With all due respect, the way out of poverty is money. So the more people in your family who have money, the more chances you have of lifting them out of poverty. That came from asking our students, what do you need and why do we have to do things the same old way?

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Bridget!

BRIDGET BURNS:
My vantage point on change and transformation is it's a lot more simple than we think. It isn't necessarily AI, it isn't necessarily blockchain, the kinds of change and innovation that are needed in higher ed, especially right now, it's about giving people time and space to actually work on their work and the design of their work to actually see what your current systems are and see how they are failing students. And they were never designed around them. I think there's been a lot of talk about student-centered in higher education for a long time. But the truth is we are still not student-centered, and the work of making that a reality is a very simple stuff. It's getting people to piece by piece, map out and see

how your systems somewhat set students up, like in a Hunger Games, as opposed to making it likely that they would complete regardless of their background. And when you do that stuff, how do you actually engage with others at other institutions and share what's helped you and how do you exchange tips and tricks that are simple?

I just think that we think it's really complex and different and it's actually the kind of change we need is pretty simple, and it's always about centering the experience of the most vulnerable students.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
My impression, and I've heard a lot of people say that institutions were forced to become more aware of their student's lives, their students as people because of the pandemic. And we did see a surprising amount of adaptation by institutions because they had to. A, Do you think institutions did of there some of the mappings you talked about or some of the rethinking about how they work with students during the pandemic? And if so, did it get into the water in ways that will mean that it is sustained?

BRIDGET BURNS:
I mean, we've been firefighting essentially the last two years. I don't think that we've changed our culture to be thinking long-term about strategy. Like we're just been in constant response. And I think that the pandemic may just you know, we literally saw into the homes of our students, those who have homes. And it created a greater degree of empathy, but it also exposed this long-standing, massive failure, which is we have no meaningful way to listen to our students. There is no way for higher education, in particular, to actually hear the voices of students. We've operated using like chapel messages and surveys for a long time, and we've mainly gotten lucky that when a student has a problem, they'll say it to the right person and they happen to know how to move up the org chart with that complaint. But we actually don't have a way to have true empathy at scale so that we can understand how our process is or is not impacting students. And that's the thing we have to do next is really start listening, take seriously the lessons of COVID and rearrange how we spend our time so that we are actually making we're coming up with solutions to address many of those things that are popping up in real time for students.

There is this sometimes tends to sort of thinking more toward the 18 to 24-year-old learners were as we're thinking through these experiences and as we think about the kind of moving away from the transactional to the relational, and we think about people returning continuously to education, they're not necessarily going to want to come back to higher education as is, right? As it's set up today. So how do we actually switch our mode just to actually being there, trusted advisor, being able to guide them in a way that helps them further their career. I just you know, I think there's just so much we can do there in terms of just switching the narrative there, especially as we think about the separation between the learner and the working learner. Because during the pandemic, what was interesting is prior to the pandemic, we knew that over 73% of our existing workforce were people who had caregiving responsibilities. We just hid it from view and what the pandemic did for all of us is showed, you know, our cats on screen, our children, you know, coming into our offices, whatever the thing maybe, all of our interferences.

And that is going to be consistently more and more the learner we're going to be dealing with, because, by the mid-2030s, there's just going to be this huge enrollment cliff for our traditional 18 to 24-year-old learners. So how are we actually pivoting to meet the needs of those working learners? I think that's something we have to think about as a lesson from this pandemic.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Each of you has come at this in a slightly different role. And Michael, maybe start with you as an institutional leader, how much do you feel responsible for being the driver of transformation as opposed to enabling an environment in which people transform. Is it a balancing act, and can you give some strategies for both of those approaches, whichever one you favor?

MICHAEL SORRELL:
I think a lot of it has to do with culture and what type of culture do you create at your institution? You know, I said at the outset, I've been president for 15 years and my presidency looks different in five-year tracks. So the first five years, we were just trying to hold on. We were a struggling institution when I inherited it. The school was gonna close in 18 months, and we were trying to bail out the holes in the boat while we were on the water. The second five years, it was alright. We have developed stability in a sense. Now we need a model to allow us to grow and thrive. These five years, it's OK, we've got our model now because our goal is to become a system, an international network of urban work colleges. And that was going along pretty well until the pandemic. And now we're seeing something completely different. We're seeing explosive growth in the online space. By this summer, we will have more online students than we will have in-person students. And that is happening at a pace like we thought it would happen quickly.

We did not understand how quickly it would indeed occur. In the beginning, I absolutely set the tone for transformation and innovation. You know, we come in on meetings and always ask, is this hot? Can we make this better? No problems are ever permanently solved. So what's the answer to the next set of challenges? Now I'm so excited because I see the leadership in each of our areas asking those questions in their own way. And I see the students asking those questions. And so we've created this innovative environment where people are always sort of pushing. And I think my primary responsibility is to make sure people feel safe to do so. You don't get criticized for stumbling. You get criticized for not trying something out of the box, right? Because our students demand the very best of that type of mindset. And so, you know, I think as a college president, my job is to make sure people realize that they never have to play it safe because it doesn't allow us safe, doesn't allow us to address the issues our students need solving the most.

