

Transcription for

EP. 33: EXPANDING ONLINE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

ANDREW CLARK

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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 33: EXPANDING ONLINE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

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PAUL FAIN: This episode is sponsored by TimelyMD, a telehealth provider whose mission is to improve the well-being of college students by making virtual medical and mental health care accessible anytime, anywhere. With immediate medical care, scheduled and on-demand counseling, psychiatry and health coaching services, TimelyMD partners with institutions to empower students to thrive in all aspects of their lives. Learn more at [timely.md](https://www.timely.md).

Hello, welcome to The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, a contributing editor at Inside Higher Ed and the host of this podcast. We're reaching the end of this season, but I have a couple of good episodes left. This one looks at two different approaches to expanding online education with a focus on working adults. I spoke with Andrew Clark, the founder, president, and CEO of Zovio, a publicly traded ed-tech services company. Clark and I spoke on the day Zovio closed on its deal to sell the Ashford online university to the University of Arizona, creating the University of Arizona Global Campus. Clark talked about the unusual partnership between Zovio and the new UAGC, as well as his take on partnerships and the new business models in the online education space.

ANDREW CLARK: The scale of it is pretty enormous. There's 35,000 students, but what a lot of people don't realize is that students start 50 out of 52 weeks in the year. In fact, at Zovio we like to say that, you know, effectively we help UAGC start a mid-size, regional public university every 90 days. And when you think about it in those terms, you quickly come to understand that there's a tremendous amount of complexity in making that happen, and doing that in a really high-quality way.

PAUL FAIN: I also spoke with Jill Buban, the vice president of digital strategy and online education at Fairfield University. The private institution in Connecticut is looking to grow its online graduate

programs and has added new credentials and partnerships with intermediaries like Guild and EdAssist.

JILL BUBAN: We're able to partner with these companies that stay true to our values but also allow us to partner directly with companies. We really have a huge bandwidth to like [LAUGH] beat the streets in terms of big partnerships. So to have that kind of intermediary is really helpful to us.

PAUL FAIN: Let's get to the conversation.

I'm speaking with Andrew Clark. Andrew, how are you?

ANDREW CLARK: Doing great, Paul. Good to be here.

PAUL FAIN: Well, I appreciate you making time any day, but particularly today where you made some news with Zovio. Can you talk to listeners about what happened today?

ANDREW CLARK: Yeah, today was a historic day for Zovio, and a historic day in higher education, kind of the second event of its kind with our sale of Ashford University to the University of Arizona Global Campus today. That transaction closed. And UAGC is off and running with 35,000 students and 60 different degree programs. And it's a real milestone for our company, which I founded 17 years ago, and probably the second most significant day in the company's history, the first being the day that we purchased Ashford University.

PAUL FAIN: Quite the journey... You know, I remember when the Purdue Global news came across the transom and I had to read that one a few times because it was so different, and just really a lot of process. And I know that's the case with this partnership too. Some key differences with Purdue Global, but would you mind just walking us through... I know this is an enormously complex transaction, but just the basic facts of how it's going to work going forward.

ANDREW CLARK: Yeah, sure, Paul. I mean, the University of Arizona Global Campus is its own freestanding institution, WASC accredited. It has just a really impressive board of trustees that has been named. They will be affiliated with the University of Arizona, they have an affiliation agreement with

them. But they're their own institution. And that was one of the really attractive things about how this all came together. We were, you know, originally looking to convert the University to a nonprofit and allow it to remain independent and freestanding. And the way the University of Arizona approached it, unlike Purdue when they kind of subsumed Kaplan effectively into their public system there, they had similar kind of approach as we have where they wanted to have a new Arizona nonprofit entity acquire the institution and allow it to remain freestanding.

So, really wonderful for alumni and students and faculty, especially, students. You know, yesterday when it was Ashford, and today when it's University of Arizona Global Campus, the classroom environment changed, but they're still in the same classes, they have the same professors. It's been pretty seamless. They go into their student center online, and now it says UAGC on it, but it's been a really seamless transition.

And a lot of work has gone into this, certainly on the part of Zovio, but also on the part of UAGC. The people there have been just wonderful to work with. And this is just a great outcome for all of the stakeholders. It's good for Zovio in terms of our strategy, and setting us up as a world-class ed-tech service company that provide technology and services to other universities, which were already hard at work looking for new clients. It's most importantly great for the University itself, its alumni, its students, its faculty, to have this affiliation now with the University of Arizona. So it's a great day for us, a great day for UAGC, for its students... I couldn't be more excited about today. It's been a long time in the making.

