

Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY



Ep.75: Anticipating Higher Education's Near Future(s)

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

How has the COVID 19 pandemic and the other upheaval of the last couple of years changed the outlook for colleges, their students, and their employees? Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key Inside Higher Ed's News and Analysis podcast. I'm Doug Letterman, editor, and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of The Key. Thanks so much for listening. People often ask me questions like the one I just asked, and to be honest, they make me a little uncomfortable. I'm first and foremost a journalist and we tend to focus on understanding the present rather than predicting the future. But of course, that line is blurry. People read publications like Inside Higher Ed and maybe listen to podcasts like this one for insight into what might be coming around the bend to be best prepared for what lies ahead. So in today's episode, I'm soliciting the help of a person who formally and proudly embraces looking ahead. Bryan Alexander is a writer, author, teacher, and yes, futurist. He wrote the 2020 book *Academia Next* and hosts his own series of video conversations, the Future Trends Forum.

In our conversation today, he first explains how professional futurists differ from some of the crystal ball gazers who tend to set my teeth on edge. Then he explores a wide range of topics about how the COVID 19 pandemic, the drive for racial justice, and other recent phenomena might affect the next few years in higher education. Touching on technology, the curriculum, and his current focus environmental sustainability. Before we begin, here's a word from this week's sponsor of The Key.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

Now on to my discussion with Bryan Alexander. Bryan, welcome to The Key. Thanks for being here.

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

Thank you for hosting me. It's always good to talk with you.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

The first word you use to describe yourself on your website in a chain that includes educator, speaker, and writer is futurist. And I've always been a little uncomfortable with that term because some of the people who see themselves that way, describe themselves that way, speak with kind of a knowingness that can come across as overly presumptuous or even arrogant. Can you talk a little bit about what you do, what that label does, and doesn't mean to you?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

It's important to realize that there's kind of two groups of people here. There's one that is, anybody who thinks about the future and says, I'm a futurist and that'll be someone like a Michio Kaku, for example. Then there's people who have training in the profession of futures. And that profession dates back to the 1950s. A part of it comes out of business. Part of it comes out of government and Pentagon planning. But everything we know about trends and scenarios really gets formalized in the 50s through the 70s. And ever since then, there's been a whole I mean, it's a profession of with professional conferences, professional associations, multiple graduate programs, classes all over the place, schools of

thought rivalries. So that's one thing to keep in mind, is that distinction. I think futurists' job is to help people think more effectively, more creatively, and more strategically about the future. It may or may not involve predictions. A lot of professional futurists hate the word.

They'll say it's the P-word, but they try to give you as informed a glimpse as possible at what might be coming up next. That's very, very different from a lot of boosters who will sell things.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

I appreciate that distinction. And I think I probably have a better sense of what you're talking about now than I did maybe a decade ago. Now that so many people either can or do describe themselves as journalists because they have an Internet connection and can throw out some information. And there are, there's obviously a huge range there. How much is the work that you describe about understanding the past, the present versus predicting or anticipating the future?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

Oh, that's a great question. I mean, if the old saying is that journalism is history's first draft, I think futurists give the futurists first draft. And both journalists and futurists are constantly revising and trying to get better. It depends on the futurist, but I'm on the side that thinks the more history you bring to bear, the better. You know, my undergrad degrees in history, my Ph.D., is in a historicist form of literary criticism. I'm always bringing up history, which can terrify people at times. But I think that's an excellent way just to build things out. A trend analysis is and another approach to cold horizon scanning are both recent past and the present. You know, looking what my colleague Amy Webb calls looking for signals of the future in the present. You know, if you're thinking the metaphor is a tree. You're looking for the acorn that's perfectly placed to take off.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

You tend to talk about multiple futures, plural, which largely mitigates the problem of some know-it-alls asserting this is what's going to happen. You seem to focus on anticipating possibilities to help people prepare for different scenarios. Is that a fair way of thinking about your work?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

