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Transforming Higher Education Institutions

Changing Higher Ed Podcast 140 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Julie Peller

Widen the Path - Policy Changes to Increase Access and Success in Higher Ed

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Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton
Julie, welcome to the show.

Julie Peller 00:09
Thanks so much for having me.

Drumm McNaughton 00:10
Well, it's my pleasure. I'm excited to talk about what's going on with your Widen the Path initiative. You guys are doing some amazing stuff up there on the Hill.

Julie Peller 00:20
Thank you very much. We're trying to spread the message and make some change.

Drumm McNaughton 00:25
Well, then that's where it's got to start. Good luck up on the Hill, because the way things have been over the last few years, you're going to need it.

Julie Peller 00:35
It is slow and steady progress. But I think that our message is clear enough to get on both sides of the aisle. So hopefully, we'll weather the new Congress this coming January,

Drumm McNaughton 00:45
I certainly hope so. So Julie, tell us a little bit about yourself, if you would.

Julie Peller 00:53
I am a creature of DC and all of that good and bad that comes with that computation. But pretty much my entire career has been built around changing federal policy to make higher education better for who I now call today's students. And I've done that on Capitol Hill as a congressional staffer, in philanthropy, and now I got this great opportunity to do it from an advocacy organization.

Drumm McNaughton 01:22
Well, that was really great. And you know, that's a great segue, thank you very much. I can tell this is going to be really good because you're given all the segues here.

You are the executive director for Higher Learning Advocates, which pretty much spells out what you do, doesn't it?

01:41
It is a pretty descriptive name. But in the world of DC and acronyms, we do often go by HLA, so sometimes I need to explain it.

Drumm McNaughton 01:52
So tell us, what do you do besides advocacy? Do you have pet projects that you're working on?

Julie Peller 02:06
Sure. So advocacy is a broad word. Ultimately, we're after change, both changing the conversation and ultimately changing policy. A lot of what we do is collaborating with people inside and outside of government and DC to ensure that we're talking about who's on college campuses today, how they're going through higher learning, both in colleges and other forms of learning, and how we can change the system to make it better for them. We do that in a number of ways.

A couple of our pet projects is we run and manage a coalition called the Today's Students Coalition, that brings together just shy of 40 organizations that span student organizations, institution focused organizations, and everywhere in between, to agree on and take action that supports today's students.

Then you already mentioned our Widen the Path initiative, which is our other big project right now. Widen The Path is a campaign to put plan language and storytelling behind this changing landscape of higher ed that those of us in the industry know so well. We have micro-credentials and badges and short-term credentials and degrees. How do we make sense of this for learners? How do we make sense of this for policymakers? And how can we make the system work better? So that's been a fun new initiative that we just launched this summer. It's a great creative exercise and a good chance to tell a good story.

Drumm McNaughton 03:44
Sounds like something that's truly needed to bring these organizations together. You've got some great things that are going on, but also higher ed needs some help at this point. So why are you doing what you're doing?

Julie Peller 04:01
We see the need for change in policy. Too many of today's students, too many learners, are succeeding in spite of the systems that we have. And in spite of the policies that we have, the need for talent, the need for skills development, and credentials to ensure economic mobility for people, has never been higher. So those two things together create such an urgency that policy needs to catch up and really make that system better so that students aren't succeeding because of their own grit and ability to jump through hoops, but because the system is really actually designed for who they are.

Drumm McNaughton 04:49
And I think that an important point to bring out is most folks who have succeeded to this point, it's all due to their grit. There really aren't the support systems that are necessary to help them raise up their economic stature.

Julie Peller 05:06
Absolutely. The fact of the matter is too many students are in a system that was designed for white men of 18-19 years old. Students don't look like that anymore. There are so many students who are coming in with different backgrounds, different familiarity with the higher education system, which, let's be frank is, we speak our own language. And that is not always transparent to people who have not been through it before.

Students have needs outside of their life as a student. If you look at the one in five students that are parents, you look at the 80% of students who are working in some fashion, the number of students that are independent from their families, that changes the equation of what supports students' needs in order to succeed in the classroom and manage their day-to-day life and all the responsibilities that come with that.

Drumm McNaughton 06:26
You and I, when we spoke a couple of days ago, we were talking about Russell Lowrey-Hart, president at Amarillo College, who you know very well. Russell has done some amazing things with where he is down there, quadrupling the graduation rate and more than quadrupling the persistence rate. And it's because he's brought the systems that these types of students need to be successful.

Julie Peller 06:56
Yes, that's absolutely right. He's doing amazing things. What he's done is looked at who's on his campus, what they need to be able to succeed, and bringing those things either on campus or making linkages to the community. I've seen other institutions offer things like drop-in childcare, or counseling at 8pm after their children might have gone to bed. They are thinking about that student's life and how the institution can fit into it, rather than the other way around. We're really seeing dramatic changes for those who have been for too long marginalized populations.

Drumm McNaughton 07:43
And universities traditionally have not been set up to take care of this type of demographic. I think the figures bear that out. We've got 39 million folks out there with partial degrees or some credits; we've got 64 million just with a high school degree. They're not really being served by the current system, are they?

Julie Peller 08:10
No, they're not. We've talked a lot so far about their outside needs. But I think another part of the equation is how does higher education connect to their goals? If somebody needs to get reskilled, upskilled, get new kind of a credential, or a new set of skills under their belt, they might not have six or eight years to finish a bachelor's degree to go get it. So how can higher education support job and career advancement goals that go along with career education? It's college and career mixed together.