(MUSIC INSTRUMENT PLAYS)

DOUG LETTERMAN:
You're listening to excerpts from a conversation I moderated at the South by Southwest Edu conference in Austin this month about the nuts and bolts of higher education transformation work involving Michael Sorrell of Paul Quinn College, Bridget Burns of the University Innovation Alliance, and Michele Weiss of National University. Having just heard Michael Sorrell talk about how to lead an institution through times of change. I asked Michele Weiss, who leads an innovation unit within an institution, how much she and her department are responsible for driving transformation in the institution, how dependent she is on signaling from the institution's top leaders, and how much the role is about encouraging change throughout the enterprise.

MICHELLE WEISS:
It's a great question. So I had a similar role at Southern New Hampshire University, and I have this role now at National University, and I'm approaching it actually quite different. One way that people have done it in the past, and this is partly, I think, what people have learned from the theories of disruption, is the idea that if you break off a sort of like a separate autonomous growth unit, that's it's a simpler way of moving more nimbly. It's like having a startup within a larger organization. So I think a lot of mega universities, and larger organizations have tried to build in that way. I think the challenge that you run into when you build in parallel is that at some point you do have to integrate the efforts. And I think the cultural differences are very hard to mesh when you separate them and silo them in that way. The other part of it is when you have innovation in a particular hub, it can work against your attempts to innovate from within because nobody wants to think that innovation is somehow housed in one area versus every unit having an innovative aspect to it.

And so how do you empower those units? I think that's more the approach we're taking now is we're realizing that we're going to have way more success if we have people from across the university if we offer them a solution to their pain point and give them different opportunities to look at some solutions that they might want to consider if they're moving forward with that idea versus us kind of pushing it on them from that top-down perspective. It is just far more transformative and has way more momentum to it. I think that's what we've really learned is turning each person, each stakeholder into almost like an initiative owner. I just want to. Yes. And that in that the most innovative spaces really have to you think more creatively about capacity and how you stop and support innovation. And I would often come in and see places where it's like there's a vice president for innovation, which is like sending this message that somehow this person high up is going to shove innovation down in.

Or there's a center over here where that's where the good ideas are, right? But what we found is that actually everyone who works in higher education is capable of innovation. They're just overwhelmed by phone up here, by their calendar, in their inbox. Good ideas do not interrupt you. And you have to actually set people up to have time and space to engage in asking the right questions and thinking about the right questions. And so you find the person who is the most overburdened with work because the reward for good work, well executed is more work. Right? So that's the person who's super competent. So you find those people. VP ish for students. For like undergraduate or whatever. They can be all over. But you look, their plates are massive and instead of hiring more of those people, what you do is you hire what feels like a project manager, but as a chief of staff under that person to essentially offload the low hanging fruit and to lighten their load so the person is highly competent and executes well can now actually have a little bit of time to actually work on ideation and brainstorming.

That has been very successful for us, and it answers one of the questions that's popped up about early career professionals. We created the UI Fellows program, but there are places in higher ed where they're really focusing on this kind of skill and the competency is project management, cross-functional innovation, support, and shuttle diplomacy. Those are the skills that we need that we are weak at in higher ed. And you hire folks like that at that level. They offload the senior-level person's plate. That is the most transformative thing is actually lightning the loads of the people who we know can deliver.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Bridget, your role is a little bit different. Both of these folks work within institutions while you work across a set of pretty traditional universities. How is cross-institutional work different from intra

institutional work, and what are the top strategies you have focused on and seen work with your members?

BRIDGET BURNS:
Institutional and cross-institutional. It's about social safety around failure. Failure is the greatest teacher. We know this from other innovative spaces. Higher ed is a space where we don't admit failure exists and we hide the million-dollar failures on all of our campuses under the carpet. We never talk about them. We never admit them. And therefore, we force other people to repeat those mistakes. So what we focus on is the only way within the alliance for you to get on stage. I don't care if you've done something. I do care if you have done something and you have coached another institution to replicate it. That's where I want to learn. I want to know what you taught them. I want to hear about the first three steps. I want to hear about the advice you gave that you wish you'd had before you started. The only way that you get attention is by sharing lessons from failure. And we operate with Chatham House rules so that people won't disclose who said it or their institutions or their social safety.

