Making an Impact in California — Higher Education Leaders on Learning and the Ed Tech Revolution

ASU President Michael Crow chats with Sonya Christian, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, in a conversation moderated by Nicole Taylor at ASU+GSV Summit 2024 in San Diego

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Nicole Taylor: It's wonderful to be here in this conversation. We're going to further that piece about partnerships, and we were talking in the back, so I think you will all be really excited about what we're going to speak about today. You know, higher education institutions are finding themselves having to be in constant motion. That is not the nature of higher education institutions, except for a place like ASU, and they're finding they're having to adapt much more quickly. I had the pleasure of working at ASU and seeing it and being in it real-time, and it's the real deal. And the California Community Colleges now has a new leader eight months in who has the same attitude, the same determination as we find at ASU. So this is really exciting. So let's start there. Sonya, tell us about Vision 2030, which has been starting to get implemented. So tell us about it.

Sonya Christian: Super excited to be here. So, there was a faculty member at a community college that said, "Community colleges are special institutions. They don't pick and choose. They take everyone." The name of the faculty member is Jill Biden. And I know a long time ago, about 30 years ago, when I came to the United States from India... I didn't know the concept of community colleges at that time. I came to do my graduate program at Los Angeles, at USC, and discovered the community colleges and absolutely fell in love with the open-access mission of community colleges. I mean, imagine that, and that thrill I experienced then I experienced even now. And that December, when I went back to India, I told all my classmates that the community college is a uniquely American invention. So now, fast forward 30 years, chancellor of the California Community Colleges, oh my goodness me, and sitting here with Michael Crow, and we've been reexamining the concept of open access.

Sonya Christian: We've got 2 million students, largest higher education system in the nation, right? But then the California Community Colleges' Vision 2030 started thinking about, are we truly open access? Yeah, we have 2 million students, we take everyone who comes to us, but what about that 6.8 million that the California Competes report put out there and said that these individuals, these Californians, have a high school diploma, but no college credential, and they're in low-income jobs with no hope for economic mobility, and they have not found their way to the community college or to any institution of higher education. So, are we really open access? Then how about dual enrollment? Of the 1.6 million who are in high school here in California. Only 14% take college classes. What about the other 80%? And when you disaggregate the data, you see the same patterns. These communities are highly racialized, right?

So, Vision 2030 really talks about... You know, it's not about building it and they'll come. It worked for Kevin Costner in Field of Dreams. But if you're defining open access with equity, then we've gotta move. We've

gotta find those who haven't found their way to college and bring college to them. And the other part with Vision 2030 is we are looking at what success means. In the past for an academic institution, success meant giving that credential, that static token of academic completion. But right now we are thinking about what is beyond that point in time, what is the value proposition of higher education? And it is that economic mobility is finding social standing. It's living in healthy communities. So, at a time when the value proposition is being questioned and the economies are changing with a change in climate action and with emerging technologies, the California Community Colleges are looking at the success measure to be much more dynamic and looking beyond, you know, the walls of what we do within the classroom.

Michael Crow put out this book in 2020 called The Fifth Wave. How many of you have read the book? Okay, well, you need to get out of this room, and you gotta grab that book. In 2020, right before we were sort of shutting down the pandemic, I picked up the book, and at that time I was the chair of the Accreditation Commission. And that book blew me away because he talks about doing education at scale, and that's what the California Community Colleges are all about. I was president at one of the colleges at that time, and that's when I met Michael for the first time. You know, just brilliant. And we had a conversation. I invited him to speak virtually at that time to the entire WASC region. So, I kind of wrap up Vision 2030 and say this...

Nicole, the California Community Colleges, we're not approaching education with a Scarcity mentality, okay? When we are looking at the 2 million and we start adding up the 6.8 million and, and the 1.6 million in high school, quickly we are coming up to 10 million. So, it's fivefold. It's not a scarcity mentality. We are trying to be bold, and we are trying to be out there to take care of our students, our communities, and our planet. And we are inspired by Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham Jail that he talks about waiting means almost certainly never, right? We've gotta move now. So our slogan is our time is definitely now.

