



Breaking Barriers and Empowering Students: Arizona State University and the University of Tennessee Collaborate to Expand Access to Higher Education

ASU President Michael Crow chats with Donde Plowman, Chancellor of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in a conversation moderated by Nancy Gonzales at ASU+GSV Summit 2024 in San Diego

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Nancy Gonzales: Well, good morning, everybody. Really happy to be talking about this next, very different type of partnership. And I'm just going to jump right in and start with you. Chancellor Plowman, can you tell us about this partnership, and particularly how it got started?

Donde Plowman: I'm really happy to be here. Thank you so much. And to answer that question, to get started, yes, we're excited about this partnership between the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the flagship land-grant, and ASU around right now. The first step is around digital learning and online education. And it started in a kind of, I don't know, flippant way. Michael asked me a question. I, like many people, brought a team of our university leaders out here to learn more about the innovations in online education. And I thought that was a real coup till I got here and realized hundreds of universities are coming out here doing it. At the end of it, Michael said to me, 'cause we were very behind at UT Knoxville—I'll just say it up front—behind in online and digital learning. And at the end of it, Michael said to me, "Why didn't you partner with us?" And I said, "Well, what would that look like?" And he said, "I don't know, let's figure it out." And so, we've been doing that, and I see some of my colleagues that are helping launch that at Tennessee that are here. And we're announcing that, as of fall, we'll be starting our new programs. And it was important to me because who says something like that in higher education—"Why don't you partner with us"—to another higher education institution? Doesn't happen very often. So, that was the beginning.

Nancy Gonzales: Well, that's a good segue to the question I want to ask you, President Crow, many people would say, "Why is ASU doing this? Why doesn't ASU just focus on its own students serving its own students?" What do you say to that question?

MMC: You know, it's interesting. So, Donde is very unusual in higher education leadership in the sense that she's willing to make the case to her faculty and make the case to her institution. Well, you know, we can accelerate our evolution as the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, if we can work with these other jokers over here in Phoenix at Arizona State, and then that will be beneficial to our students and that will be beneficial to our state. For us, what we've been thinking is that we will learn from interacting with University of Tennessee. The University of Tennessee has programs and faculty that we don't have.

One of the things that we've done in higher education is we've kept all our universities like little schoolhouses in the Black Forest of Germany with our little chimneys. And we each have our own little



magic potions and newts and all this other kind of stuff. And we think that's the way to advance. It turns out our students and our constituents are suffering because we're not partnering. They're suffering because we're not accelerating the rate of innovation. And so, so this alliance between the two of us is a way for us to learn from UT Knoxville. It's a way for them to learn from us. It's a way for us to figure out how to partner. Ultimately, UT Knoxville will then partner with others and link with others and make things happen. And so, this is a part of a process in which we all benefit. That's not in the logic of higher education, where everyone tries to solve the problems on their own. It turns out that's not going to be the way that we can move forward. And so, the excitement for us is to figure out how to partner in real-time with multiple universities, working together with live students, having enhanced learning outcomes and figure out what to do with that. So we all benefit from this process.

Nancy Gonzales: Thank you. So, this is a very different model for scaling digital learning. Traditionally universities have partnered with private companies to reach more students. Can each of you tell us how this model differs from that model and why you think the time is right for this approach?

Donde Plowman: We had done some of that, and we've developed some especially graduate programs using that, but we were really lacking in undergraduate degree programs. And I remember Michael saying, "If you're gonna help the socioeconomic situation in Tennessee, that's where you have to start." And so partnering with another R1 institution... We have the same values. We have a very similar mission. We're a land-grant university, committed. We have a covenant with the people of the region where we serve that we serve them, and we help solve their problems. And we also have a lag in the percentage of kids going to college in the state of Tennessee. So the opportunity to partner with ASU helped us escalate: we can do this faster. There are about 100,000 people in Tennessee who have some degree credit, but no college degree. And so, for us, partnering with another university who understands how it is that you inspire faculty to be part of it, what's in it for faculty to participate, how does this match up with your research mission—does it match up at all? Those were real appealing factors for us.

