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Ep. 83: What Colleges and Instructors Need From Ed-Tech Companies

DOUG LETTERMAN:

The last two years disrupted many aspects of higher education and the educational technology market, and the relationship between colleges and companies are no exception. Hello and welcome to The Key Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Letterman, Inside Higher Ed's editor and co-founder, and host of The Key. Thanks for listening. This is the second episode in a three part series about the current state of Digital Teaching and Learning, which was made possible in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Last week's episode featured two researchers exploring how recent exposure to online and virtual instruction has altered faculty and student interest in using technology in learning and how colleges are responding. This week, I'm joined by two people who have through a variety of roles, sat at the intersection of where technology meets teaching and learning. Kara Monroe is founder of Monarch strategies, a consulting firm she founded early this year, after 25 years as an academic administrator at Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana.

Kelvin Bentley is senior consultant at WGU labs, where he works with companies that want to help colleges and universities educate students at scale. Over 25 years, he has worked with a range of public two year and four year colleges and multiple edtech companies. In the conversation that follows, we'll talk about how well the many hundreds of edtech companies that work with colleges, professors and students meet the needs of the institutions and their people where they fall short, and how they can do better. Here's Kara Monroe.

KARA MONROE:

I would put the focus on the people, I think where the situation works the best, particularly, Doug, since you're focused really on the software that enables teaching and learning. You've got to have a company that understands that we have to get faculty really interested and engaged in using a tool, that they want to support that endeavor, that they want to relate to faculty, that they want to work with faculty, and that they're willing to bring in people who the faculty can relate to and who they want to work with. Some of the best companies are ones who have taken folks from the faculty ranks and made them a part of their team because then they speak the same language as faculty.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Before we begin the conversation with Kelvin Bentley of WGU labs and Kara Monroe of Monarch strategies. Here's a word from the Gates Foundation.

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

Now, on to today's discussion, Kara and Kelvin, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here. Can you tell our listeners a little about your backgrounds and how you come at this conversation, and maybe share a bit about your philosophy about the role of technology in teaching and learning? Kara, I'll start with you, maybe.

KARA MONROE:

Thanks again, for having us, Doug. I had another conversation with someone else earlier today. And I'm gonna borrow a phrase from that conversation, which is, technology should enable us to automate some of the lower order process skills that we tend to spend a lot of time on in higher education, a lot of the transactional processes that happen to make higher ed occur. It allows us to automate those so that we can spend time on those higher order skills and on those higher order activities, like the relationship management with our students and our faculty, which is the most important.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

And is that true in the teaching and learning process as well? And can you maybe give an example of how that works?

KARA MONROE:

Absolutely. So, I come at everything as a mathematics educator. That was my original training and so it's still a foundational core of who I am. And I think about a part of mathematics is drill, it's repetition, it's practice, it's learning to use the algorithms so that we can spend time on the problem-solving. If I can use technology to help students work themselves through whatever they're struggling with in terms of the mechanics of the algorithm, so that we can spend more time on the project-based and problem-based learning, that's the beauty of where technology can really help in that teaching and learning process.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Kelvin, welcome you into the conversation.

KELVIN BENTLEY:

Technology has a place in different areas. I think it definitely needs to be as a tool. So, I don't think we should always just lead with the technology and hope for the best. I think there's still a lot of wishful thinking, magical thinking about what technology can do, or what we hope it can do for us. And I think we need to do a better job of really figuring out what it can do for us, collect better data, and be much more transparent across our institutions about what's working and what's not working. I don't think we should wait for journal articles about all of this to come out. I think there needs to be almost kind of like

a yearly update where institutions go through a process, really doing kind of a post-mortem and actually describing what technologies do we actually use first of all, because I think that's still an open question. And then what impact did it have on pedagogy? What impact did it have on saving faculty members time and their busy schedules? What impact did it have on supporting the wraparound services that we wanna provide students regardless of the modality of the courses they take?

And I don't think we do enough of that, and so if we could do more of that, in terms of our reflection on the use of technology, I think that would be helpful.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Can you maybe each of you give a little bit of a sense of the role that you are playing now or have recently played in Kara's case, and how you came at this set of issues in that role, and maybe going a little bit further back in your career? But sort of what are the ways in which your roles have had you address and confront this set of issues?