Nicole Taylor: This is great. No business as usual for California Community Colleges. So, Michael, ASU has been up to a lot in California. I think you need to tell folks about that, and what does that mean in terms of fitting into Vision 2030 and what's possible?

MMC: First, what Sonya's talking about is something that's really hard for people to get their arms around, and that is that eons ago, they decided everybody needed to know how to read. It was essential. Everyone would learn how to read. And then we needed everybody to go through elementary school. And then that took a long time to get that in. And then everybody needed to go to high school. And that's only been about a hundred years or so, a little bit more than that. And then not everybody needing to go to college, but there is no argument whatsoever in which a person needs to stop their formal access to learning at age 18 or age 25. That's a fundamental error that we have made. We've made that error for economic reasons, sociological reasons, class reasons, all kinds of reasons.

The community colleges in California are taking the lead in figuring out how to be ubiquitously present to all people with whatever they need in their life. And we're a university that's an R1, intense research university that has decided that we will also not limit our connectability. We won't ever be the size of the California Community Colleges per se, but we already have 25 million learners engaged with us digitally and 700,000 people that are engaged either in registered learning or registered courses. But even that doesn't capture it. What we need to do and where we're headed is... We don't believe that, that the country is best advanced by basically saying, "Well, you people over here can have access to learning, and you

people can't, and you people here that are living in California now that may live in Utah later or may then live in Arizona or may go here, or here or here."

As industry is evolving, we have to find a way to look at the learner as the unit of analysis: not the college, the university or the state, the learner. And in thinking about the learner, what we're interested in and where we have been moving forward is how do we use technology to facilitate more partnerships with the individual learner, more partnership between the learner system providers, the community colleges and the university and so forth and so on... How do we make all of that happen? That has then ended up for us... Here at ASU, we have more than 30,000 Californians who are ASU students pursuing degrees both online and on campus. We have many hundreds of thousands of Californians who are a part of our learning environment. And then, we've also found that in California, like we are right now here in San Diego, are hundreds, if not thousands, of new companies that are emerging in the learning and educational technology space, venture capital, concentrations, and so forth and so on. What we're finding is that, in the western United States, California is a powerful source of learners, a powerful source of venture capital, a powerful source of new technologies. All these things are needed to blend together to focus more energy on the individual learner.

I just want to emphasize what Sonya is saying. We've made egregious social errors by not continuing the learning process. If you want to, if you want to drive up the American economy, drive up wages, drive up standard of living, drive up per capita income, drive up the competitiveness of the United States, if you want to win in competitive markets, we must find a way to make every person an engaged or engageable learner at scale, connecting everyone to be able to do that.

So, we're excited about the, the connections that we have with the community colleges in California, which we have a signed partnership with all of them. We're excited about the students that are coming to ASU and staying in California or coming into California to work and then coming back to Arizona. We're excited about all of that. We built two new schools—a school for fashion and a school of film—which are being based in California and Arizona, because we think that that's a way to link and connect and make things happen. So we're, we're just excited about all of that.

Nicole Taylor: That's fantastic. So, for both of you, speak more about where technology and the innovations around technology play for you to do exactly what you're doing, and Sonya, for you to pursue this vision.

MMC: For us, the technologies basically have allowed us to look at the learner in a different way. It's not like, "Oh, you went to a great high school, or you're a gifted student and you went to a not-so-great high school, but you overcame the adversity of the not-so-great high school." What an error that we're making ,writing off most of the population as a lesser learner. So, we're using technologies to empower and enable the individual to learn. Now think about this in the spirit of the design of the United States. Liberty is a tremendous concept, but if you're not empowered to fulfill your liberties by being a part of the economy as it has evolved, well then liberty is unattained, right? What we're after is individual empowerment through advanced learning, and the technologies have allowed us to find new ways to teach subjects that students struggle with, subjects that perhaps they were less prepared with, subjects that the academy isn't very good at teaching to the general population. And so, we're working using technology to make all those things happen.