MMC: I think what I would say is it really is the case that the scale of the challenges is so much larger than the scale of the institutions. You can't just take a thousand institutions and chop them all up into little pieces and then send them in an uncoordinated way. Because we have no ministry of higher education, which I'm not arguing for, or coordinating authorities because higher education and the public sector are coordinated at the state level because each state's circumstance is so different, we have to find a way to work with each other across these politically complex barriers, across these sociocultural settings. And what better way to do that than in technology-enhanced learning outcomes. One of the reasons that we lag in educational attainment behind a place like Korea or several European countries where they have these centralized foci, is that they're able to marshal their assets and organize them in much more coordinated kinds of ways. We have to then take a partnership model, which I think would be superior to the coordination model, and then start learning together and making things happen together. So, that's our main motivation here.

Nancy Gonzales: And can you say, just to draw the distinction a little bit more, about how this differs, like—

MMC: One of the differences is that we're not profit-seekers. We're social outcome-seekers. We have for-profit partnerships that we work with and for-profit vendors that we purchase things from and allies that we work with. And that's all positive and good. But when it comes down to the University of Tennessee student or the University of Tennessee aspirant, or the ASU student or the ASU aspirant, we want to work together



focused only on the student and not worry about whether or not shareholders are satisfied with the financial return of the joint venture.

Nancy Gonzales: Thank you. And Chancellor Plowman, can you talk a little bit more... You mentioned it already about what you see as the economic impact that you're hoping that this will have and the kind of economic and social development. If you look down the road, what do you really want to see as new opportunities for your communities?

Donde Plowman: Last year alone, Tennessee... We're attracting businesses like crazy: 77,000 new businesses in one year. The fastest-growing segment where there's need for employees is in the four-year college degree segment. So that's one of the things: it's serving the industry that's moving there. The second thing is we have all these young people—I think they're young—adults who are, have 30 hours of credit. They're working, single, oftentimes two children, and they're stuck economically. And so, I think one of the things that is so important to me that people understand is how ASU has, for a long time, been focused in their mission. The charter's everywhere, talking about who we include, not who we exclude. We are both very mission-driven organizations. And for us, as the land-grant, it's not just about helping farmers be more productive: it's also about helping industry with their needs and developing degree programs.

You know, you're talking about the Black Forest: it's kind of like a Black Forest inside higher ed, too. We offer degrees within our little silos. So you get an engineering degree or you get an accounting degree. It's hard to get a degree that has stuff—that's a technical term, stuff—from each of those areas in the university. And yet, industry is saying, "We would love students who have more breadth in what they know." So for us, I think it's all about helping the state in terms of economic development at all levels of that ladder.

Nancy Gonzales: So, President Crow, in the last panel you mentioned the challenges of universities partnering in this way, so this really is unique. And within this, I'm sure you expect we'll learn a lot about future opportunities and kind of learn from this model and also learn from our partners. So what are ways in which you think we are going to kind of be able to change what we understand about operating in the future?

MMC: Well, I mean the University of Tennessee is an outstanding research university, which is in a differentiated cultural location than ASU. So we're going to learn more broadly how to address the cultural complexities that we face that perhaps they're better at facing than we are: the breadth of students, the types of students, the, the circumstances of the students. And then, also, the fact that the University of Tennessee is a land-grant in the tradition of agriculture and engineering and extension services and so forth and so on: we're not, so we'll learn intellectually within those areas. Every university has its spikes of excellence where they have clusters of faculty members that are better than most other places, or they have individual programs that are absolutely unique in the way that they do them.

What I've always said is that universities are often foolish. I mean, it's like, "Well, we want to build a new program in something, and at another university they already have such a program". And if we just gave that other university five faculty lines and then said, "We want to invest in your program", then we'd have a program also. And they don't do that. And I think that one of the things that we're hoping to do is that we're going to find ways to leverage the University of Tennessee's expertise and faculty know-how and particular approaches to solving problems and the kinds of programs that they have. And then, that gives us an



opportunity to further evolve our institution, so we're excited about all of that. We think that there should be more partnerships, more clusters, more alliances, more joint degrees.