PAUL FAIN: So, if you wouldn't mind giving folks an idea of the scope of the new UAGC... You mentioned 60 degrees, but I gather more than 300 courses and quite a few students.

ANDREW CLARK: So the scale of it is pretty enormous. There's 35,000 students, but what a lot of people don't realize is that students start 50 out of 52 weeks in the year. In fact, at Zovio we like to say that, you know, effectively we help UAGC start a mid-size, regional public university every 90 days. And when you think about it in those terms, you quickly come to understand that there's a tremendous amount of complexity in making that happen, and doing it in a really high-quality way.

We measure the net promoter score of our students, many educational institutions do. And we have a very high NPS with students. Most recently, we hit our all-time high since we started measuring it in January of 2017 at about 63. So we're really proud of our ability to support students and meet them wherever they are, and do that at a tremendous amount of scale. There's faculty obviously involved in

all of this. There's scheduling of faculty and courses. There's, you know, student advising and making sure the students are well advised and, you know, planning for their educational goals, and eventually, the ultimate outcome, graduation. It just takes a tremendous amount of work to put all of that together at scale.

And many ed-tech service companies are good at a much smaller scale. There's very few as you look around the US landscape that can actually do what we do at literally orders of magnitude, for tens of thousands of students.

PAUL FAIN: That was where I was going to take this next, and I feel like we all know that the disruption to adult and vulnerable student populations is intense at this point, and no real end in sight. Anxiety about the job market, not sure your credential pathway will pay off. Of course, all the impacts on your schedule, your fiscal health... There's a lot going on for the students you service. And I think a lot of institutions out there are looking for help to do better, and to enroll these students and to help them succeed. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the benefit of partnership from your perspective. You know, I think people look at the University of Arizona and probably say, why can't they do this themselves? What did Zovio bring to the table and could bring to the table to other partners?

ANDREW CLARK: Yeah, I think that's a common question, Paul, which is why can't big public land-grant universities or even medium-size public universities or nonprofits do this themselves? I think it comes down to what we were just talking about, the complexity of managing, you know, the scale of that number of students and doing it in a really high-quality way. Universities typically just don't have the internal skill sets to be able to accomplish it. And many of them, Kaplan probably being the first example... You know, Mitch Daniel said, we kept trying and it wasn't working. And we looked around internally, and just found that we didn't have those skill sets. You know, I think Southern New Hampshire took a different approach, where their president hired those skill sets into the university and has obviously been very successful. But not many institutions can go out there, quite frankly, and hire all the skill sets you need to develop the systems.

It's tremendously capital intensive there. You know, we've spent the better part of 17 years creating technologies and using data, and building out data analytics capabilities, and automating systems that, you know, it's just really difficult to do that from a standing start. And you need to go outside to companies that like Zovio that have literally over a decade invested in doing exactly that. And so many universities realize that. Some try initially to do it themselves and then come to realize it.

And I think it's promising for Zovio and our future, because I think there will be a lot of demand. We had a lot of people reach out to us just when we announced our agreement with UAGC, and we weren't really quite in the position to help at that time. We had our hands full. But now we are, and we've gotten a lot of inbound interest, and now we're also reaching out to many universities.

And, you know, as you pointed out, Paul, it's been one heck of a year in 2020. A lot of different dynamics and changes for both the learner as well as the institutions. And I think institutions are quickly realizing that the business model that they had before isn't going to be the business model that they have that will support them as well as their students in the future, and that they need to be more kind of agnostic about where a student actually is, whether they're on their campus or whether they're in their hometown in their apartment, you know, hiking through the Rockies, wherever the heck they are, they can access that same high-quality education from that institution. But it's going to look different online. They're going to want to be also on campus, perhaps, and universities just need a much more adaptive model that allows them to reach those learners wherever they are. And again, that's where Zovio comes in and can really help out.

PAUL FAIN: Obviously, as you say, the business models are under intense pressure right now. The state and local budget crisis is only going to get worse for publics, it looks like, at least for now. UAGC and Purdue Global before it are real iterations, I think, of a business model in a new way. How many of those can there be? I mean, not too many that you can start with this scale going forward. But beyond that, I'm wondering will we see iterations on what you all have done at a smaller scale potentially looking forward?

ANDREW CLARK: That's a great question. I mean, we see the UMass-Brandman announcement recently. I mean, look, I would say Mitch Daniels and Dr. Bobby Robbins are in an elite group of presidents, right, just the two of them that have accomplished that. But I don't think they'll be elite for very long. I do think that you'll see many more transactions like this or similar to this, variations of it. Certainly, UMass-Brandman is a different approach. And so I do believe that you're going to see more.