I think people who layout one particular future are usually just very narrow in their focus, and at times they will be biased because this future is happening, because it connects to them in some way. It's what they want to see happen, or maybe it leads to a solution that they'll be selling down the road. But I think it's much more important to keep in mind the plurality of futures. Essentially, you could say that's a way of hedging bets, which is not a bad thing to do. But also it's to keep in mind that we have billions of human beings living in extraordinary and ever remember find complexity. And one of the things that happens is several futures come through simultaneously.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

That's helpful background on you. So thanks for laying that out. The main reason I asked you here was because I've been thinking a lot about how higher education's future has been shaped, reshaped by the multiple pandemics, COVID, the recession, and the racial justice awakening of the last two years. It's a complicated question, but how are you starting to assess that impact?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

We have two extreme options, and a lot of economics are somewhere oscillating in between. On the

one hand, we have the sense that what we've experienced has been extraordinary. Academia, like our society, like everyone inside of it has been changed by the pandemic, partly injured, scarred, partly exhilarated. But we've been through changes in a big way. In higher ed, a couple of things have happened. And one is that colleges, and universities seem now more committed to teaching, improving teaching than ever before. And that's, this shows up in different ways, notably funding and creation of teaching and learning centers taking a bit more seriously, some of the lessons learned from the pandemic teaching. But the other is the huge movement for racial justice. And that, of course, is continuing to ripple through colleges, and universities, everything from naming buildings, changing pedagogy, building new resources, hiring staff out in new or expanded offices, thinking about the curriculum and it reaches as far as decolonizing the curriculum and all of that.

And there are other factors too. I think people have been rethinking globalization, people have been rethinking nationalism. And this is, this has been quite a energetic, creative time, as well as a horrible one. So all of that augurs an academy that is transformed and also one that's ready for more transformation still. The other extreme is what people have called the snapback, and that's the fervent desire to get back to fall 2019. So for faculty and staff and for students as well to forget ever having to use Zoom, I think a lot of people have a wide range of reasons for that. I mean, anybody who has suffered badly. I think most academics are somewhere in between, you know, they may have picked out some of the real benefits of being entirely online, making more use of a student's name, for example, or better use of small groups, or maybe learning how to record Zoom as well as how to do synchronous sessions live got more people thinking more about blending classes, doing flip classes which we know could be pedagogically very effective.

And we also, I think institutions, a lot of leaders are really committed to improving the students' experience, in part because enrollment has gone down. So, you know, my work, I've been tracking the enrollment decline. It started in 2012 and it's trickled down from 2012 to 2019. But the past two years, it's really, that trickle has become a surge. We've seen 73 to 5% of our undergraduate enrollment dropping every year. So I think for a lot of colleges and universities, the ones that are dependent on enrollment fees for revenue are really hoping if they if they're losing on the quantity game to improve on the quality side. So I think that's kind of the big architectonic struggle that's going to be happening for the rest of this year and probably for the next couple of years.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

You talked about going back to 2019. Back then, it was widely believed that roughly one in five colleges faced some meaningful financial vulnerability. You made the case around then that higher education had peaked. Do you think in general, this higher education ecosystem is in better shape than it was in 2019 from an economic sustainability standpoint?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

There are a few ways that we're better. And one is that I think higher education embraced the spirit of institutional creativity and innovation in a hurry. There is literally no precedent for what we did in the two years ago, in the spring of 2020, how we flipped higher ed online in a matter of weeks. Just a few days, really. I mean if you look back at previous interruptions, like World War two, the Civil War, the Great Influenza a century ago, you know, we had no opportunity for this. And this time we did something really amazing. And you still see all these developments. Your colleague Josh Kim and my colleague Eddie Maloney had this great book where they looked at all these different ways that higher

education was already unfurling. How it was developing different, different options, everything from changing the calendar to switching up which classes would be face to face versus online. I mean, so I think that's one thing that's really important for all Higher education reputation for being an ossified dinosaur, which is often merited.

