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THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Colleges are focused as never before, and the role of student wellbeing in ensuring persistence and completion. What are the special challenges and strategies for the growing numbers of students who are studying partially or fully online? Hello, and welcome to the Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-Founder of IHE. And today's episode is a little different from the norm. I essentially outsourced it from a great conversation that took place earlier this month at Digital Universities US, an event that Inside Higher Ed co-hosted in Chicago with our partners from Times Higher Education. The event overall featured a wide range of sessions about how colleges and universities were making their way in the increasingly digital world that we live in, and evolving their practices to serve the changing expectations of students, employees, and their other constituents. One particular conversation featured leaders from three very different institutions talking about how their colleges and universities create online or blended educational experiences that build a sense of community and belonging for students, prepare faculty and staff members to respond to learners' social and psychological needs, as well as their academic ones and use data effectively.

The session was moderated by my colleague Charlotte Coles of Times Higher Education, and featured Sarah Dysart, Senior Director of online learning at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Omid Fotuhi, Director of Learning Innovation at WGU Labs, and Jeremy Alexis, Vice Provost in the Office of Professional and Continuing Education at Illinois Institute of Technology, whose amazing campus in Chicago played host to the event. An edited version of the conference discussion follows. Before we begin, here's a word from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is sponsored this series of podcasts on post-secondary student success.

SPEAKER:

This episode of The Key is brought to you by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, working to ensure

that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are no longer predictors of educational success. Learn more about the foundation's work to improve digital teaching and learning advance institutional transformation and more at usprogram.gatesfoundation.org.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Now on to today's episode. We'll hear first from Charlotte Coles.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Looking back at the last couple of years, what new observations do you have of students' experience of higher education? How much has changed from your perspective? Jeremy?

JEREMY:

I think it's interesting because for about the last 20, 25 years, the consulting firms I work for, we've always been pitching, we are in the time of greatest change in the history of humanity. And for 20 years, we were saying that, but now I kind of actually believe it, right? That there's between the pandemic and the rise of AI and everything else going on there, it's just really sort of a really a time of great change for our students. I've seen our students, they need a little bit more structure and instruction before they get going, but once they have that, they're actually going further than students that I've had in the past. So, I think it's kind of a balance that we're seeing. But I'm kind of interested in what's going to happen in the next few years as some of these trends and factors start to become more pronounced.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

I mean, you say they need more instructions. Do you think that's because there's more tools and devices available to them? Or is it?

JEREMY:

I think much of it might have to do... And this is just a hypothesis. Much of it might have to do with their education and K through 12, where it felt like there's a lot more structure to their learning. And they're not necessarily prepared to build their own process. So, instead, they need a process. But once they've seen it, they're actually quite adept at customizing it to their own needs.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Got it. And Sarah, at Michigan?

SARAH:

Yeah. So, this is such a great question. I think, not that it's changed, but I'm an educational psychologist by training. And the context in which learners are situated is so incredibly important. And our institution is heavily residential. We have been kind of slowly moving more toward formal online degrees. We have a vast open portfolio, but many of the instructors on campus are really focused on residential learners. And I think the need for instructors to be thinking about the context in which learners are situated, not just physical context, but what's happening psychologically, what's happening emotionally to these learners, really hit instructors in a way that was new to them in some ways during the pandemic. And I think that that's really changed in terms of how instructors are willing to put more attention to what's happening in learners' lives, what are even our residential learners focusing on, what are they balancing in addition to their studies. And learners are expecting that, they're expecting more flexibility, they're expecting people to be accommodating and understanding of the things that they're going through in their lives that don't just involve their academic track.

OMID:

Yeah, lots of thoughts and just echoing what my colleagues are saying here. But it's hard not to contextualize this question around some of the recent disruptions relating to the pandemic and technology. What we noticed, we've got some data that shows that as a result of the pandemic, more so than any other time in history, there were higher levels of self-reported isolation students, not just saying that I don't feel like I'm connected or I don't feel like I have access to resources, but literally saying I feel isolated. That's a pretty extreme state for individuals to be going through, especially as they're starting a new experience where they're hoping to integrate into society. That's a very difficult backdrop to begin your experience in higher ed. And then on the back of that, we have this advent of technology, which also was fueled by the fact that you can also experience your learning through more flexible mechanisms. You can choose to take some of the learning at home or after we've come out of the pandemic, have some combination of at home or in class.