That's a really important piece that is missing, I think from the broader ecosystem is we have a culture throughout higher ed that is about praising like headlines and posturing and how great we are. And my institution is the best at buti bop cool. It doesn't help anybody. What helps me is what has been hard for you. What did you learn? What do you wish you'd known? We're a community of practice, trying to basically share the lessons learned so other people can actually move faster. And I think within the institutions, what I notice is I come in and I'm looking for is there social safety around failure? And the question I always ask is, do you have an autopsy process? Because most institutions do not have a way to unpack what went wrong, what we should have done differently, and how we could learn from it. And if you are interested in being a space of innovation, that's the first topic I would suggest having is what kind of autopsy process could we have that would surface insights or what did we learn from this experience?

And the other that I know, just because I want to tactically give you the stuff to put in your pocket, is what's our strategy around new ideas? Because new ideas don't interrupt you. If you don't know where they're coming from, they're not going to just like happen magically. Think of an idea or a new strategy that came about. Where to come from? Is it when so-and-so had a retreat? Is it when that team had an offsite? OK, we're not going to get more of those if we don't figure out where good ideas are coming from in this institution. And then how do we support them? Because in too many places in higher ed, a new idea has to get debated to have a chance. And I believe that. Yes. And creating space for us to actually iterate and pitch and catch ideas and evolve them is what's needed. In terms of lessons learned. It's an important thing for institutions to take a look at all of the things that started off as pilots. We tend in higher ed to launch a pilot and then just let it go. It just kind of becomes the new solution that we rely on.

We don't actually evaluate whether it's working for our people. So there are these different kinds of ways in which you can identify an innovation, but also make sure that along the way you are making sure that the different stakeholders because the people who say yes to the innovation initially aren't necessarily always going to be the ones who are deploying it every day. Right? Because it's going to be a faculty member or an advisor, whoever it is. And it's important over, say, a one-year period as you're testing it to make sure you're connecting with each of those stakeholder groups and identifying whether this is actually solving for what it initially was set up to do. Because I think we tend to kind of launch

these pilots as sort of a using our way into what will ultimately just be a full-time contract. And that's one way to kind of think through. Is this truly a transformative innovation? Is this actually getting to the radical change that we were hoping for?

DOUG LETTERMAN:
You've all talked about creating a space for experimentation and making people comfortable with failure, or at least making people less uncomfortable with it. Michael, how do you go about creating that space on your campus?

MICHAEL SORRELL:
You create a culture where failure is seen as OK by a leader talking about your failures. And you can't just talk about your failures once in a while. Right? Like you have to be open with people to understand how you have to be able to make fun of yourself when you fail, right? So that people are sitting there thinking, Oh my God, like, is this a big thing? I am happy to tell you how I screwed it up. Right? And I talk about how if there's been any one thing that I've been particularly good at in higher education, it's failing. Paul Quinn, We tried to be a normal college that didn't work. We tried to have a football team that didn't work. That's how we got a farm out of it, right? We became an urban work college because being a normal college just wasn't going to get it for us. We figured out a different accrediting model because the normal accreditation stuff wasn't really working well for us. You have to be willing to say that doesn't work now. What? Right, what's next? Because you can't just stop at the point that didn't work.

You can't just stop at your failure. So we don't even call it a failure. We just simply tell each other, we don't allow our stumbles to become a fall. Stumbles are expected. They're part of the iterative process. You are rewarded for what happens after your stumble. And that's how we've done it. And I just try to be transparent and authentic, and I own my mistakes, and then we move on.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
The conversation then pivoted to what motivates institutions and people to undertake the very hard work of bringing about significant change or transformation. Do you need to be facing an existential threat? Do you need to be uncomfortable to be willing to take a risk? Here's Michael Sorrell.

MICHELLE WEISS:
You can talk about discomfort or not, but what I pay attention to is where the best ideas come from. And I rarely see them come out of a moment of scarcity and the mental space that scarcity creates. That's really about leadership. That's about visionary leaders coming in and providing clarity of perspective. Here's the vision. Here's where we need to go. I don't think you can scare people into creativity. I do think that you can connect them to purpose and they can bring out their best ideas. It's not about fear. It's about we want to pay attention to the human emotions in general when it comes to change and innovation. And regardless of if you are in discomfort or comfort, we want to set the conditions for people to be as creative as possible, to feel in community and aligned around the vision. And that change is something they can actually all be a part of.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
That's a good note on which to end my conversation with Michelle Weiss of the National University System, Bridget Burns of the University Innovation Alliance, and Michael Sorrell of Paul Quinn College. Thanks to all of them for their insights to the good folks at South by Southwest for letting us bring you

these highlights from the event and to Pearson inclusive access for its support of the key. I was struck by one thing in this conversation. It was the emphasis on experimentation and learning from failure, or, as Michael Sorrell put it, not being afraid of trying and stumbling. Colleges and universities face a lot of questions and challenges right now, and the path forward isn't always clear. But as I scan the landscape, I think there's a lot more risk and complacency and clinging to the status quo than in trying new ways to serve students and fulfill their missions. That's all for today's episode. I'm Doug Letterman. Thanks for joining us. And until next week, stay well and stay safe.