Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast
Episode 8 – Michael Crow

Eloy: Hi, I'm Eloy Oakley, and welcome to another podcast brought to you by the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office." Today, I have the great pleasure of being joined by Dr. Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University. In today's podcast, we're going to talk about the trends in higher education, especially online education, which ASU Online has been at the forefront, a developing...and earning a national reputation for quality. It's great to have you join us, Michael. Happy to have you here.

Michael: Thanks, Eloy. It's exciting to be here and it's really a tremendous moment in history, you know, where we've got technology and demand for learning all coming together at the same time. It's very exciting.

Eloy: Well, you've been doing some exciting things for a number of years at ASU, and certainly, many of us in higher education have been watching and taking close look at the changes that you have been leading. So, we very much appreciate your leadership, Michael. Let's start with some of your thoughts about the future of higher education in the United States and globally, and how online learning is shaping that direction, shaping the direction of teaching and learning at the post-secondary level, and specifically, what ASU is doing to shape that national conversation. So tell us a little bit about your thoughts.

Michael: Well, I think one of the things that's happened with the speed with which the present model of the economy is moving, it's accelerating. Technology is being interjected in all aspects of our technology. Take a look at Amazon, take a look at the change in workforce, workforce work itself, the idea of work. With all of that happening, I think that what has happened is that we've gotten to a point where the notion of linear thinking as it relates to education. You go to K12 then you go the community college, or you go to the university, or you go to the military, and that trains you up, then, for the rest of your

life for a technical school or something like that. I think that model has run its course and that what we're looking at now is a fantastic opportunity in human history where there's more and more change and more and more opportunity for people that are prepared for that change and prepared for that opportunity.

And so the way that we look at this at ASU, and the way that we have looked at it is, how might we use technology to empower our faculty and to empower our students and to empower our community to be able to learn more broadly, learn more quickly, learn more inexpensively so that the learning process itself can be made more universal? In fact, we've got this idea that we're now calling "Universal Learner," which is this notion of a person learning how to learn. You go to a community college to learn how to learn. You got to a university to learn how to learn. Our parents teach us how to learn. And what we do is then, in the past, we haven't empowered that learning throughout a person's lifetime.

It turns out that technology and online learning will allow us to be able to facilitate access to learning throughout a person's entire life when they're changing jobs, when they're thinking about starting a family, when they're learning about how to move into a new community, when they're influenced or affected by a new technology that's coming through the economy like autonomous vehicles, or new ways of treating diseases, or new ways to be nutrition enhanced, or whatever it happens to be. What we're after is how do you enhance every individual's ability to learn throughout their life? And the way to do that is with a great faculty, a great set of teachers and learners and a great technology platform to help that to occur across the entirety of a person's life.

Eloy: So, Michael, there's a lot of debate right now in the media, in higher education circles, in circles of folks who are looking at the future of work. And there's this juxtaposition of the dawn of artificial intelligence to growing automation of the workforce and what a skilled workforce needs versus what higher education has been traditionally providing students and members of the workforce. So, how do you see that friction playing out? There's a lot of debate whether or not higher education, as we know it today, really creates the value that we need for the future of work. How do you see this conversation playing out and what do you see at ASU is happening on the ground related to this issue of creating value for your students?

Michael: So the dawn of automation and all that was a long time ago. What we're experiencing now is the accelerated notion of the changing

of work. And so what they're not aware of is the nature of the fact that what we have now is an unbelievable, unprecedented opportunity. The opportunity is, now, that any person from anywhere at any time can enhance their learning, and from enhanced learning, then, adjust to a new opportunity, create a new opportunity for themselves, engage in the new economy in a new way, drive their families forward in new ways or earn for their families new levels of income. All of that, we believe, from the experience that we've had at ASU, can be greatly enhanced by enhancing the learning process through technological engagement.

We've done this on campus, we now operate what we call an "on-campus, full-immersion technology-enhanced learning environment." We've got tremendous improvements in graduation rates, tremendous improvements in learning outcomes, tremendous improvement in the ability of students to take two or three degrees and learn other things along the way or additional certificates enhancing their learning ability. We then move those technologies into another realm that we call "Full Immersion Online Technology-Enhanced Learning." In that arena, we have 30,000 students pursuing 150 degrees online. We're getting fantastic learning outcomes from these largely adult learners, people that went to college and didn't finish for the whatever reason, or they didn't have a chance to go to college for the whatever reason. We now have found a way to connect our faculty and our library and our laboratories and all of our work to them.