Once students have tasted that, there's more options. Now, the irony of options is that it also has a tax with choice, right? Like if you have options, you now have to exert energy to make a choice. And that too is adding a layer of complication for students. What we're seeing in the workforce in some of the large surveys that are going out, when we ask individuals now what their preferred modality of work is, and you can ask yourselves what this is for you as well. People are saying, I actually prefer a flexible model where I can choose to go in on uncertain days and not on other days. And this is particularly true for subgroups that have more competing demands, right? If you have a family at home, if you have to have a job at the same time of going to school, then the flexible option makes sense. It's also true for students who are now also saying, now that I've tasted that there is an option, I want that flexible modality, but we don't fully understand the complications and the consequences of this modality quite yet.

And I think there's a lot happening that we don't yet fully understand, but we know there's sort of an emerging set of tensions that students are grappling with. One last bit of data, which is really interesting. We've been working with a number of schools. And one of the most recent patterns that I keep hearing over and over for traditional brick and mortar institutions, especially those who have on-campus residence options, more so than any other time, students are saying that they want on-campus residence options, but they're asking for individual accommodations. They're really, for whatever reason, quite averse to sharing the rooms with other people more than any other time. I don't really know what that means, but I do think it's an important data point to reflect on. And I think in the context of all these changes, it's kind of leading to recognition that students are just navigating, they're learning in a very different way.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Just picking up on that point around flexibility, do you agree that all institutions are gonna have to move towards this flexible approach to create the most optimum online learning environments for their students? Sarah, maybe?

SARAH:

Yes, absolutely. And I think we are specifically seeing this in our mental health services that the CAPS, our counseling and psychological services unit on campus. In discussions with them, they've said that so many of the learners that are traditionally residential enrolled in residential programs are still requesting the online telemental health counseling options. And I think it raises some challenges around to what you were saying, space, where do people actually take these calls? Where are they taking their

counseling calls, if not coming into a counselor's space? So, that flexibility in thinking about offering services for online learners, it creates a more robust infrastructure within the university that actually serves all students better. And that's really, I think, where we're able to push forward over the past couple of years, is helping people understand that where there might have been reluctance within the central infrastructure units to offer some of those online services, pushing them into that through the pandemic, help them see how that flexible remote options for various services are really more accommodating to all learners who have different things that they're juggling in their lives.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Yeah. Jeremy, how do you approach flexible learning environments at IT?

JEREMY:

Yeah. I like to use the analogy that when the electric guitar was invented, right? The first version of the electric guitar was essentially just an acoustic guitar that you plugged in, it was slightly louder, right? And it really didn't take advantage of the fact that you were turning sort of physical mechanical things into electronic signals. It wasn't until much later that the actual, the electric guitar that we're familiar with sort of opened up a whole range of possibilities. And I feel that we're sort of on that, that sort of tipping point in the world of online education that we've essentially taken the old way, right, and sort of made it digital to some extent, but we're only now starting to see how this, these new approaches can enable and unlock innovation for students. And I think the key word to that is flexibility, right? It's optionality and flexibility that whether you're on campus or you're off campus, I actually see that becoming less and less of a distinction going forward, because we really start to see the students being able to engage in classes in new ways, and not only in sort of the traditional class time, but how do you start to make this more of a sort of a persistent thing?

So, when you have that question, can you get it answered quickly, immediately, sort of just in time, as opposed to waiting to have to have it answered a week from now from your faculty member?

CHARLOTTE COLES:

I think it's safe to say that whether you're faculty or administrator, that student wellbeing is everybody's responsibility within the institution. And so, for yourselves, like how does your institution ensure that people have the training, the skills, the confidence to tackle any challenges or opportunities around student wellbeing?

SARAH:

This is such a great question when you juxtapose the residential environment versus the online environment. Learners who are in strictly online programs, their primary touchpoint is the instructor in the course. And so, it puts a burden or a responsibility depending on how you wanna frame it on the instructor in ways that you don't necessarily normally see when you're teaching residential to be monitoring students' wellbeing. So, one of the things that we have really focused with our, when building the infrastructure for programs within academic units is to also have a staff member who is really focused on being the concierge and the point of contact that can be the person who's working with the faculty members to. When a faculty member experiences a student in crisis, they know that they can contact the student services professional, who knows the right routes and the right processes to refer that student to the resources that they need, and making sure that those processes are mapped out, that they're clear to everyone, that everyone knows what services are and aren't available, especially in

a space where if you don't have appropriate licensure to offer counseling across state lines or internationally, that becomes a problem.

