Ep.84: Defining the Role of Digital Learning on Campus

DOUG LEDERMN:
Public colleges and universities going about rethinking their teaching and learning strategies in the wake of wide scale experimentation with digital instruction. Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of The Key. Thanks for being here. This week's episode is the last of a three part series on digital teaching and learning supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The first two episodes explored how the COVID 19 pandemic reshaped what researchers and practitioners know about the role of technology and learning, and how well the hundreds of edtech companies that work with colleges, professors and students meet the needs of the institutions and their people and what they can do better. In this week's episode, we look more closely at how individual colleges and universities are rethinking the role of digital learning. We're joined first by Dhanfu E. Elston, chief of staff and senior vice president for Strategy at Complete College America discussing an effort involving six historically black colleges and universities.

Then we'll listen in as administrators at a diverse range of colleges and universities, all speakers at a recent conference I participated in in Boston discuss the work they're doing to evolve their strategies for using digital tools and approaches in instruction. Before we dive into today's episode, here's a word from the Gates Foundation.

SPEAKER:
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DOUG LEDERMN:
Here's part one of today's program, a conversation with Dhanfu Elston of Complete College America. Dhanfu welcome to the key and thanks for being here.

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
Now, thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

DOUG LEDERMN:
For those of our listeners who aren't familiar, can you give us a sense of Complete College's mission and how strengthening institutions ability to deliver digital learning fits into that larger mission?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
For those that are not as familiar with Complete college America, I think the the name speaks for itself. Our focus when we were founded 13 years ago was to kind of elevate the conversation beyond access. And so when we're talking about college completion, we are talking about credentials of purpose and value. So whether that's a certificate or an associate's degree or a four year degree, we still believe that American dreams are fueled by college degrees and college opportunities. And that dream has been to some individuals in question from stagnant success rates to growing debt to declining career outcomes. But we know that, a college education, a certificate still has currency and value. And so our goal is to make sure more students get that.

DOUG LEDERMN:
And then in terms of digital learning, I assume that as it has carved out a larger place in higher education generally, as we've seen the proportion of all students taking virtual courses, etc, grow pre-pandemic obviously, digital learning has taken on a more relevant role within your larger mission. Has there been a specific digital learning mission, or is it really just looking at digital as a modality to achieve the larger goals?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
I think that everyone is talking about something absolutely different when they say the learning.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Absolutely.

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
I think that, you know, the pandemic laid bare the idea that students were not able to be in an in-person environment. And so when they say digital learning, most folks meant or thought that that meant making sure that the courses and the pedagogy translated to an online version where you could have Zoom or whatever modality a platform you were using. I think that when we talk about digital learning, we're talking about the holistic experience of students, you know, and it goes beyond the classroom. So they're learning in their co-curricular activities, they're learning in their mentorship with faculty members, they're learning through the social experiences. So for us, we've moved a little bit beyond the availability awareness and adoption of tech tools and moving largely into a larger conversation around what does digital student success look like?

DOUG LEDERMN:
Good way to segue into the Digital Learning Infrastructure Initiative that you have launched in the last year or so. Tell us a little bit about what that is all about and how that aligns with that broader definition of digital student success that you just described?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
This is not new work for CCA, I think it's more of an evolved set of efforts. We've always been about

what are the structural reforms that will ensure that more students graduate on time with less debt, and really the things that institutions can modify and adjust to provide that service to students. The digital learning infrastructure, as it's named which is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was really intensely focused on HBCU's. And what is the unique experience about HBCU's? What are the opportunities that exist for them, especially in this post pandemic, in our current pandemic era where we could just think a little bit more about what this might look like, not with the intention of turning their unique experience of an on campus, very practical, familial type environment and putting it online. That's not the goal. The goal is to figure out how do we use this to capture students who stop out, drop out, for whatever reason, might not be able to have an in-person experience but are still wanting to connect with that unique HBCU ethos.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Tell us a little more about the substance of the work you envision being done as part of the Digital Learning Infrastructure Initiative and what will make it a success in your eyes?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
We're trying to figure out are there unique cultural needs of minoritized learners in hybrid and online learning spaces? You know, we wanna think about what a long term strategy could look like throughout the country to support institutions that serve students of color. And we want to evolve, you know, kind of elevate new models of innovation in the midst of resource constraints. We wanted to use the experience of success and resilience of HBCUs to show other institutions that there are ways to think about this and move your efforts forward. One of the things that drew us to this project was the fact that for the first time a foundation wanted to do a co-design effort, and that's not typically how they do the work. You know, it's normally here's an idea, we've gone into the lab with some consulting groups and here's what we think is the big thing. And this conversation starts with the institutions in my campus visits, meeting with the leadership, discussions with the students on what is the unique needs that they think and that they desire.

