

Transcription for



INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

EP 69: A MAJOR CROSS-COLLEGE COLLABORATION

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Colleges tend to compete more than collaborate. That's why a new five-college cooperative in New Mexico is so unusual. Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm your host Doug Lederman and I hope you all had a good Thanksgiving.

The focus of this episode is the Collaborative for Higher Education Shared Services, or CHESS. It's made up so far of five independent community colleges in New Mexico that have teamed up voluntarily because they think they are stronger together than apart. They've started by agreeing to create a common enterprise resource planning structure, to share resources and information in areas such as accounting, student records, human resources, and payroll. But the vision ultimately includes many of the features you might see in a formal college system, including smoother student mobility and more efficient and cost-effective campus operations. In today's conversation, the presidents of two of the colleges, Becky Rowley of Santa Fe Community College and Tracy Hartzler of Central New Mexico Community College, discuss the combination of trust, subjugation of institutions ego, and internal culture change required to bring about a massive cross-institutional collaboration like this. They acknowledge the help they've gotten from the external partners guiding their work, CampusWorks and Workday, and they explain how they ultimately believe the project should be judged--by better results for students.

Before we begin today's program, here's a word from Formstack, sponsor of this and the previous five episodes of The Key.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Here's today's conversation with Central New Mexico College President Tracy Hartzler and Santa Fe Community College President Becky Rowley.

Tracy and Becky, thanks for joining us on The Key today. Could you tell our listeners about your new collaborative and the problems or challenges it was designed to address? Becky, maybe you first?

BECKY ROWLEY: You know, when we started looking at how we could work together in more of a shared services model, at the outset we were addressing some pretty serious conversations at the state level about creating a system in New Mexico. New Mexico is pretty free-flowing, not tightly organized in terms of how higher education is structured. There's a lot of duplication. We compete against each other, and so it's really difficult sometimes for especially smaller institutions to really be able to thrive in that kind of an environment. And so as we looked at ways that we could partner on all kinds of programming, business office practices, things like that, we started talking about shared services collaborative. The problem was really deep. We have institutions that struggle. That not nearly as equitably funded as other institutions, and that's not likely to change. So we were trying to figure out how we could pull together to assist each other and work together in a collaborative, and then that conversation quickly moved to a common ERP.

And one thing I will say too that has been, was a challenge at the beginning, and it's a challenge now, and it will always be a challenge, and yet it's the strength of the whole project, is that we are all, we're all independent community colleges. We don't really have to work together very much. Historically, we have not. We're very different. New Mexico is a really diverse state. We're very different and we want to preserve our character, what ties us to our communities, and yet we have to give some things up to be able to work together. In order to build consensus in a lot of these areas, we have to give up the things that are not important to us, and it's interesting to see what we ultimately decided was not that important.

TRACY HARTZLER: Our governing boards are very clear. We are independent. They are independently elected. We serve a distinct community locally. We need to maintain that to be responsive to our voters, to be responsive to those who pay their taxes and support our programs. And as Becky noted, what we realized is our common challenges. And it doesn't matter the size of the institution. Some of it is related to data-reporting. Our financials, in terms of... We have different charts of accounts. I mean, we just have a number of different systems and requirements that just aren't conducive to working together. All of us, and it doesn't matter if I'm in a large urban area or a rural area, all of us are facing workforce challenges. We've faced them before in terms of recruiting. Again, we're a public institution, so, you know, we try to provide competitive salaries and benefits, but that's a challenge in many of our areas. In addition, with our current situation in the economy, it's an employees' marketplace. So we're seeing a number of retirements and people moving across sectors, and people resigning to take other opportunity. And then, of course, we have these legacy systems that require so much attention and don't allow for standardization. So we were looking to solve some really practical problems.

DOUG LEDERMAN: It seems like this collaborative is in part an effort to introduce what the former State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher likes to call "systemness" or coordinated network behavior, into a group of colleges in a state that doesn't seem to have any inclination to create a formal system. Is that a fair assessment?

BECKY ROWLEY: We know that we can benefit from each other. All of us can benefit from each other. There are certain areas where we will all do better to work together. I know at my own institution there are systems and problems and things that we will not be able to solve on our own, but being part of this group and going back and like looking at kind of rewiring the hiring process, the procurement process, and how we can share courses and all that, I know, I'm very confident that we'll get through it together. And I would have never been able to say that if Santa Fe Community College were on its own.