So, knowing what services aren't available to students is really important and puts an extra load of knowledge that needs to be on those professionals that are working in the online space.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Have you faced any challenges with this? Has there been any challenges you've had to address along the way? I imagine it's a journey.

SARAH:

Yes, absolutely. We've had students who were in crisis and the instructor didn't know how to actually handle it. And prior to the pandemic, we did not actually have telehealth counseling for online learners. So, it was a challenge for both the counselor, embedded counselor within the school, the student services professional, as well as the faculty member to know how to handle that particular instance. But those instances are also cases that help us explain to broader people who are need to be persuaded at the infrastructure or institutional leadership level, that these learners need to be served in the same way as our residential learners do. And so, we do need to have these services available to them.

JEREMY:

We're at a much different scale in terms of just size as University of Michigan. So, I think the pathway that that is, is emerging, it's actually being run by our Vice Provost of Academic Affairs is really focused on mentoring, right? So, we're building a mentoring structure, which is training, evaluation and support of a large group of mentors of our students who can go back and mentor other students. And again, it's very critical that they know what they can do and what they can't do. So, they know when to move them to the right counseling. But having that sort of early warning system of lots of students who are empowered to do the mentoring, but also empowered to know where to send students once they observe something for our scale that seems like the best solution to this particular issue.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

(UNKNOWN) Omid?

OMID:

These initiatives are clear examples of sort of a cultural focus that we have currently on wellbeing, and that has both positives and some potential negative consequences. Whenever there's a priority initiative like wellbeing, like belonging, like a growth mindset, it's usually a reaction to the observation that there's something in the system that warrants that need, right? We only are talking about wellbeing because we know that students are struggling with wellbeing. The challenge there is that when you have this initiative that is sort of very explicit, one thing to keep in mind is where is the onus of change being placed. So, oftentimes you'll see institutions say, this is the year of wellbeing, or we prioritize and value wellbeing, but there's not clear intentionality with where the onus or the expectation of change is. Sometimes it's sort of deployed as a marketing campaign saying, we care about well-being, so go out and be well without any institutional change, or the faculty who are the sole points of contact are now faced with this burden of supporting wellbeing without having the resources or the training on how to do that.

So, I think it's critically important to be mindful of how our students are doing what they need to be able to thrive. But with that, there should also be a recognition of where is the onus of impact and change

being placed, who is sort of expected to bear the load of this change as you roll any sort of large campaign out. And I think these are important considerations to think about.

SARAH:

That's a great call out. And if I can add something, I think I'm gonna pat myself on the back a little bit, but this is where over the past year or so, we've joined the Okanagan Charter. For those who are not familiar, it's a focus inter-institutional focus on mental health and wellbeing. And this is a place where one of the things that people realized is that faculty don't adequately know how to support mental health and wellbeing within courses. We're partnering with our Center for Teaching and Learning to help change that. So, we're creating a course for them that's actually helping them be able to understand what are some of the indicators that you need to be looking for, what is some of the research today in terms of how this manifests within the experience within your course, what are some of the things that you should be looking for, and what are the routes that you need to take to refer students, both if you're a residential instructor or an online instructor. And I think that that's really important.

You can't just say that, that it's a priority, but then not actually do the work underlying that to actually fix the system that we're in. (MUSIC PLAYS)

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

This episode of The Key features a discussion that took place at Digital Universities US, a joint conference from Times Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed in Chicago this month. The session was moderated by Times Higher Ed, Charlotte Coles, and included the University of Michigan, Sarah Dysart, Omid Fotuhi of WGU Labs and Illinois Techs, Jeremy Alexis. Here's the rest of the conversation starting with Charlotte Coles.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

What role does data play in this, in this online environment? How should we be using data to help inform and not just be reactive, as you mentioned, Omid, but proactive?