Now, there's only a finite number of, you know, 35,000 students in online universities out there to acquire and to help accelerate your online offerings at an institution. So I think that will mean there will be two things. There will be some kind of creative approaches that are innovative, you know, includes mergers and partnerships, but I think also then you're going to see a lot of universities look towards companies like Zovio who can help them scale quickly. And one of the most motivating reasons for them is because of what we talked about before of how capital intensive it is. You mentioned, there's strain on these institutional budgets. They don't have extra capital laying around to invest in a strategic

direction that they all know they need to go. That's another motivating factor for why they're going to look to companies like Zovio to help them, not just provide the technology and services, but if you're trying to build a really large online scale degree program offering, you will want some capital investment to come with your partner as well.

PAUL FAIN: Speaking of technology, I wonder if you could give folks just a quick flavor of what's possible, given your 17 years of experience on the student success front with AI at this point, and what to look forward to. You know, I've heard little bit about it. We've written about chatbots here at IHE, but it sound like we're looking at new kind of level of use here.

ANDREW CLARK: Absolutely. You know, we started making investments about three or four years ago at Zovio in data analytics, machine learning, bringing those talents and expertise and systems into our company. We developed, Paul, a product we call Signalz, that ends with a Z, stealing from Zovio a little bit. And Signalz is actually a predictive modeling, data-analytics, machine-learning-driven technology that alerts both faculty and student advisers to students that are at risk of failing a course or dropping out of school, based on 50 different data points. And those can be behavioral. They can be academic. There's a variety of them. And then there's a prescribed set of interventions that faculty and advisers take proactively to help students overcome whatever the challenge is. It could be personal, it could be academic, it could be both. That product has had a remarkable impact at UAGC. You know, previously, Ashford, we saw that highest cohort retention we've seen in four years. We saw 3 percent improvement in just a single year on student retention as a result of Signalz.

So a long way of going about saying you're absolutely right. Data analytics, machine-learning AI is going to instrumental and instrumental to student success, also instrumental to identifying the right types of students for your institution at the very beginning. So, for example, Signalz for marketing and enrollment can help build predictive models around the most successful students an institution has, and then identify who those potential students are and attract them to the institution and interest them in applying to the institution, and then hopefully attending the institution. And that also helps improve retention, because now you're getting a student that is best suited for your institutions and for what you offer.

So there's tremendous power in data analytics, so machine learning that when harnessed correctly can lead to significant improvements in student outcomes, which is what everyone is ultimately invested and interested in accomplishing, both the institutions as well as us at Zovio. We have a have saying here at Zovio that, you know, our mission here is to help everybody be in a class of their own. And we're not just talking about institutions, we're talking about individual learners as well. And data analytics is the

engine that's really going to power us and institutions to be able to help learners accomplish their goals.

PAUL FAIN: Well, we'll leave it there, Andrew. Thanks so much. I know we barely scratched the surface. We say that a lot on these show. But hopefully, we can keep in touch and we'll be watching to see how UAGC and your other partnerships develop. And again, I want to thank you for speaking with me on a very busy day, and congratulations.

ANDREW CLARK: Well, thank you, Paul. Thank you for having me on your podcast. I'm a long-time listener and I enjoy your podcast. So thank you for including me, inviting me, and have a great day.

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PAUL FAIN: If you're looking to go even more in depth in IHE's news coverage, check out our special reports. These deep-dives feature rich data and reporting, as well as thoughtful, substantive analysis you can trust. Visit insidehighered.com/special-reports, to view the topics we've covered and to purchase the report that best supports your area of work or study.

So I'm speaking with Jill Buban. How are you?

JILL BUBAN: Great, Paul. Thanks for inviting me to join you today.

PAUL FAIN: Thank you. So, you know, I remember, I believe it may have been during the pandemic, but some months ago I heard a bit about what Fairfield University was trying to do online, its ambitions for the future, and was very intrigued. Would you mind sharing kind of the Cliff's Notes of where you are and where you're headed?

JILL BUBAN: Yeah, sure.. So Fairfield has four strategic priorities right now. One of them being the expansion into online, specifically for graduate students and somewhat spin on that, professional degrees for graduate students. It's interesting, because these priorities have been in place coming on two years now. And I came into the role in April, right at the beginning of the pandemic. So many times it's linked to that we're expanding online due to the pandemic, but we actually been kind of planning for

this, you know, as I said, for almost two years. So with that, we're looking at launching seven master's degrees and nine certificates for the spring 2021 term. So [LAUGH] we really went all out for this expansion. It's going in the right direction. It's a combination of degrees. We had all the degrees in the works. Some had already been launched, so it was kind of giving them that boost or, you know, that injection to bring them to market. But it's a really exciting time to kind of watch where they're going, who they're starting to attract, and working internally, just building all of the supports necessary to ensure success.