TRACY HARTZLER: To build on that, when people talk about systems, it's because they crave consistency, solid practice, consistent customer service or service in the student experience. They want clear data reporting and they want clear and transparent financials. They ideally would like savings. But I'd say also it's very difficult to move to a system when you have constitutionally created institutions, when you have institutions like ours that are created by statute that have elected boards. We also have two-year colleges that are affiliated with their four-year universities, and they have an advisory board. So the governing structures are very distinct.

And I would say like many systems, and you can even say our political system, people don't necessarily

like the large body, but they love their neighborhood institution. They love their local member, right? And so I would say it's also very politically difficult to make the changes to move New Mexico to a system. And so what we found and what I think our institutions were able to do was take advantage of that vacuum, where it was a little bit hard to move in that direction, but I think all of us said, well, we know what our taxpayers want, we know what state legislators want, we know what our executive branch wants, and so how do we do that and accomplish that by contract, right, by agreement, and by good will? We're still maintaining our local flavor, we're still maintaining that local responsiveness, but we're absolutely going to get the benefit of common practices.

And as we've all seen, I think all our institutions are called to get out of our own way and help students quickly and easily get in, take their programs, and transfer or enter the workforce. And we think by working together we're going to be able to do that much better than we would have independently. This is a group of employees from each institution on each team. It's all blended together. Our technology teams are blended together. Our teams are being led by individuals from different institutions. So what you're seeing is truly a collaborative I'd say labor effort to build what is a desired system to serve our students.

DOUG LEDERMAN: It continues to surprise me how difficult cross-institutional collaboration seems to be in higher education. That mindset of working together rather than competing seems to be so hard. As you've been starting to work through that in CHESS, what's your sense of why that's so?

BECKY ROWLEY: I often think that there is a lack of trust, and I think that people are afraid to collaborate because you may be giving too much up or you're not really sure what other members of your collaboration are doing or whatever, and so one of the things that we were very clear on when we started out, and this does speak to our organization, is that all of us have an equal voice in the plan moving forward. So even though CNM is by far the largest institution in our group, and so we range from 2000 students to 20,000 students, the structure is set up to where each college one vote as we make decisions and figure out how to move through this.

And so as our institutions are working together, I think it's really important that they see that groups of presidents works really well together and that we trust each other, and if we ever thought that there was a problem, we would be sitting at the table. I mean, we meet every week and talk about these things so that our colleges understand that there's trust as our level and that we expect there to be trust at the other levels too. This kind of change is really difficult, and there are a lot of people who are just opposed to it on principle. But we have to do this. I mean, New Mexico is not really what you would consider a leader in higher education or in innovation, and we have serious enrollment challenges and

attainment challenges. And so if we really want to succeed, we're going to have to take some risks and really commit to doing things differently, because what we've been doing in the past has not been all that great.

DOUG LEDERMAN: When I've written about any system or any grouping of institutions, there's sometimes tension between institutional self-interest and the common interest. It crops up between highly visible flagship universities in state systems, for instance. I don't know if you can cite any specific examples of that tension within CHES so far, between what might have been best for one of your institutions, but not for the whole. Tracy...

TRACY HARTZLER: All of us have institutional ego. [LAUGH] We are all leading institutions that are very distinct. We have different expectations on us. We all care about the students, so I think when you start going back to what's best for students, and what's best to serve our local businesses and economies, that starts to break down pretty quickly. What is, I'll say the institutional id, right, I mean what's going to drive those conversations.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking with Becky Rowley and Tracy Hartzler, whose New Mexico community colleges are part of Collaborative for Higher Education Shared Services. We've been talking at a pretty philosophical level to try and make this a little more tangible for listeners. Let's talk a little bit more about what you're actually doing on the ground. I know there's a major technology angle in terms of the adoption of a new enterprise resource planning software in Workday. But what else is it? What builds from there to the extent that it is operational, strategic, cultural?

TRACY HARTZLER: It is not a technology project. I know we've focused on the technology. This is absolutely about changing how we do business to better serve our students. I mean, if I can bold it down to ten words, and that was probably ten words, that's what it would be. And how do we do that? We do that through changed business processes. We do that through technology. We do through reporting. We do it by changing our culture. It's easy to say we are a student-centered institution. Well, of course, we're all serving students, but it's really how do we get out of our own way with our, you know, 25 steps in the admission process, or registration, whatever it is, to really boil it do

I mention we've been doing this for two years. A year of this has been a 100 plus staff, faculty leaders across all five institutions, going through our business processes, in HR, in payroll, in finance, and in student information. Hundreds of processes were documented across our institutions, and coming up with what do we want. What's the ideal practice to enhance our student experience from day one? And what does that mean for our employees? And so we talk about all of that, and that really guided our efforts to then say, well how do we solve this problem.