KARA MONROE:

I served as provost and senior vice president of student experience and academic experience at Ivy Tech Community College for three years and had roles of increasing responsibility at Ivy Tech for the 20 years prior to that. I've always sat at a place where I was the bridge between technology and the business of teaching and learning. So, whatever those processes were, that we were trying to enable with technology, I sat there and translated those for folks. Later on, in my roles, I moved up in the frame, it was about enabling us to use the technology as well as possible. And I love what Kelvin said about that portfolio of tools. And what do we actually use? And what does it do? Because one of the frames that I brought to that thinking was, are we using everything we can in this tool, or is there are we not using it and we should be? And do we need to get rid of some of these because we're really not using them to our advantage? And that comes with a lot of change management that you have to do.

In my role today at Monarch strategies, I'm still doing many of the same kinds of things. My consultancy is around helping institutions and individuals become the very best that they can be. So, I'm applying some of those same frameworks with clients now. It's just a different set of people that I'm working with every day.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Kelvin, tell just a little bit about yourself and how you come at this set of issues.

KELVIN BENTLEY:

For the past 20-plus years, I've been in higher education in various roles. I've been a faculty member and administrator of online learning initiatives that community colleges, private and public universities. And so, especially in those roles, I've had to be the person to say, OK, we have online learning programs. So, what types of tools will we use to support them? What types of technologies could we use to provide access to things like online tutoring and online proctoring? And a couple of roles, I was the kind of the executive sponsor of, partnering with the right technology companies to provide those services because they didn't exist. And so, now in my role at WGU labs, I serve as a senior consultant, where I'm actually working with early-stage edtech companies. So, it gives me an opportunity to kind of take my previous experiences, and almost kind of be the higher ed voice to help guide them in terms of how they market themselves to the certain institutions, and not just again, focus on, hey, we're awesome.

But really helping them to dive more deeply, to hopefully establish really mutually beneficial relationships with the right partners.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Historically, how successfully do you think the EdTech market has served higher education? I would judge the companies by how well they help institutions meet their own needs. How do you judge their performance in that way, particularly on the teaching and learning side of things, Kelvin?

KELVIN BENTLEY:

I would say that for the most part, the vendors that I've worked with, I was able to find the right individuals to really kind of listen and to provide the support that we needed beyond the basic sales pitch. Just trust us. We'll provide you a service as long as you pay your bills. And so I was able to kind of find a value add beyond what we originally hired them to do.

KARA MONROE:

I would put the focus on the people, I think, where the situation works the best, particularly, Doug, since you're focused really on the software that enables teaching and learning. You've got to have a company that understands that we have to get faculty really interested and engaged in using a tool, that they wanna support that endeavor, that they wanna relate to faculty, that they wanna work with faculty, and that they're willing to bring in people who faculty can relate to and who they want to work with. Some of the best companies are ones who have taken folks from the faculty ranks and made them a part of their team because then they speak the same language as faculty. I think the other place where that personal relationship works the best with those who work in the higher ed space is, and I know, in higher ed it's mostly consultative selling. That's what most of the vendors in higher ed will tell you they do. But some are better than others. And so when they really do, when my salesperson, or my client representative, or whatever they call them, really listens to me and understands what my problem or my challenge is, and then doesn't just try to make my challenge fit their solution.

But instead says, hey, I just talked to Kelvin, and he's working on a problem like this. Let me make an introduction for you so that you could talk to him. Because the people are gonna solve the problem. The technology is just a tool in their toolbox. And companies that admit that they are the companies that are doing well. Those that come in and say we're gonna solve all your problems, and here are all the benefits we're gonna help you do. I've grown tired of working with them.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Describe the consultative approach that's real. Like, what does that look like?

KARA MONROE:

I can think of three or four of the best customer relationship folks that I've worked with who I'm dear friends with, and will call when I'm having a challenge with something and say, Hey, has you talked to your other clients? Is there anybody else in the community college space who's dealing with this, and it may have no relevance to their product whatsoever? They are boots on the ground across the entire higher education space, listening to the challenges that I face, that Kelvin faces, that all of our colleagues face. And if they can help us make connections to one another, that's great. If their product happens to help us do that, even better. But they go beyond. I'm just trying to sell you something and make my quarterly goal. They're really trying to create a relationship with you.

KELVIN BENTLEY:

Someone who really wants to be less of a vendor and more of a partner. So, someone who wants to form a partnership. And that takes time, that takes trust on both sides, it takes transparency. Also, a company is willing to walk away if they can't actually solve your use case.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

One of these days, we won't have to ask about the impact of the pandemic. But we're a ways away from that. Right now, I fear. We know most institutions intensified their use of technology in delivering education during the last two years. What's your sense of how that altered or didn't the relationship or the balance of power between tech companies and institutions?