And so we chose six institutions in which we actually intensely focused on a number of institutions that don't always get selected for these projects. You hear the same names over and over again, but we get they have the pleasure to work with Coppin State University, Langston University, Mississippi Valley State, Virginia State, Wiley College and Xavier University of Louisiana. And I think there's just so many kind of learnings that came out of those conversations with them.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Are there commonalities among the six institutions in terms of either what have been the impediments to the use of Digital Learning or what are likely to be barriers going forward? Are they cultural, financial or something else?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
We spend a lot of time not just working with those six institutions, but part of our research included almost 20 plus institutions and different individuals in different roles. And so we started kind of organizing this in this learnings and these learnings into a framework of investment and innovation. And so I think that broadly across that taxonomy, there are some foundational pieces related to, you know, do you have a vision and what's your institutional policies and what's the change management process. Then there there're the institutional kind of efforts around what is your IT infrastructure look like, are you even collecting the right data. So this technology to support some kind of outcomes and then what

software and platforms use that? And then there's the faculty piece, the professional development and the teaching and learning experiences that kind of coincide with that. And I would say the most important piece are students. You know, how do you ensure that they have the right supports and that there's a culture of engagement?

All those things were broad. Ultimately, we landed on three or four kind of innovation priorities that we think are key, but they all came out of that conversation.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Mm hmm. I guess I'm interested in the in the question of whether the outcome is likely to result in more students studying online? My sense is that in a lot of the conversations I'm in about the role technology plays going forward, I don't think that in most places, it's necessarily about going from x% of students studying online to 2x%, that it's much more about wisely, effectively integrating technology where appropriate and digital modes into the overall instruction that's being offered. Going back to what you said near the beginning about how we define things, to the extent you're talking about a digital learning infrastructure, I don't get the sense that you're necessarily talking about all these institutions suddenly having a third of their students studying online. Am I right about that?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
You're absolutely correct. That is not the plan. I'm an HBCU graduate. Now, I went to Clark Atlanta University. There is nothing like being able to walk on the campus, smell the air, see professors engaging with their students in a way that you wouldn't typically see on another campus. And so, you know, this is part of a larger effort. There are a number of other projects. I mean, I think UNCF is doing some really amazing work. And then there are a number of institutions, Paul Quinn and Howard and a few others that are really kind of in their own unique way thinking about what does this customization look like? When I think about schools like Morehouse, where they started thinking there are individuals who are Morehouse men who went to our campus and for whatever reason, life got in the way and they weren't able to finish. Being able to find ways to re-engage students who have real life issues-work, family, marriage, children being able to keep them engaged is I think, absolutely key.

And technology can be a way of making that happen. It can also be a way of engaging students that may not have always seen it as an opportunity because they couldn't travel to those locations. But those are all, I think, ways that they can be used to kind of elevate the value of the HBCU experience.

DOUG LEDERMN:
If we're thinking about what institutions can do, institutional leaders can do to best ensure their institution's capacity to deliver an effective digital experience, what advice do you have for them? Again, recognizing that you're still doing the learning you're doing in this early in this project, what do you think most institutional leaders should be focused on as they figure out what their own strategy is gonna be and how to help their people achieve it?

DHANIFU E. ELSTON:
It is going to vary depending on the institution and the mission of the institution. I think there are some institutions that are all in on trying to make sure that they provide virtual options, whether that be executive programs or graduate programs or just some unique kind of undergraduate curricular efforts. I think that there are a few things that I think have to be considered. I think that all institutions have to kind of start off with a recognition that each institution will start at a different point in the engagement

of the work. So there are some institutions that are very much in the discovery phase, and then you've got institutions that are already scale in some of these efforts. And they're trying to figure out how do we continue to build on this momentum. There were a number of the institutions in our project that were like, thank goodness we made these investments five years ago. It was just a turn of a switch. And then some were starting from scratch. But when you think about that specific question, I think there are some big takeaways for me.

One is that, having some sort of student portal that is a single place for students and faculty to kind of engage is key. And right now, most institutions have five or six different systems. It's just burdensome. And it's probably not the most efficient use of the limited dollars that you have. That's one example. I would say a second one is just what's the data platform that helps you tell a complete picture of student success? The first question in this project was, How do you define student success? And I also think that, you know, there's this misconception that everyone's competing. I think one of my colleagues, Neha Heidel at the convening said that's not the game that we have to play. We can really learn from one another and in some cases pool our resources to create communities of practice for HBCU leaders, staff and faculty. I think that is a unique opportunity for us to build and cultivate talent that can then be used as service to all institutions and all HBCUs and I think those are some of the ideas that are on the table.