Sonya Christian: The two words, in terms of the problem we are solving for, are the problem of scale and the problem of equity. So those are kind of where our heads are in the California Community Colleges. So, let's talk a little bit about scale. We have 2 million students and 116 colleges. So, if we are moving quickly from two to 10 million, you're looking at fivefold. So the idea that we'll therefore take 116 colleges and multiply it by five... That's not gonna happen, right?, if you look at it in a conventional way. So, automatically you start looking at the promise of technology to be able to do the scale, right? So, with the emerging technologies, smart technologies and AI as a tool, there are a lot of possibilities.

For example, one of my colleagues the other day, for whom English is a second language and just a great thinker, but when he writes, he was not able to communicate ideas in writing, right? Now with ChatGPT, it organizes the word after word and the structure once he puts in the prompts that had that clear thinking through the prompts. So, there is a promise and there is an anticipation that the AI tool can now really raise the profile of large numbers of individuals rather than having sort of the elite—you used the word "stratification" in a previous talk—and that is what California Community Colleges are all about. It is providing the opportunity to develop the expertise for large numbers of individuals.

So, how many of you have seen the movie The Matrix? Okay. That's my favorite movie. The main character is this guy Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, and he's a computer hacker and living in this computer code world. But my favorite character is Trinity. She's just amazing, courage, bold... She's got this piercing gaze, really calm. There's a scene in the movie where they're both running away from the enemy—the bad guys, Agent Smith—and they get the call, "Oh, there's a helicopter on the roof." They rush up to the helicopter and Trinity's about to get into the helicopter, and she doesn't know: she doesn't have the expertise, right? Boom. She downloads the knowledge, gets in, flies the helicopter, and off they go. <Laugh> And so it seems farfetched, but the reality is, in, in some of the reading that I'm doing in the literature, that is not farfetched: you have AI playing backgammon and translating poetry and doing all kinds of incredible stuff.

I tend to be moderated in my optimism. And recently there's an MIT guy, he's a labor economist, David Autor. Typically, he's like this negative Nelly; he talks about how, with the advancement of technology, the middle class in America is disappearing and the elite is becoming more elite. But he's now showing confidence or tempered confidence, I would say, that the pre-AI computation really took away sort of the procedural and the repetitive aspect and made the expert more of an expert who had judgment and decision making. But AI really brings that judgment and becomes a tool to really elevate... [Brief loss of audio] It is a time to be tremendously optimistic that we can do education at scale and with equity.

Nicole Taylor: That's great. Two final questions. One is for the people building the education technology, and then the second one is about the people leading schools here. So, for those who are building the technology, what do they need to know about the unique context for your learners, for your faculty, for your goals?

MMC: One of the things that's been interesting to me in talking through the years with so many of the technology developers is that they all think that they're the makers of a magic elixir and that, from this magic elixir, we (the educational institutions) will go away because we're so inefficient, or we're this or that: we're gonna be replaced. They're basically taking the standard, Schumpeterian model of creative destruction— fabulous Austrian economist—and they're basically suggesting that there are replacements. And I'm like, "I don't really think so." You know, there are universities still operating today. I was in Jagiellonian University

in Krakow, Poland, years ago, sitting in the rector's office, and he was showing me Copernicus's instruments in a glass case behind him. I will guarantee you, 500 years from now, Jagiellonian University will still be there, still be teaching, still be doing what the Polish government wants it to do.

Stop thinking that you're a replacement technology and start focusing on taking these existing institutions and helping them to be of greater impact and greater outcomes. You saw all these for-profit universities rise up and, you know, most of them are off in the ditch now: billions of dollars of investments and all kinds of momentary millionaires. I hope you didn't buy your yacht on time, because you're gonna have a hard time paying it off. <Laugh> What we need is people working in partnership with the higher education community in which you can make a good return on your investment for your technology. You can get a good return on the risks that you've taken as a capitalist to advance your technology, but think about how the system, the, is going to evolve itself. One of the things in the book that you looked at, Sonya, The Fifth Wave... It talks about the first wave. In every other sector, institutions that are the precursors to later waves of evolution are always gone, except in education where none of them are gone. Some of them are morphed, but there are still small Greek academy, New England colleges in the United States, prospering, right? Having a great time, charging a lot of money to be able to go there for a small number of students, but nonetheless, they're still there. We've gotta get the technologists to think about innovating within the sector.