KARA MONROE:

I think at the beginning of the pandemic when everybody rushed to go online and do emergency remote instruction. There were a lot of vendors who stepped forward, made their products free, offered them at a discount, provided tools so that institutions that weren't enabled already could become enabled. And I talked about this several times at Ivy Tech, that we were very lucky in that we had an excellent foundation already existing already in place to build on. We had video technology licenses, we had Learning Management System licenses, we had all of those things, robust training, all of that. It was still hard for us. So, the technology vendors stepped up and did their part, which is say, this is a weird situation that we hope to never go through again. We're gonna make our product available to you. Beyond that, I think everybody maybe hoped or thought that institutions would use this as a learning opportunity and an exploration opportunity. And even where it was appropriate, a capacity-building opportunity.

We look at all the money that the federal government poured into institutions of higher education through the half dollars. Institutions... And again, this is my perspective, because I do think technology is an important tool in the learning process. Institutions that I think used those dollars well made investments into investing in technology that could help if a similar situation arose in the future. And we don't know that we're done with COVID-based quarantine. I hope we are but we don't know that for sure yet. But I just facilitated a session last week with some educational technology leaders from across higher education. And what many of them are saying is, everybody just wants to get back to normal. So, higher education, I've said this for years, I'll continue to say it, we're not very good at our own core business, which is learning. Because we don't learn from our own experiences as higher education institutions and try to take what we learned about COVID and build it into the teaching and learning process in a more robust way.

Everybody really is just trying to get back to normal. Institutions as a whole, I don't think have used COVID for the small amount of positive that this horrible situation could have had for us.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

I'm speaking today with Kara Monroe of Monarch strategies and Kelvin Bentley of WGU labs. I wanted to

go next to the question of the faculty view of technology in the teaching and learning process. Even pre-pandemic as there was sort of increased adoption, or at least more and more faculty members teaching a course online, etc, we weren't really seeing significant increases in the belief in the value of online education. And a lot of continued skepticism about the role of technology. And I'm curious how much that the pandemic and the sort of forced experimentation change that I still think remains a little bit of an open question. Although I certainly from a lot of my conversations, I sense that people have seen some movement. To what do you attribute the historical and just the extent it's continued faculty skepticism about the role of technology and the motivations of both technology companies and of administrators who are perceived as sort of pushing technology as the answer or a major part of the answer?

KELVIN BENTLEY:

It's a weird problem because we tackle it and sometimes in a nonsystematic way or systemic way. You might have a dean who says, yes, we need... I just came back from a conference or I just heard about this particular type of technology. We need to use it as a school, or as a department, or on a micro level, or faculties too. Hey, I have the same. I have this tool. I wanna use it. And we're not really having a very strategic conversation about what should we use within departments or institutionally. And then, what data will we actually track to know whether or not it's actually made a difference in the lives of students, in the lives of faculty, in our ability to actually be this institution of higher learning, of high quality? We're not doing as much work there because things are still very siloed. And then it depends on the executive sponsor or the faculty member. One thing that still is unclear to me is the tenure and promotion process. There's maybe not enough incentives built in the current T&P policies that would actually get more faculty excited.

KARA MONROE:

I wanna build on something Kelvin said in his response, though, to answer your question, Doug, about why is online education, high quality online education still viewed so inquisitively, I guess. Is the is the kindest word.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

That is a very kind word. I was just gonna say sceptically. But...

KARA MONROE:

Yes, that's probably the more accurate word. Thank you. And I think it is really around what Kelvin said about the strategy. I have talked with institutions in my new role as a consultant who, a decade ago made strategic decisions to not do online instruction. And they're now looking at that decision and going, Oh, my gosh, what did we do? We can't get that last decade back. And then I look at my former employer that used online instruction as an enormous growth opportunity but didn't put all the quality checkpoints in place along the line. I think that conversation around the strategy has to leverage both of those pieces. It has to leverage the why are we doing this? And how well will we do it and say that we're doing it as well as we can, given the resources that we have. No one's ever going to be perfect. But you've got to have both of those conversations and you've got to have alignment around both of those conversations. And not many institutions take the time to really have those good conversations, and to have them in an ongoing way because unfortunately, whether we call it the great resignation or the great reshuffling, it started long before COVID and it's gonna continue long after COVID.