And then we have a third realm that we're working in, which is what we call "Full Immersion Open Scale Technology-Enhanced Learning." And this, you know, not pursuing a degree, but just pursuing a pathway to learning. You may be a welder and need to pick up a little bit of information about engineering. You may be working in a business and wanna know a little bit more about what is accounting or what is finance. And so what we found in all of these programs is that learning opportunities and the learning empowerment are truly powerful. Then we have a fourth realm, which is what we call "Education through Exploration." How can we use technology platforms to gamify, to make fun, what learning is really supposed to be is fun, how can we make fun the learning of really complicated subjects like biology or chemistry or calculus or other things that people need along the way? And we've figured out how to do that using technology also.

You take all of those things together and you match them up with what other kinds of institutions are doing, be they...trade unions, which are training skills or employers, which are training skills or what have you,

and you bring all of this together... And we've got this opportunity for the first time to not have learning have boundary conditions around it where you can't move from one realm to the second realm. You can't change your educational status. You can't update what you know. How about anyone can update what they know? Anyone can update their learning outcomes. That's what we've really worked on. And we're seeing huge progress towards those objectives.

Eloy: So, as you began to experience these changes and this adaption in adoption of online learning, there are still a lot of people in higher education and beyond that hold on tight to their notions of what higher education should be or what it has been. And we've seen, over the last few years, a decline in the number of people enrolled in traditional campus-based programs and an increase in the number of students enrolling online. So, what do you say to those people who continue to hold on tight to the traditional way we deliver higher education and what are your students telling you about how they prefer to learn today versus 10, 20, 30 years ago?

Michael: Well, I think, one thing that's true in higher education, as in all learning, is that there's lots of rooms for lots of methods and lots of pathways. In the business that you and I are in of reaching the public at scale, you know, we have to worry about the cost of delivery. We have to worry about the effectiveness of our programs. We have to worry about making sure that we're not leaving anyone out. We have to make sure that we're connecting to the broadest spectrum of our society. So in that model, technology is really the only way to go. And I would say to those that hold to the older models, I don't think there's any part of the older model being abandoned, which is the centrality of the teaching, learning, and discovery environment. The centrality of the learning process. What we're doing is we're enhancing that learning process.

So, we're not using technology as a replacement, we're using it as an enhancement. We know, for instance, in courses from the arts to the humanities, to the sciences, to math, we have seen tremendous learning outcome enhancements using technologies empowering our faculty and our instructors and others to be able to be more impactful in what they do. And so there is, by nature, resistance to all change. That's human nature. And then within that human nature, then there are those do change that then innovate and move in new directions. And so I think that in higher education, that's a little bit slower than maybe it needs to be, but it none the less, is underway. And I think what we're seeing now is we're seeing multiple pathways for learning that are evolving. And

what I'm really excited about is the kinds of really positive outcomes that we're getting, both through enhanced-technology learning on campus, as well...enhanced-technology based learning off campus.

Eloy: So, we in the community colleges, we've certainly seen an increase in employers requiring some sort of post-secondary credential for workers today to have any sort of meaningful participation in the economy. And of course, that's troubling to us, particularly as we see the equity gaps that exist between those who have the opportunity to gain a quality post-secondary education and those that do not. So there's issues of equity, there's issues of pushing back on a selective model of higher education. And so you've probably heard a little bit about Governor Brown's proposal to create a fully online tech-enabled college here in California that its sole purpose is to reach out to adult learners who are stack in the economy. What are your thoughts about this kind of proposal? Do you think these adult learners can actually learn in this online environment? Are they capable of acquiring the skills they're going to need to gain a stronger foothold in the economy? Or is this just some sort of fool's errand?

Michael: Well, it's definitely not a fool's errand. I can tell you that human beings want to learn. Human beings want to be successful with their families. Human beings want to raise their children for their children to be prepared for whatever lies ahead. What we know what lies ahead is a fast-moving technology-empowered economy. California is at 40 million people now, growing too, perhaps, as many as 60 million people over the next few decades. It's got huge public institutions in the University of California, the Cal State system and your system at the community college. There's really no way to think about educating the workforce of the future at the scale that needs to be educated across a person's entire lifetime unless one thinks about enhancing the existing institutions technologically and building technologically-based learning platforms that allow as many as, let's say, in a 60 million person California 30, 40, 50 million people to be learning at one time. No one has ever conceived of anything like that.