OMID:

I'll certainly have a bias for data 'cause I am a research researcher by training. But I think especially in times of uncertainty, Daniel Kahneman has a fantastic book called "Noise". And he talks about the utility of inference. So, how is it that you can take the data that's available and make an inference about what it means, what kind of patterns it represents? And in that book, he talks about the two kinds of errors that can sort of skew your ability to make an inference. The one kind of error is bias, which means that systematically people look at the data and they sort of interpret it in one way, which is off target by a small margin. And that's typically where we focus a lot of our attention is like, in which ways are our institutions or programs biased? In which way are they sort of misdirected? But the other kind of noise is actually random error, which is actually a larger part of the kind of error composition. And that means that data falls all over the place, especially in times of uncertainty.

Now, the best remedy to this random error is to increase your sample size and try to have as much data as you can. So, data is at our disposal, and most of institutions, whether online or residential, will have access to vast amounts of data, but often it's underutilized. The compliment that in what we're doing with WGU Labs is we're hosting what we're calling a college innovation network, which is a consortium of 17 different schools. With that very explicit goal in mind is, how is it that we can aggregate data from across all these schools, right, navigating different kinds of challenges in various ways so that we can make the best inferences possible with the little kind of data that we have available? So, I think data is critical. I think it's often underutilized because it's sometimes overwhelming, but how is it that we can put into place as the structures, the personality expertise to capture that and synthesize it, I think would be helpful.

SARAH:

This is a place where data needs to be used very carefully, because the indicators that you will see in online learners and the ways that they show up to the course depending, or program, depending on how that design is intentionally eliciting certain behaviors may be conflated with mental health or wellbeing challenges, when in reality, sometimes these learners just are juggling different priorities in their lives. So, I think this is a place where we try to remind people that data is both quantitative and qualitative, and the qualitative really matters. You may have clear indicators when somebody's in front of you if they're facing a wellbeing challenge. That is more challenging when you have the psychological distance in the online space. So, you have to seek out ways to intentionally elicit some of that data from people. And that's where those staff, being those staff or those instructors, being able to spot something, not making assumptions, but also doing proactive outreach to learners and saying, are you facing a challenge?

Is there something that you're, that we can help you with is so important to be able to elicit whether or not a student is struggling?

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Absolutely. And Jeremy, same question to you. And on top of that, how important is it to communicate to the student? What kind of data you're collecting to monitor their health and wellbeing?

JEREMY:

I love that comment about the mix of qualitative and quantitative, right, 'cause oftentimes, when we look at a data set, you're worried about the difference between a mystery and a puzzle, right? A puzzle is a problem that has a single clear piece of data that will answer it. But most of the time when we're thinking about student wellbeing and student issues, it's more of a mystery, right? It's a mix of factors. It's no single one factor, and no single data point is all of a sudden gonna make it easier to solve their problems. So, that's why having the mix of qualitative and quantitative and doing one-on-one check-ins can be so important. I think, though, that the issue that, that you brought up is one that we're gonna continue to face, and I'm not sure that I have a good answer for that, which is just being transparent about what data is being collected. And it's very interesting because a lot of our students in their other online life, right, tons and tons of data is being collected about them, and they have signed user agreements and they seem to be OK with it, but we can't use that as an excuse not to treat our world with the students very differently, right, so that we can be more transparent and upfront about what's going on.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

I want to move on slightly to talk about community. So, whether you're online, hybrid in person, what strategies do you use to create that sense of community and belonging for students, whatever environment they're learning in?

OMID:

It's taken for granted that we are all sort of pre-equipped with some pretty core motivational foundations. One of which is that we have this need to belong. I mean, the reason why we come together in groups is because of that need to belong. The reason why we have motivation facts, I would argue, is also because of that fundamental need to belong. And in part that shows itself when you sort of create opportunities that allows people to organically and naturally try to connect, and often they do. So, I think as we think about just that fundamental motivation, it's important to recognize that it's often there, right? It's just about being able to unleash it and provide the channels to allow people to do that connection in a way that feels nourishing to their core needs. From a sort of fundamental dimension, I think, I think there's a lot happening, and it's just about creating those pathways. The challenge, and I'll go back to that sort of broad contextual movement around wellbeing. There's also that parallel movement around belonging right now.

And just like the year of wellbeing, there's also the year of belonging where literally I have seen examples of billboards as students are driving into campus saying, belong! (LAUGHTER) And the thing about belonging is it doesn't work when you're explicitly told to belong. Students before they even set foot on campus, are told that you belong here hundreds of times. After a while, they're like, why am I being told that I belong here? Should I question whether I belong here or not? What's interesting about belonging is that the best way, or the best path to fostering belonging is in creating a position of interest and a position of just appreciating individuals from their further diverse experiences and backgrounds. That means taking the time to ask them about themselves, taking the time to show that they are part of this institution. And that's a pretty heavy load. That's a heavy burden to carry. But that's really the most meaningful way of doing that. And then on top of that, allowing them to connect with each other.