When I was at Columbia—I was the deputy provost there for a long time—my boss and one of my mentors, Jonathan Cole, the provost for many, many years there... We went to several other Ivy League schools that had fantastic Italian programs, Italian language, Italian culture. And we said, "Let's put this all together and create the most unbelievable Italian department outside of Italy, let's say." <Laugh>. And so, no, no, no, no. "We just have to beat you." "Ours is better than yours." "We're not gonna let you touch our faculty members." "We're not gonna let you have our students." And so, then all of us could then continue to float along in some sort of subcritical thing, then all of us being able to come together. So, we're looking to find ways to work with the University of Tennessee in that kind of realm also.

Nancy Gonzales: Okay. So, this next and last part that I want to ask you about has to do with organizational and cultural change and what it is you think is going to be necessary. And I'd like you both to address this you know, to be able to have Tennessee have the advances that they're hoping for. So, Michael, I thought this would be a nice opportunity for you to talk a little bit about how we've used EdPlus to accelerate all that we're doing and the critical role that that plays. And then, Chancellor Plowman, if you could talk about what it's gonna take for you organizationally and culturally to get something like that stood up where you are.

MMC: So, we have an entity within ASU called EdPlus at ASU. And what we decided to do years ago was to stop the process of allowing small clusters of 15 or 20 or 50 faculty members, each of them thinking that they would become innovators of the universe of the future, each of them thinking that they would build their own capability to do these things. We decided to build an all-university support unit which has in it instructional designers, technology developers, technology acquirers, program developers and so forth and so on. So, we built EdPlus at ASU as an all-institution innovation and implementation entity around advanced learning activities. And then, we made that as a service available to all of our faculties, all of our departments, all of our schools, and so forth and so on.

It turns out that that then allowed us... I was I was a visiting lecturer at Oxford once, and I was getting a lecture on the university, and they told me they had 35 admissions offices. And I said, "You people are insane." <Laugh> And they said, "Maybe, but we're still better than you." We weren't going to end up with that. We thought we could build this unit, and it has been very, very effective across the entire university. And then we also said, as we built the unit—we call it EdPlus at ASU—the same services and skills could also service, in partnership, other universities. EdPlus is designed to be able to take what we've learned and what we've developed and the partnerships that we put in place and then partner with other universities so that we might synergistically advance together. Now, this is extremely challenging because we're not supposed to cooperate with other universities; we're just supposed to compete against them. No: we have to find a way to cooperate and compete at the same time. So, EdPlus has really been designed for us to be able to do that.

Donde Plowman: And one of the things we saw... First of all, I should say, our team has made several trips out here. Your team, by the way, is coming next week to our campus. We're getting lots of advice from ASU's EdPlus group on how to structure what we're doing, how to set it up, what areas to start in first, how to work with differing faculty around some of these objectives we have and opportunities. And there are



cultural shifts for our campus because you start with, there are faculty who wanna say, "This is my course" and here we are doing, "This is our universities and our courses"—

MMC: And this is our check for you. So it's your course, but this is our check.

Donde Plowman: Exactly. So, I think that, culturally, yeah, there's a shift and I think one of the things I've thrown—it's gonna sound bad, I've thrown my weight behind this, the provost's weight, and it takes a commitment from the top of the organization to help faculty see that, you know what, this is an opportunity for you to get to know some ASU faculty and, actually, you don't have to develop all the courses. We can use some of their courses and put together a degree plan—

MMC: Which could allow you to develop other courses. Exactly.

Donde Plowman: So, while the students are taking the first two years of courses, maybe we're working on years three and four: it just makes sense. But I can tell you in higher education... I mean, this is the first time anyone has honestly ever turned to me and said, "Why don't you partner with us?" And that's the message I would like to leave with this group. Partnership is something we talk a lot about. But in higher education, it hasn't happened a lot. It's happening more between institutions and industry and startups, but not among each other. And so I want this to be a model— [Recording cuts out]