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DOUG LEDERMN:
That was Dhanfu Elston of Complete College America, discussing how the organization is helping six historically black colleges strengthen their institutional digital learning infrastructures in the service of student success. For another angle on how colleges are adapting what they've learned about themselves and their students in the last two years to rethink their approaches to teaching and learning, I wanna parachute you into some of the conversations that unfolded at Digital Universities Week which our new partner Times Higher Education staged in conjunction with MIT in Boston last month. Much of the discussion over several days was about how campuses were evolving their strategies for using digital tools and approaches in instruction. In the excerpts of that follow, we'll hear from officials at a diverse range of institutions with different missions, all of whom view this moment as an opportunity but are seizing it in distinctive ways. Here's Dale P. Johnson, Director of Digital innovation for the University Design Institute at Arizona State University, describing how he views the opportunity at hand.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
If you're not seizing this moment to engage with your faculty, then you just missed the greatest opportunity in your lifetime to innovate. It means meeting the faculty where they are. They've just leveled up. Some of them are not happy, they're gonna go back, that's OK, but how many can you retain at that new level? How many can you encourage to go to the following level? And that's a process that also you have to think about structurally. What does it mean to say now faculty's ready to teach online? If you don't have a program to support that development, then they're just gonna revert back to the mean. So as you think about where your faculty are now, they've been exposed to synchronous online education or remote education. Well, what if they videotaped all of those synchronized lectures and

now they have a library, can we use your own library to help you place more of your material online for the LMS or for some other use and platform? You have to start thinking about that strategically because that opportunity is slipping away as we speak.

And all those faculty members who are sitting on the fence right now thinking, you know, I could put a lot of my stuff online, they need encouragement and the innovation would happen without them.

DOUG LEDERMN:
But they'd also be required to then have that... What you call the plan model.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
Yeah.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Of what to do if they were to do that, how to use the class time difference.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
That's the wild card, is that innovation of classroom activity hasn't been socialized yet. So there are pockets. If you're in physics, you probably have been exposed to it or in life sciences. Any doctors in the house? Any medical students? The doctors started doing this about 120 years ago with case analysis, right. They do symptomatic analysis. Medical education has been doing active learning for over 100 years. And then the lawyers adopted it. How many people remember the paper chase television show and movie? So that was the lawyers saying we can do, we should be doing case study. And then the business schools adopted it. How many people did an MBA? All of the MBA students know what case studies are. So if it's good enough for the doctors and it's good enough for the lawyers and it's good enough for the business people, why isn't good enough for our freshmen? Why are we making them wait until they go to professional school to have that wonderful, engaging learning experience in the classroom?

DOUG LEDERMN:
In another exchange from that same conversation, you'll hear first from Chris Campbell, chief information officer of DeVry University, and then again from Dale Johnson, talking about some of the strategies their institutions have used to train, support and motivate faculty members to do the hard work of rethinking their own way of doing things.

CHRIS CAMPBELL:
Driving that change is tough, right? Just the cultural alignment and that's why the faculty becomes so important and in their interest in that innovation because we can only do so much with the tech. When you're asking these faculty to completely redesign the learning experience for the student from a lecture to an interactive modality, it's a big lift, it's a big lift. And it's not rote, I think which is one of the other things that I've heard recently from some of our faculty is that, you know, it used to be a lot easier because I gave the same lecture over and over and over again, and now we're asking them to break it up and have interactions, more discrete interactions. And oh, by the way, in order to fuel those interactions, you have to use current events. You have to use things that are resonant in the students lives. So it turns out to be it's a big lift.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
This brings up the question of motivation. We all face the challenge of having too many things and not

enough time. So for us, the motivation was very fundamental. How do I get a faculty member to make this type of conversion? Either give them money which we do. To get a course online at ASU, we pay the faculty members $5,000. They take all of their lectures, they videotape them in our studio with the support of our staff, with our instructional designers, they place them all online and then they have to do that for at least two semesters. They have to teach that course. That's their obligation. That's the same if you're gonna ask them to go to a hybrid model and put all of their material into the LMS and then do something different in class. The other compensation might be something like goodwill. They might say, I really love this model and I want to do it. So you have to look for the motivation of your faculty. If it's not goodwill and it's not money, and sometimes it's the mission.

We want to produce students that are better prepared to address the social problems of the day. So therefore, we want to motivate our faculty with our mission, whatever works for your institution. But you have to try. You have to look for those kinds of incentives and motivations. Otherwise, it doesn't get.

CHRIS CAMPBELL:
So one you didn't mention is the reward system within institutions.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
Yeah.