Right. I think there's a fundamental need to see their peers as a resource that they can leverage. And so, how do you create the structures for them to be able to do that connection in a way that they want to?

CHARLOTTE COLES:

Is it more challenging, say, if a student is fully online?

OMID:

I think it's a different dynamic because again, that fundamental need is there. And in some ways, if we want to get very theoretical, it might actually be a better balance, because as you think of the more traditional institutions, for some subgroups, there's almost an excessive amount of pressure to fit in as though belonging is the only way into this one profile of a student. Whereas if you really think about the educational experience, it is a transactional relationship, like students are here to get an education with the hopes of getting a job. And as a culture, and maybe as this group, and more, more, more generally us as administrators, as policymakers, we realize that belonging is associated with better retention, better performance and better outcomes. And so, we've really pushed this narrative of trying to get everyone to belong. But there is also a cost to that, because at sometimes belonging can be toxic, especially when it's pushed too hard and pushed in too much of a, sort of a monotone way.

Online learning can offer that balance. If you are competing with other demands at home, if you have a certain lifestyle that fosters better to a transactional relationship with your peers and your education, then that provides a really great alternative.

SARAH:

Yeah. Well, that's such a great vein of discussion that you've opened up. When you look at the research around why students choose certain programs, their prior history and the way that they feel like they belonged or didn't in a particular environment, predicts their future choices to engage in educational opportunities. So, when you think about students who are underrepresented on a campus and they were forced to come to a residential experience, being able to pursue that online where they may not feel marginalized or may not feel as much in terms of stereotype threat when they're not necessarily engaging with the populations who may be imposing those assumptions on them opens up an opportunity for them to be able to perform in their own situated environments, and to be able to think through how their learning experience isn't necessarily isolated to that particular physical context of a campus, but it might be related to their jobs and they're able to understand how the work that they're doing in their program actually aligns with their professional aspirations and to be able to apply that there.

In terms of the interpersonal connections, we've really found XR to be a helpful tool for mixing and blending populations between our residential learners and our online populations. So, when you think about the different clubs or groups or events that are happening on campus, to have that be represented in 360 video for the online learners and for them to engage in a way that seems more authentic or even telepresence robots being able to interact in a way as if they're there is a way for them to create an opportunity that makes them feel like they're part of that broader community in a way that they weren't able to before.

JEREMY:

When it comes to building community, especially in an online environment, I really believe that rituals are important, right? We have them when we live in a physical space and we have a co-located community, but online they're just as important, right, because it's a way to sort of bring in some normalcy, bring in some standards of behavior, bring in some traditional interactions. So, it's even simple things like how do you check into class? How do you give feedback? And if you build those rituals, it starts to build a connection because oftentimes online learners, they're coming from different places, they don't always have sort of the same experiences. It's a much more diverse group. So, bringing a few shared rituals together can really help. We've also really pushed social contracts as well as a way for the team to sort of set up and understand the rules of the class before they get going. Like the other day, I've been online now for, teaching online now for what, three, 3.5 years.

For the first time, someone ate lunch in front of me. (LAUGHTER) And I realized like, you know, I've been doing this for hours and hours a day. No one's ever eaten lunch in front of me. There must be some weird, unwritten rule that no one eats lunch in front of Jeremy that I just didn't understand. (LAUGHTER) And I thought that was great that it broke it. But it also made me say, hey, there was this sort of unwritten rule. Maybe we need to be more transparent about what the rules are of behavior around these things so people do feel more comfortable.

CHARLOTTE COLES:

And do you think that will develop over time? Like are we still adapting to this new set of rules in terms of what are the guidelines for how you behave online?

JEREMY:

Like anything, like you can either be proactive and intentional about it, or it will just happen to you, right? The rules will be there whether you want them or not, right? Yeah. You can just choose to author them in a strategic way to align with your values versus kind of letting them happen.

SPEAKER:

And a lot of these discussions, we tend to take a course centric view of this and rightfully so, because what happens inside the course makes a big difference. What happens outside of the individual online courses also makes a huge difference when it comes to wellbeing, when it comes to retention and all of that. My question has to do with whether those support services are best delivered within a dedicated online unit or whether they're better served by that online unit training, the different student services admissions and all of that to provide services to fully online students.