There was a guy, famous guy, now passed away: Clayton Christensen. We invited Clayton to come out to ASU, and I said, "Clayton, you know, you talk about disruptors." So he thought disruption, Schumpeterian creative destruction, was the method by which innovation occurred and new things happened. I said, "Yeah, everywhere but this sector, dude <laugh>, it doesn't work this way." And so, he left after two or three days at ASU, and he said, "I understand now that my, my writing and my logic about disruption as the only way to advance innovation is not a complete story." And I said, "Exactly, you can disrupt from the core." So institutions like the California Community Colleges and Arizona State University: we're in the core, we're the part of the world that Clayton would've said has to be disrupted and replaced. What we need is disruption in the core, from the core, in education to be the most successful. So that's what we need from our innovation partners.

Nicole Taylor: Sonya, your thoughts?

Sonya Christian: I've come to ASU+GSV several times and super excited about the talent with the ed tech community and what you're thinking in terms of sort of the future problems you want to solve. So, from the California Community Colleges perspective, we are serious about equity at scale. So, two quick examples.

We are trying to build an infrastructure that recognizes learning, even if it happens outside the classroom. The phrase is "credit for prior learning". So, earlier, I talked about the 6.8 million Californians who are stuck in low-income jobs. Okay? It's up to us. We have a moral obligation to take college to them, right? But if you think about a 35-year-old woman, Sabrina—actually I've met her. She's a healthcare worker. And if we want to take a certificate that then leads up to a degree, we've got to recognize the learning that has happened for her in the last 10 years when she's been working as a home health care provider. So, that credit for prior learning infrastructure is what we want to accelerate with the infrastructure that we are doing to get to the 10 million learners. So workers now need to have a "dual citizenship": they're workers, but they also need to be learners.

Which gets to my second point, and that is the data systems. Now, we have the data system for our 2 million learners who are with us now, but we need to really find those whom we need to take college to them. So we need to create partnerships and agreements, data sharing agreements... For example, in California, we have large labor organizations that have thousands of workers. So, when we do a data sharing agreement, the workers become learners with the California Community Colleges. We're also doing it with employers, so large-scale employers, we are doing those data-sharing agreements. When I was at the conference, the faculty member from Princeton, Ruha Benjamin, she talks about the equity aspect. Her point is, when you're doing these large data agreements, if there is an individual who has a certain stigma within a certain system, by doing the efficiency of data, moving around and making it more global, are you really amplifying that stigma across, right?

So, there are lots of considerations that we need to take as we get deeply into the world of AI. But having said that, I will conclude by saying that I'm extremely hopeful that the time is certainly now for ed tech folks to solve our problems in partnership with us, in partnership with universities, community colleges, and so on. You know, I saw this quote 10 years ago that said, "Hope is the ability to see great music of the future, and faith is the courage to dance to it today." And that summarizes, my dear friends, the California Community Colleges. We are moving with such focus because we have tremendous hope for the 10 million who are going to be our future learners. And we have so much hope that, through partnerships with ed tech talent and talent with universities like ASU, we can have the courage and the faith to dance to it today.

Nicole Taylor: I love that. Okay. We have a minute and a half left. Final question. What do you have to say to the school leaders who are trying to figure out what their partnerships need to look like with ed tech and AI companies?

MMC: Well, you take these shackles that are holding your wrists and your ankles together and you take them off. And you then start partnering with others and make partnering essential to your pathway to success because there's no other way to get there. That's been the case for us.

Sonya Christian: Ditto on my end. There's a book by Noah Yuval Harari called Sapiens, and I keep going back to the book all the time. The chief message that Harari puts out there is the message of cooperation, because it's through cooperation that humans have sort of dominated, right? So I think it is through large-scale cooperation that we are going to make miracles happen. Thank you.

Nicole Taylor: I love that. Let's give a hand to Michael and Sonya. Thank you all. <Applause>