The only way to do that, and I think this is where Govern Brown's proposal is genius, the only way to do that is to build an institution that draws from the fantastic value of the faculty, the wisdom of the faculty, the insights of the faculty, the learning capabilities of the faculty, and then marries that with all of the technological capabilities that human beings have put together so that any person...you know, maybe they didn't have a chance to go to college. Maybe they didn't finish high

school, for whatever reason. Maybe they want a better outcome for their children and they want to enhance their children's learning, even beyond what the local school district is providing. Or they, for whatever circumstance, are facing a life change and they need additional learning. They need to be able to just easily, seamlessly, and simply and at the lowest cost possible, gain access to that learning. And so the governor's proposal is, I think, the largest step ever contemplated in the U.S. to build such an institution. And I'm somewhat familiar with the concept and the idea. And if it can be pulled off, it could be life-altering for the trajectory of tens of millions of Californians.

Eloy: So, Michael, ASU has been pioneering the use of online technologies to reach more adults, many of which are here in California. What are some of the challenges that you have faced and how have you overcome them, particularly in terms of reaching adult students? Because a lot of folks still hold on to failed experiments that they keep bringing up from universities such as San Jose State, failed used of MOOCs and other online technologies. What have you done and what have you learned at ASU that has allowed you to get beyond some of those initial points of lack of success to where you're at now?

Michael: Well, so several things that we've learned. One, we know that all learners are different and you have to respect their differences. You can't treat a person that's been to college and didn't finish the same as a person that's in college. You need to look at every learner given their circumstance. The other thing that we've learned is that there's deep discouragement out there. Some folks that went to community college and didn't graduate or went to a college or a university and didn't graduate. You have to move past that discouragement. So it requires us to rethink the notion of the technology platform that we advance. So the one thing that we've learned is that human contact, social interaction, social peer groups, all of those things are absolutely essential to any human-based learning environment. There is no learning on your own in isolation away from others. And whatever technology platform you have needs to be hybridized into a sociotechnical system that allows for human contact, human interaction, human engagement, creativity enhancement, you know, all those things together.

And so what we have done is, after learning these lessons, we've worked to build systems that have academic coaches and success coaches and peer mentor groups and team building capabilities and visualization capabilities, to allow people to come together so they're not learning in isolation. MOOCs, for the most part, early MOOCs were all

isolation single leaners, single learner environments. We didn't do any MOOCs at the beginning because we didn't think that that was necessarily the best technological solution. So, what we're working toward with all of our energy and all of our creativity and all of our partners is these sort of hybridized enhanced technology-empowered learning environments where the core process of learning in a given course or a given program or a given subject can be customized to the way that people best learn within that subject. That's not the same in electrical engineering as it is in our philosophy degrees or in our online biology degree or our online nutrition degree. But what we have done is we've learned that it's all about doing something other than oversimplifying the process to think that somehow robots or machines can do these processes. What does this are faculty enhanced by technology, working with people to help the students to be successful. And that's really the key. It's a combination. It's a sociotechnical educational platform.

Eloy: So, Michael, like the California Community Colleges, ASU offers a lot of traditional brick and mortar classes, the traditional undergraduate experience. How do you differentiate between the kind of learning environment you create in your traditional classroom that many of us who've come through higher Ed experience versus this new opportunity for adults to engage in learning? Do you provide different types of professional development for your faculty? Is there a differentiation between the kinds of skills necessary to reach adult learners online versus your traditional student in a classroom? How does ASU deal with those different populations?

Michael: So, we have the same faculty that's doing all of our teaching, number one. And what we do is we empower that faculty by training them at their decision, their own individual decision to become technologically empowered, technologically aware. And then I think the other thing that we've done is, in our case, we've built a staff of about 170 people and we're growing that staff dramatically that are unbelievable teaching-learning specialists themselves. So they're instructional designers. They're knowledge navigators. They're knowledge curators. They then now work with our faculty in ways where our faculty, who are the subject experts, now are working with teaching and learning experts who are allowing them to now enhance their technological projection of what it is that they know. And what we found now with 2,000 of our faculty members trained, with thousands of courses, hundreds of thousands of people that have taken these courses, with learning outcomes that we've measured across these

platforms, is that we're getting great outcomes for our faculty. They're feeling fantastic about themselves, number one.