And who was in place at an institution three years ago, when we had that conversation? And the last time is not as in place of that conversation now. And the lore behind these kinds of things is often so far removed from the truth of the conversation that actually occurred, that a lot of clarification has to happen on an ongoing basis.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

How do institutions credibly make the case that they're going to place a bigger bet or make technology-enabled learning of some kind, whether it's online or blended? We think this needs to be a more fundamental part of our strategy or a fundamental part of our strategy to fulfill our mission. And we're gonna make sure that we do it in that high-quality way. Because I do think that some of this inquisitiveness or skepticism about the role of technology in instruction is because faculty members or others are suspecting that their institutions are doing it as a tactic just to grow or, and are gonna cut corners. Now, figuring out where there really are cut corners versus where some faculty members are just saying, it's not what I'm used to doing. So, it's got to be of lower quality, which is certainly a factor sometimes in all of this. But I'm curious how you think about what institutions can do to be credible on this. Kara, since you've sort of raised those issues.

KARA MONROE:

The best way to do it, if you have the time and the attention and the ability to invest in it is to let it come from the ground up. Where we had the most buy-in and the most success was when faculty members were advocates with their fellow colleagues around a particular thing, whether it was a week classes, open educational resources. That always brought the most success. But you don't always have time for that. And so you try to enable those folks. And you try to reward those folks to tell their stories more broadly, and to share their stories more broadly, to try to help ideas come to scale. When you do that, though, and I think Doug you answered your own question a little bit, there has to be strategy around it. And there has to be some quality framework around it, whether it's LLC, whether it's QM, whether it's all the above. And it has to be in line with your mission. And I'll use an example from Ivy Tech. At one time Ivy Tech's leadership, not the current leadership, wanted to do online learning as a growth strategy only and was not focused on Hoosiers.

And that was not in line with our mission at all. And it was a failure. I think failures are OK. It's OK to test that. But that's one where you should have said maybe we shouldn't have even gone there because it was just not in line with our mission. And so I think you've got to look at the reality of the business very separately from what does our mission say we're going to do. And as long as you stay in line with your mission, you're probably OK.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

If you had a piece of advice or some advice for the many technology vendors and providers that want to operate in this teaching and learning space, what would you recommend they do or not do to best serve institutions, professors, students?

KELVIN BENTLEY:

Distance yourself as much as possible from salesy language. Sell without selling. Don't be a vendor, be a partner. Be someone who's actively listening and not just active listen to current customers. Like, even if someone says, Hey, you know, we loved your product, but we picked this other product over here. Find a way to stay in contact with those other folks because you can still learn something from them. They're evolving over time. And then I would also say for them to be more actively involved in professional

organizations, not just as an exhibitor, but as someone who is participating in conversations. Finding better ways also to work with your university community college, HBCU partners, to actually do better research around the product. And that could be through an advisory group, subgroups like that, or just taking in almost like a citizen science approach. Any school can kind of opt-in to anonymize data to show how the technology is making an impact. I don't know if enough organizations are doing that.

But I think we need to get more of that. And then of course, make that very transparent for anyone to find.

KARA MONROE:

Kelvin gave wonderful ideas. I can only build on those by adding, to let your customers tell their stories because that's the most impactful. I care most about what Kelvin is doing, not what vendor y is doing because we're colleagues. We know one another, that trusted relationship already exists. And the other one is, I don't think enough institutions are paying attention to price, and are paying attention to the cost of higher education. And so if we really wanna have a strong conversation about access as a tool for social mobility in this country, then we've got to talk about the price of higher education. Because healthcare is an abysmal industry, in my personal opinion. And it is disappointing to me that higher education outpaces the cost increases in healthcare on a regular basis. That should not be the case. If we really want to democratize higher education, we've got to talk about price at every level. It's not just the role of vendor. I used to tell vendors that I don't really care if you make a buck.

That's not true anymore. I know that they need to make money in order to enable their work and I recognize that now. I was wrong in that comment. But we all have to think about where our costs are, and how we bring them down so that students can afford an education.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

That was Kelvin Bentley of WGU labs and Kara Monroe of Monarch strategies. Thanks to them for their insights, to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its support, and to all of you for listening today. During the conversation, I was struck but not surprised by Kara and Kelvin's focus on how essential it is for technology providers working with colleges and universities on teaching and learning to listen to and really understand what the institutions and the instructors are trying to do, the goals they have, issues they're facing the problems they're trying to solve. Only then are the companies gonna have a real shot of being partners rather than vendors as both of our guests encourage them to be. And only then is technology likely to become a fully integrated part of the teaching and learning process, rather than an add-on viewed inquisitively as Kara Monroe so gently put it. That's all for this week's episode of The Key. In the last episode of this series, we'll take a look at how different types of colleges are rethinking how they incorporate digital technology into the teaching and learning they offer.

I'm Doug Letterman and until next week, stay well and stay safe.