PAUL FAIN: So what was the institution's experience with online programs, confidence in the ability to get to the next level? And when you joined, where were they in terms of experience?

JILL BUBAN: When I joined, the University had done a lot a research in looking at this expansion, so just a brief background... We have roughly 4000 undergraduate students on campus. And about 1000 graduate students in either hybrid or on-campus programs. So where we're located to expand geographically is a bit challenging. We're about 60 miles out of Manhattan, a real, you know, close to metropolitan areas. So if we were to do some geographical expansion, it would probably focus on undergraduates. So it made sense to be planning online for graduate. And we also know, right, Paul, nationally everything showing that graduate students, even if they live 20 miles from campus, are really thinking about online.

So Fairfield had done, I'd say some of the groundwork in thinking about what programs do we have that could move online and what is some planning we'd have to do to get there? When I joined in April, I started looking strategically at the internal groundwork. I say to colleagues all the time, I'm really grateful for all the years that I've had, and really, mentors that I've had in online that have been there from the beginning. Because some of those frameworks internally we're building were really like 1.0 of online learning, which is nothing to be said that there's not the experience there, it's just the groundwork was never laid there before. Luckily, we have some great names within our schools at Fairfield. Egan School of Nursing, and also our Dolan School of Business, so we have some of that already internally. We know the programs that are really rock solid, they're wonderful to be providing in that environment. But it was really the internal groundwork that needed to be laid soup to nuts.

And then also looking externally. How do we start to select partners to work with? how do we think about innovations? And for Fairfield, being a Jesuit Institution, there's a big push to be able to still provide the values and mission of our institution and, you know, the Jesuit foundations. So thinking about that. So I say internal infrastructure, external partnerships, and that Jesuit mission foundation that we wanted to get across was what I started building when I came in.

PAUL FAIN: So April was an interesting time in higher ed. Still is. But, you know, I gather for anyone who was hoping to go bigger online, it was a benefit to have some plans in place then. But those plans tended to be accelerated. How have things changed the last few months for you in terms of how fast you want to ramp up or how you might choose partners, or any of that?

JILL BUBAN: Yeah, it's interesting. Fairfield... So for our undergrads and our graduates definitely pivoted to remote in March, April timeframe, and then over summer worked, really partnered between my office, the Center of Academic Excellence, which is really our teaching and learning center on campus, to provide support. So the Center of Academic excellence really focused on that undergrad population, where I focused on the strategic goals to move forward.

In terms of acceleration, you know, we're seeing a couple of different things, where I think there's a few scenarios. Are students coming back to online due to high unemployment rates? We know that typically happens. Are they looking to quickly upscale with a graduate certificate or even a professional certificate like a Coursera or EdX? Or are they looking for the full degree? The second scenario is kind of business as usual. Are we just going to continue along and see a slight uptick due to some marketing, communication and partnerships? And the third is just burnout, people just burned out and not going to come back. So I think over higher ed, I'm assuming most institutions are dealing with those three scenarios.

I think we're prepared for either. We've built in the graduate certificates. We have stackable degrees. We're building in some professional certifications into our master's degrees, so I think the curricular aspects of our programs are really strong to provide any opportunities.

But in looking at how we could kind of differentiate ourselves in this strange time, and also looking towards the future, we're looking at how we really can support our students. So, and that gets back to what is a Jesuit education and how do we focus on the whole person, not just getting them through in, you know, in a timely manner to completion. So we're looking at, you know, we're offering mental, telehealth, mental health services through Uwill, through our partnership with Uwill, for all graduate students. And that's free of charge. And that was something, not only because of the pandemic, we were looking at that before, but we knew that students were asking for services like that. And that lets us support them holistically, and in turn, will likely improve their success and, you know, our retention. So looking at supports like that.

Also looking at different partnerships, like we have mentioned, I think when we talked months ago, one with ISTE, which is a national organization that can provide teachers or participants in some of our ed technology programs, the opportunity to have a national certification. We're doing the same with Cisco and looking to do so with IBM. And so I think it's looking like how this time was changed, I think it's really looking at how we're supporting our students, and then how we're differentiating ourselves to provide both the support, but also what the workforce will probably be asking of our students upon graduation.