I think at the same time, we really discovered about ourselves that we are actually a lot more flexible than maybe we thought. A second thing is this real commitment to improving teaching and learning. And I think part of that it comes from either a technological criticism or a tech phobia based on people seeing their experience of online education not being as good as face-to-face. And so the idea is to improve that. I think a lot of academics now are pivoting towards making sure that our students are okay in ways that... I haven't really seen much of outside of, say, the liberal arts world or some of the community college world. And I think that's great. I mean, I think these are wonderful developments. And I hope we cling to them. And then there's a surprise benefit, which no one wants to talk about for political reasons. But I think the Trump and the Republican Congress did a great thing with the CARES Act. That was a gift to higher education. And then you remember we laid off something like 10% of our staff in 2020.

It was a horrible, horrible massacre and one of the worst hits that higher ed has ever suffered. It would have been far worse without the enormous amount of cash from the CARES Act. Given all of that. I think we are also suffering from the weaknesses that we were suffering from when the virus began to first appear. I mean, we have still the student debt nightmare, which no other country in the world does, which should be a sign that we're not doing the right thing. That's still there. And we know it can be overstated. But we do also know its economic effects are often bad. And we know just from qualitative work that it's depressing and frightening and scary. The demographic problem is still there. Overall, the picture remains that the United States, like all developed nations, and a lot of increasing numbers of developing nations are simply having fewer and fewer kids. And nothing is slowing that down. And on top of that, we have the problem of public universities. Public universities are about two-thirds of the institutions in the U.S.

and we know from the great work of Chris Newfield and others that state governments for the past 40 years have been reducing their funding to public universities, especially on a per-student basis. And there are other problems as well. A kind of more recent problem that still predates the pandemic, but a worsening of pandemic is growing public dislike of and anxiety about higher education. The short answer is we've developed some good strengths. We've taken some steps forward that are very good, but we're still dealing with the weaknesses that we inherited before the pandemic hit. And some of them are worse.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

I'm speaking today with Bryan Alexander, author of Academia Next. Bryan, one of the bigger question marks for me is the extent to which the innovation and the remarkable creativity we saw many colleges employ in response to the pandemic got into the water. How much is the strengthening of those muscles? That inclination likely to change how colleges and universities and their leaders behave going

forward? Most institutions, like most human beings, I think, make significant changes mostly when they have to and not necessarily when they don't. So to the extent we see some relief in the pressures and in the compulsion to change, will we see them continue to push in that direction?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

We can look at a few different angles. One is that we can think about it in the kind of economic or behavioral say economic way of incentives. And where do the incentives lie? If institutions are committed to improving the experience of students, and not just nominally, but if they're committing dollars to that, if they're changing structures, including, you know, tenure promotion, and review hiring, then I think that's going to be the proof in the pudding right there. And to the extent they're committed to do that, we can measure that and we can track the number of professional development offerings that are available. We can track the number of teaching and learning centers. I think that's something we have hope for and the incentive is there. And again, to come back to that enrollment aspect, you know, if you, if the pipeline is narrowing of incoming students, you want to try to maximize what you can with the students you have. And that includes making sure that they graduate, that they graduate in a timely fashion.

They have a good experience. And another incentive may be political. Political in multiple ways. That is for faculty and staff who are really in an anti-racist frame of mind, then trying to focus on their students of color and their experience, maybe something they're just simply committed to.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

You've started paying increased attention to issues of environmental sustainability in your work. What has spurred your interest in that topic related to higher education specifically as opposed to, you know, just caring as a person on the planet about whether it survives?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

In my most recent book, *Academia Next*, which came out in the winter of 2020, that was looking at American higher education over the next 20 years. For this current book, I want to look ahead further. And I also wanted to expand my scope to look at global higher education, because that's how I proceed in my work. And I found that when I looked at everything around higher education, looking ahead 80 years, the climate crisis was everywhere. If I looked at economics, politics, technology, architecture, culture, sociology. Climate crisis is everywhere unless you talk to academics, in which case it's just not available. We just were not engaging with it. And that really mystified me, and so I kept digging into it further and I found many ways in which the climate crisis can impact higher ed. And one of them is the physical threat that campuses that are close to oceans, campuses that are close to deserts, campuses that are in other locations can be threatened with physical harm, if not destruction.