CHRIS CAMPBELL:
Teaching load. Teaching load. But also does pedagogical innovation get recognized in tenure, promotion and tenure decision? Most of us don't change unless and until we have to or unless we have real motivation to do it. In general, we haven't train people starting in their doctoral programs to pedagogically innovate. And I'm not sure that many institutions that the reward systems, especially the higher up the ladder, the systems are deeply tilted toward research over teaching innovation.

DOUG LEDERMN:
Here's one more thought from Dale Johnson. With his view widely shared by a lot of folks I'm talking to these days, that the main goal of this time ought to be focused on figuring out how to use the new digital tools and expertise at our disposal to take best advantage of the time professors and students spend together in the physical classroom.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
Though the objective is to use the class time to the highest value possible, that's the goal. The technology enables us to transform that classroom learning experience. That's where we get the benefit from. So applying innovation in the teaching endeavor requires us to rethink those types of structural activities. But the objective is not to stop lecturing. That's in order to do something else with that time.

DOUG LEDERMN:
The steps required at the institutional level to bring about that kind of change, why don't you go a little bit more about sort of what the steps are.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
Faculty development, number one, number two, number three, it's faculty, faculty, faculty. You have to convert that behavior which is so ingrained in us away from lecturing. The second thing we need is a model. So if I'm not using that time together with my students to lecture, what am I doing? So you need

a model of engagement, something that has more value, like class teamwork exercises, case studies, applied exercises, things that have more direct value for developing student capabilities. And the third thing is we have to transform our learning space, the classroom, this room is a constraint. As soon as we set up these chairs, we have to find our pedagogy. It's not tragic. So if I had had you all at circular tables, we would be having a different kind of educational experience right now. But I don't control the space.

DOUG LEDERMN:
But only if you implement a plan. I mean, there have been plenty of conferences with round tables, but it would be, you would then either require the different space so that you could do some peer to peer stuff or whatever.

DALE P. JOHNSON:
Hence the model. If you don't have a model and you give a faculty member roundtables, they're gonna be confused because they're going to try to lecture to groups of students who are facing each other which is worse than lecturing to an auditorium. So if you don't have a model, everything breaks down.

DOUG LEDERMN:
I'll close out this episode with evidence that this kind of rethinking is happening at least modestly, even at some of the most traditional colleges and universities in the country. Here's Jennifer Frederick, executive director of the Yale Porvoo Center for Teaching and Learning with some thoughts about the kind of change we're likely to see at a highly selective residential institution like hers that is unlikely to dramatically reshape its curriculum to become digitally focused.

JENNIFER FREDERICK:
If anything, the pandemic experiences in some ways reinforced our intentionality with respect to residential education because we lost the ability to be in physical spaces together. As we come back into those spaces, we're thinking about, Well, why should we do this? What is the value, what is the value added of being in a room, a professor with students, and what could we put online? So I think we're open to asking the question which is in itself a historic moment here. And I think that the student behaviors and expectations will be influential in changes that are happening. And there are places and opportunities to close the gap between what students want and where faculty say they see they are in some of those areas that provide openings for further conversation are the digital technology capabilities that more faculty now have, they're just more skilled. Mental health and wellness and how that connects to flexibility are elements that students and faculty both care about, and then also accessibility which has one particular type of equity and inclusion that we're thinking about more on our campus because there were so many greater increases to accessibility during the pandemic with teaching on Zoom.

I'm also running into policies that are dated and limit flexibility. So how many minutes you can do something besides teach which pre-pandemic that used to be bring a guest speaker. Now people are thinking about does that a policy apply to that doing a lecture on a video? How do we think about that? So course proposals ask people to propose the number of pages a student will read. Could we think about that differently? The number of minutes you could spend of watching a video before class? So there are a lot of things we're working on and I think probably in five years, we won't be where we are now, but it will be a few small steps away.

DOUG LEDERMN:

I don't know about you, but as I listen to the Dhanfu Elston, Dale Johnson, Chris Campbell, Jennifer Frederick, it's obvious to me that there's a lot of hard work ahead as colleges and their faculties and staffs figure out whether and how much to capitalize on the newfound comfort with and in some cases, acceptance of digital teaching and learning. How and how much that happens is gonna vary enormously by institution. But it's hard to imagine that it's not going to have significant implications for students, faculty and staff members at just about every college and university. If there's any other point that screamed out to me from the various people we heard from today, it's the need for campus leaders to co-design whatever strategy they adopt with the people at the core of any successful pedagogical innovation. Their own instructors failing to do that and to support professors in that journey will almost surely result in a bad experience for them and most importantly, for students. That's all for this week's episode and for this three part series on digital teaching and learning.

Thanks again to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its support for these episodes and to all our guests. I'm Doug Lederman and until the next episode of The Key, stay well and stay safe.