SARAH:

I think it depends highly on context and your institution and what resources are available. At the University of Michigan, each college and school functions as its own little ecosystem. So, from our perspective, we have people within, I'm in the Center for Academic Innovation within the Provost Office, and we train people or we support better understanding within those units. I think from my perspective, they are the ones who are closest to the student and can actually provide that day-to-day support in a meaningful way. We do have some services that are at the infrastructure level. And similarly, we provide the support to those units to help understand what's happening within those programs.

SPEAKER:

As I've been sitting here this week and just meeting different people, we've been able to sit down face-to-face and have more natural, authentic conversations just because we're in that proximity. And so, from an online perspective, how do we emulate that? How do you emulate that? Very natural. And I know there's always gonna be some element of the unnatural just because you're not in the same place. But in building that community, how have you trained people or approached building the natural conversations within the online or hybrid communities?

OMID:

I think it's a great question, and I'm not gonna pretend like I have the solution. I go back to my earlier comment that again, we're sort of social creatures that have this need to belong. Increasingly, there's a question around what is belonging? Is it literally the face-to-face one-on-one kind of connection that you have? Or can it be more of a symbolic, maybe a digitally facilitated kind of experience? I think it's probably a combination of both. And to the Jeremy's point earlier, you can have mechanisms that nourish that, that same sense of connection. I think routines and traditions are really important. Like, for instance, at WGU, while it's completely online competency based and the only interaction you have is with your mentor, they still have a graduation ceremony that's in person. That's very important to have that celebration with others in person conferences. The reason why we pay \$1,000 to go to a conference on top of the transportation costs is because we know there is something very unique about that human exchange, the organic exchange that happens just by being in the same room as somebody else.

So, I don't know that there has to be an sort of an and, or, I think it's probably some combination, because again, there's a lot of benefits to being able to access certain experiences like your work experience, like your education in a way that is conducive to your life demands, at the same time that need to belong as fundamental. And so, I'm not sure we're gonna find a digital replacement for that as far as I can tell.

JEREMY:

I think it's interesting. The first time I was in front of a big set of tiles, if you will, and I was using my own strategy of I'll just wait them out. Usually, in a physical group, right, if you wait it out, eventually someone will talk. But when you're on the screen, like 15 minutes into it, I'm like, oh, this is not going to work. (LAUGHTER) So, one of the things we have a really... we call it a sticky learning playbook that we share with faculty. And a couple of things really help, right, it's so simple, but it's this idea of templates, right, of, if you're going to have people have a conversation, break them into a smaller group and give them a template that they can use to manage the discussion, because it is so easy just to sit back and be passive on the screen and not jump in. But if you give a group a template that they have to come back and share, it's very helpful. We've also observed that the very tried and true sort of elementary school parent share method works fantastically.

I even use it with online executive courses that I teach because it's still as helpful to sort of play with an idea with someone online first before you share it back with the group.

SARAH:

But I don't have the answer in the fully online space. But in the hybrid space, I think thinking about the curriculum where you start with an opportunity to meet in person and to engage in person, if you do have people coming to campus or if you're offering flexibility for residential learners helps to create that understanding of, I can actually see this person's facial expressions as they're saying something. I can hear their voice in my head. When you then transition the curriculum to the online environment that carries with it, you feel like you know that person in a way that you may not have known them earlier. So, if you are experimenting with hybrid programs, putting that in-person element at the beginning of the experience can really go a long way.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You were just listening to a discussion about student wellbeing and success in online and blended settings from this month's Digital Universities US event. Thanks to the three higher ed leaders who participated in this panel and in all the other great conversations that unfolded during the conference. Thanks also to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its support of this in the last two episodes of The Key podcast. The podcast in this series explored various aspects of how colleges are changing their practices to focus on making it possible for more learners to achieve their educational goals in high-quality programs. There is no more pressing issue in higher education these days because it has moral, financial, political and other implications. It's the subject of Inside Higher Ed's newest editorial offering our daily Student Success newsletter. And it will be the topic of another major event that we'll be putting on with Times Higher Education in November in Los Angeles, if you have ideas for how we can best track these issues.

That's all for this episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next time, stay well and stay safe.
(MUSIC PLAYS)