We solved the problem by seeking a new enterprise resource planning system in finance and HR. We do this by looking at our student information system. We also look at that and said, well, what are there other areas we can work together, because not everybody will join onto this big technology project. But, you know what, I bet we could have shared procurement. We all have issues around cyber security. Let's look and see what a collaborative looks like even for those institutions not part of this big ERP process. So are really at looking at ways to, again, leverage our scale, leverage our buying power.

BECKY ROWLEY: There's sort of a day of reckoning on campuses when we've agreed that we will have a common student record, a common student identity, so that students will enroll at Santa Fe Community College, or CNM, or wherever, and they'll be coenrolled in all the other institutions. It will easy to share courses. If we don't have a course that a student needs, a student can take if from another institution, all of those things.

But what will happen in that process is that some of the things that we currently do that I would perceive as kind of gate keeping mechanisms that are obstacles for students are going to become glaring. And students will be able to choose, okay, well, they're not, that institution is no going to make we do this, so I'm going there, or I'm going to take my classes there. That's going to be a critical thing, and I think, you know, so far we've been able to sort of sit back in our own corners and kind of did what we needed and wanted to do without a whole lot of external pressure. And that external pressure is important and it's what makes us do better, and it's what makes us really acknowledge that we need to do, as Tracy said, what is best for our students and not what's easiest for us, which we have some legacy of doing in higher ed.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Can you share one or two things that your institution is already doing differently from what it was doing before, or something that you're on track to do differently to help students because of this project? Becky...

BECKY ROWLEY: We have been struggling with updating our placement test policy. Everybody comes in and takes a placement test. We are very rigid in how we place people according to the scores that they get and there's no real discretion in that. Other people don't do that. And so if you are only aware of what's done at Santa Fe Community College and you come from Santa Fe County, you've learned to tolerate that. And now you're going to be exposed to how CNM does that, how Clovis Community College does it, how San Juan College does it. And so that is something that I was trying to push on and to change anyway, but this is just, it's an opportunity to drive that home. We have to do that. I mean, it's not just my crazy little preference.

TRACY HARTZLER: I really look forward to the time where we can centralize some of our data reporting, where institutions still vet the final report that's submitted, but let's centralize some of that information because I would really like our RIR shots to focus on helping faculty and administrators make better decisions based on data. I want them focused on the analytics side, not necessarily running reports. We've started to transition that, and I can only see that snowball as we all join this effort.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the most important things you need to do to make this work and/or what are the biggest possible impediments to success?

TRACY HARTZLER: Show results. Boy, that's really critical. Show results, because that's going to move the needle as well. So keeping that up for a long period of time is important. I think the challenge is, this is complex. I know we say that in higher ed, we say that about everything we do. This is a complex project. Financing is a challenge, because we have to keep reminding our state support and our local support, it's expensive, but here's what we're getting. We can't promise it's going to make us coffee in the morning, because I tried that. It won't. But we've got to show it's going to improve our business practices. It's going to make it easier for reporting. It's easier for transfer... We have to show that, we have to demonstrate that. If we don't, we lose credibility. And it doesn't help others join the effort. It doesn't help see the benefits.

So I think that challenges are continuing to describe a complex program, not something our state has really funded, not for higher ed or for higher ed institutions. We're asking a lot of state support for the project, particularly for institutions that don't have that strong tax base, that don't have those other resources. So all five institutions are lobbying together for an expensive, complex project that everybody wants to show immediate results. And it won't. And so it's how to keep people engaged to show our progress and that we're sincere, and that it's going to benefit others. So I think we are absolutely up to the task.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Tracy Hartzler of Central New Mexico Community College and her colleague Becky Rowley of Santa Fe Community College. CHES, the nonprofit consortium their institutions have helped form, will be worth watching as an example of whether colleges can compromise on their own interests enough to collaborate to serve students better. Higher education has a mixed track record of doing that, but it's more important than ever in a time of constrained resources. It will be difficult for many colleges to do everything they've historically done, let alone everything they want to do completely on their own.

This is the final episode of The Key for 2021. We'll be taking a breather for the holidays, and I hope you are able to as well. This has been quite a year and we all need some downtime if we're going to come back refreshed and ready to do it all over again in 2022. I wish you all a holiday season filled with family and friends, peace, and appreciation for our relative good fortune in a challenging time. I'm Doug Lederman and until our next episode, stay well and stay safe.

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