PAUL FAIN: Well, really interesting stuff. You know, the mental health support piece has become like THE story of the last few, I mean, there's so many big stories, but every one of these interviews I do, that's an issue. So again, good foresight to be planning that before all this, I would think. You know, when you mentioned some of the partnerships in the works, it sounds like some national scale here. I just wonder what kind of your concentric rings of students might be and how it's looking to shift in the next year or so, like, where you might be where you haven't been before.

JILL BUBAN: Sure. That's a great question. So we're starting to explore some partnerships with the educational benefit side, the workforce educational benefit side. So I don't think it's a secret, but we're partnering with Guild, and that's in the works right now, so really excited to see where that goes. We think that their mission really aligns with Fairfield as well in terms of, you know, trying to provide benefits and getting our workforce educated. So that's one we'll be looking to follow and expand. We've also had some conversations with EdAssist, which is a similar company, but they, you know, the benefit does go directly to the student, which is a nice initiative too. So I think these companies are all doing things a little bit differently.

But for a small institution like Fairfield, we're able to partner with these companies that stay true to our values but also allow us to partner directly with companies. We don't have really huge bandwidth to like [LAUGH] beat the streets in terms of big partnerships. So to have the kind of that intermediary is really helpful to us. So exploring and researching, and figure which one of those and more are better for us.

We're also, I guess, actually, since I've joined, I've been really interested in the MOOC space, you know, EdX, obviously, Coursera. A lot my colleagues in the space have been at institutions that are original partnerships with Coursera. And I think not only does a benefit to students but to institutions to partner with them makes sense. And when I say that, it's part of that innovation at an institution too to see how you can, to learn how you can kind of create microcredentials and to expose your, not only your faculty, but all people on campus that can be creating these kind of microcredentials, whatever they are.

Whether it's a full certificate, whether it's externally facing on a platform or internal, I think that's really important to just keep our minds new about where we're going and what we can provide our students. And through that, we're trying to link some of our partnerships that I talked about earlier, whether, you know, it's Cisco or IBM, and seeing where we can go with them on some of these platforms. Or our other partners exposing some other financial partners to those platforms. So that's exciting to me.

And thinking about... I think sometimes when we think about Coursera, it's simply in the MOOC world. But I think there's also opportunities, how can we provide free professional upskilling to our greater community, to high school students, so there's just so many options there. So for us, it's a great way to think innovatively all the way around with a large partner. But, again, internally we're trying to figure out, okay, how do we even prioritize the opportunities within a partnership such as, you know, one of those large providers. So I think you'll see that coming.

We're also looking, and I think this is true for a lot of smaller institutions, we're looking, you know, we want to provide those student services--I mentioned mental health, career services, writing services. These are things that are typically forgot about at the graduate level, but all the research tells us, I mean, going back 14, 15 years, Paul, that's what students are asking for. So we're looking now, how can we, does it make sense to be able to provide those resources through partnerships or grow capacity internally? And I think, again, that's how we can differentiate ourselves yet stay true to our values and our mission by really recognizing those are support students need and deserve at that level, so it's not just an extra expense, but it's how we need to serve that population to ensure their success academically, in life, and professionally.

PAUL FAIN: You know, given your national perspective from your OLC days, I wonder just your thoughts, how many institutions can really successfully do what Fairfield is trying to do. We all know that the big institutions online have grown a lot recently, and breaking in is hard to do when you're competing with institutions that are so established.

JILL BUBAN: Yep, that's definitely true, Paul. [LAUGH] Yeah, I mean, the market share for those top five institutions is huge. I don't have the statistic off the top of my head, but, yeah, we know that. But what I do think, and a lot of this is from my experience at OLC, I think we know we have to differentiate within the market, but we also know that there's a strong regional market for Fairfield degrees and for Fairfield to grow online, even if it's Maine through Delaware. We expect to see that geographical expansion grow further through pockets of where our alumni are and where we start to form partnerships. So I think it's some of that brand identity, which we're working on now at the graduate level. And then that will allow us to slowly expand. Our goal was never to be one of those top five schools, but to provide the type of

education that our huge alumni network and undergraduate network has come to really value, and to bring that to the next level and expose another group of students to the high level education that they can now get online.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Jill, we'll leave it there. Thanks for talking this through with me. You know, among other things, I'll be really curious to see the microcredentials and the partnership with Guild and EdAssist, and where that heads for an institution like Fairfield. So I really appreciate you sharing the plans with us.

JILL BUBAN: Yeah, thanks, Paul. It was great to talk with you.

PAUL FAIN: Cheers, thank you.

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That'll do it for this episode. Thanks for joining. I'll be back next week, talking to leaders from Broward College and Purdue Global with a specific look at how their credentials tie into the job market. Hope you'll join us.