Number two, we're getting tremendous impact across tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people. And so we're feeling pretty good about what the institution is doing. And we're doing all of this by, basically, creating this new class of person. These knowledge navigators, these instructional designers, these knowledge curators. And so we've brought all of these people together with our faculty. And that's really the lesson that we've learned, is that it's all about the enhancement of the faculty so that the faculty member can reach multiple types of students in multiple types of settings.

Eloy: That sounds like some great insights for us here in the California Community Colleges, Michael. Now, let me turn to another topic. A lot of debate in education right now, which is the whole notion of credentialing. We're all used to the bachelor's degree or the graduate degree or the associate's degree in community college. But there is a drive across the country, particularly in the areas of technical education, workforce training to create more of a credentialing or badging system across the country that signals specific skill acquisition to employers. What are your thoughts about this growing trend toward credentialing? And where do you see this going?

Michael: Well, if done with great rigor and great discipline, I think badging is really, really important. I remember eons ago when I was a Boy Scout and I became an Eagle Scout, the earning of the merit badges was a really big deal. And they were discrete learning modules that we went through. And it was a fantastic experience. You'll laugh at this, but I wish there was a way I could still be earning merit badges now for all the stuff that I keep learning. As an old man now, I wish I somebody could give me some little merit badge, so I could say, "Well, look at my merit badge here. I know everything there is to know about bird study." And so whatever it is...

Eloy: We'll give you a merit badge for this podcast.

Michael: So, what I think is great is that we do need more credentials. We need more definition around the credentials. We need more badging. We need more stackable credentials. We need more tradability between credentials. This is tradable for this and is stackable with this and is connectable with this and, "Oh, yes. I see you have these four certificates. And if you had these other three certificates, well that's the

equivalent of this." I'm all for that so long as there is unbelievable rigor around the quality of the program itself.

Eloy: Yeah. No, that's a great point because, at the end of the day, we wanna create value for our students. And we need some method to ensure that that value exists. Otherwise, we open up the door to all sorts of different players in this space and the consumer, our students, not knowing where to turn.

Michael: Well, I can see it even in my own family. My dad was a working-class guy who was an enlisted man in the navy. I lived in California a lot growing up. Different navy bases in Alameda and San Diego and Imperial Beach, other places. And so what I knew from my dad was that my dad was really smart and really capable and he did all this technical stuff in the navy. And then when he got out of the navy, they said, "Well, what did you do? We have no idea what you did. You didn't go to college. And so, therefore, you don't know much." So my dad became a truck driver filling vending machines on a food service route. And he had unbelievable technical skill because, in a sense, he got...I won't use the technical term. I guess I will. He got screwed. And so he got screwed by not having a way to have the badges or the certificates of the things that he knew. So this is something I'm intimately familiar with.

Eloy: And that is one of the cornerstones to the design of the 115th online college, finding better ways to capture that prior learning that so many adults come with, whether they come from the military or experience in other workplaces. We need to do a better job of capturing that learning because it is real learning and it demonstrates a mastery of a lot of content that we just have not been giving our students credit for.

Michael: Absolutely.

Eloy: Let me ask you, in closing, based on your time there at ASU, what would you like to see for ASU in the future? What is your sort of game plan for world domination? And what would you like to see higher education doing more of as we move forward into the future?

Michael: We don't have any plans for world domination. There seem to be other people thinking about that. So, what we're focused on is how could we build a great on-campus university where every single student is a part of the teaching, learning, and discovery enterprise, no joke, so that eventually there's no tuition for anyone coming to the university.

Because then the university is reaching out to many, many, many hundreds of thousands of other learners at various points in their lives and working with other institutions and other people to help them to advance. So, what we're looking for is how do you empower the university to be this powerful teaching, learning, and discovery thing, not just all about itself? All the kids that come here, all the faculty that come here will get great benefits. But then so will many, many, many other people by being connected to us. And so that's where we are headed. That's our ultimate goal. That's our ultimate objective.

Eloy: Well, that sounds like a great future for ASU. And it's been my pleasure to have a chance to talk to you, Michael. Thanks for joining us today.

Michael: Thanks, Eloy.

Eloy: That wraps up another installment of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office," podcast. I've had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University. Thank you, Michael. It's been a great pleasure and I look forward to continuing this conversation in the years to come. Thanks for joining us.

Michael: Yes. Thanks, Eloy.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next "California Community Colleges" podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.