Think, for example, about the major state university in Indonesia. That's in Jakarta. The city of Jakarta is actually literally at sea level and they recently moved the government capital away from Jakarta because of the fear of it being swamped by climate change. But the university is still there for campuses which aren't physically, you know, immediately in danger. How do you rethink your entire physical plant in terms of the climate crisis that is, you know, do you, for example, start electrifying all vehicles? Do you perhaps prohibit gas-burning cars? What do you do? Food service, which is an enormously contentious field. Then you look at research. Obviously, you know, academia has contributed a huge amount to the research into the climate crisis, and we've seen that in all kinds of the sciences. But we're also seeing

more and more scholarship being done across basically every position on the curriculum. And that whole catalog also flips from research to teaching. And we to figure out how we teach the climate crisis.

Do we teach more? And if so, how are we... Do we have programs? Do we have sub colleges? Do we have more majors and minors and all of this field? I mean, to what extent does academia dive in and play a role in this crisis?

DOUG LETTERMAN:

I don't know if the professional code allows futurists to have optimism or pessimism, but I am curious to sum up what we've been talking about. How do you view this moment in terms of looking ahead for post-secondary education and the people listening to this podcast? Where do you place yourself on the pessimism to optimism scale, and how do you think we should be feeling about it?

BRYAN ALEXANDER:

It's a great question. And the first part of your question is especially good because there's my own code is that a futurist must look at the full spectrum of possibility from nightmare to utopia, and we have to do that. Otherwise, we're just not going to be doing good work. Not every futurist follows that. Some of them will tend towards one pole or the other of the very happy optimistic, or the very grim pessimistic. But I think overall we try to keep our eyes as wide as possible, and then mentally that takes a toll, depending on which way you have to limit to stare into the abyss. One of the chapters of my new book is Best Case Worst Case Scenarios, and it might just give you a psychological whiplash going through it. You know, talking about the possible extinction of the human race to a new golden age. That's a lot of opportunities. So I try to keep my mind as open as possible for that. In terms of where this moment is, I think the past couple of years have been a Dickensian epic of best times and worst times.

I'm furious and depressed at some of the horrific mistakes that we've done, and I'm delighted by some of the amazing things we've done. You know, you think, for example, about the development of the COVID vaccine, which is extraordinary. I mean, literally extraordinary, an amazing, amazing development. You think about the enormous work of medical providers that have been done under horrendous circumstances. And you think, again, about the innovation that we saw in higher ed. But at the same time, we had all kinds of losses and all kinds of misfires, bad teaching, and a lack of caring at times. I think right now we have to learn from this experience. We have to apply it to make higher education better. And I think on a good day, higher education is always thinking like that. We always want to get better. We want to learn. We should be the kind of learning organisations that we want everybody else to be. And we really should look ahead not just to next week but over the next generation and think about what kind of ancestors are we being for the rest of the 21st century?

How are we situating our descendants for their future? And we've got to take that seriously. I'm open as to how we're going to do that, and I'm going to try to do my own personal best to make sure it's as good as possible. I know Inside Higher Ed is a perpetual ally for me on that score, so thank you for all of your work you're doing keeping us informed.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

I hope you enjoyed that conversation with author and futurist Bryan Alexander. I particularly appreciated him setting me straight on why futurist isn't a dirty word, and I valued his humility in acknowledging the many possible futures, plural, that could lie ahead for higher education. Thanks to Bryan for being here and to Pearson inclusive access for its support for this and the previous two

episodes. Sponsorships like this help us bring you these sorts of conversations, which we hope stimulate your thinking and maybe inspire you to keep doing what you're doing. That's all for this week's episode. Thanks for listening. I'm Doug Letterman. And until next week, stay well and stay safe.