I think that's another thing that we're seeing with those two populations that you mentioned. They're stopping out, not because they're not seeing the value, but because career is getting in the way or there's a mini-milestone that's happening in the middle there. So how do we keep them ensuring to be both on their work and learning journey at the same time?

Drumm McNaughton 09:29
And of course, the cost comes into play as well. Higher ed is very, very expensive. And does it pay for itself? Yes, of course it does. But there're other things there.

It reminds me about the difference between some of the Scandinavian countries and here. I remember seeing this on 60 Minutes or another news programs. In the Scandinavian countries, people look forward to being laid off because they know the government is going to train them up to that next level of skills that they need to remain productive. And in the US, there's no government training for that. They'll give you unemployment money, but that goes for maybe six months. There isn't that partnership between industry and government and education to retrain the workforce or really even prepare the workforce or students for the workforce.

Julie Peller 10:27
Absolutely. And this is why I love working in federal policy, as frustrating as it might be. And on the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act, which is the set of laws that govern workforce investments and incentives, there are about getting people back to work, which I think is really good incentive. But too often, that means how quickly can we get somebody the bare minimum skills to get them back into the next job, which really does not enable a resiliency and a building of skills for somebody to be on a career, it's getting them into a job, but not ensuring that if that job goes away, they're prepared for the next one, or that they're learning and skills can translate to the next set of development and the next set of education that they need. We just have not incentivized the structures to really think about it that way.

Drumm McNaughton 11:31
And with technology moving as quickly as it is, you cannot not go in and get retraining. But the amount of unemployment that they pay, etc,, there's no real job training, you're stuck when folks leave a job. It's like when they leave college, if the college closes or something like that, the chances of them coming back are very, very small. So it's one of those things that the we need to change the way that the universities work. They've got to think about who their current student is, as it's not working for a lot of people. You made a comment that really intrigued me, it was asking adults to repeat what they've already done. Let's talk a little more about that, because that goes to the structure of higher ed.

Julie Peller 12:27
Absolutely. So when you think about your students on campus being as adults coming out of some level of work experience, even though it may have not been obtained at an institution of higher education, or within the system, recognizing those skills can go a long way to engaging learners, accelerating them through your program faster, and showing the path of how the next set of education really builds on what they've already learned. And so critical, I think both on the financial side, because you're accelerating their learning so it's less expensive, but also on the engagement and morale side, if an adult is coming in and saying I don't need to show that I can do these basic skills in this field that I've been working in for 15 years, I can take a credit for prior learning assessment or a competency based course where I can accelerate that learning, you can engage that learner much more.

Drumm McNaughton 13:45
And the other thing too, is we've got a different generation that's coming in to higher ed Gen, Gen Z and whatever the next generation is going to be. I don't know. Has anybody come up for word with that? I don't think so.

Julie Peller 13:59
I'm not sure. I'll have to ask my 11-year-old who probably found it on YouTube somewhere.

Drumm McNaughton 14:04
There we go. YouTube, it works better than some higher ed institutions. No, I shouldn't say.

Julie Peller 14:12
But YouTube is a good point about that next generation – we haven't even begun to really think about what the system needs to change. But that generation is used to a la carte everything, but to get my children to watch a 30 minute television show versus a clip on YouTube is a struggle. How they're going to think about a four-plus year degree program is going to be very, very different because they're going to want to pick and choose and say, Hey, this lecture series at this college down the street is really interesting and applicable to me, and then this apprenticeship program is also really applicable to me. Why can I do both? Why can't both come together for me, because that's how I consume everything else in life,

Drumm McNaughton 15:11
It makes perfect sense. The other piece with that is employers are saying that they're not getting the skills they need. They still think a four-year degree is important, although many institutions, the state of Maryland being one of them, are no longer requiring a four-year degree for employment in many positions. Google has not been doing this for a while now. But higher ed needs to do a better job of preparing graduates for the workforce. It's almost as though the purpose of higher ed is changed, instead of its being for the public good, it's for the individual to go out and find good employment.

Julie Peller 15:58
I think it's always been a both / and. Both things are important. I don't want to imply that it needs to be only job training and career training. Oftentimes what employers are looking for and why the degree is still kind of the coin of the realm is that critical thinking and engagement and citizenry and all those things that come with higher education. But I don't think we can assume that it's has to be an either / or, or that those things have to be in a consistent package where people cannot be learning the soft skills and public good type skills. And you need a long period of time in order to get there.

The other thing, I think that institutions can do a better job for their learners, and we've seen a lot of advancement in this, is giving people the language to articulate the things that they're learning. I graduated college at a time where I was I left with a such and such degree, and I took these classes, and I wrote this paper. But what employers want to see is, I know how to analyze a problem and propose solutions and write effectively. Those are competencies that if we can give learners, and particularly learners who have not been through higher education, or don't have family members to say that this is really what you're doing – the language to say to employers to be able to say "this was a science course, but through that I learned analytical reasoning." That's a different conversation with a new employer than I got a "B" in science.

Drumm McNaughton 18:06
Yeah, I was a physics major. What can I do with that?

So that brings us back to Widen The Path and what the purpose of Widen The Path is. When spoke before ,we talked about Widen The Path. Let's review that and go into what those solutions are that you guys are proposing, because I think it makes a lot of sense. And there's things that need to be done from a policy perspective. But also, there's things that university presidents can be doing right now, to help make education far more accessible. And, oh, by the way, it might solve some of your enrollment problems, too.

Julie Peller 18:54
We're really after three sets of solutions through Widen The Path.

The first is connecting higher education and workforce systems. This is to me connecting the dots for the programs and the systems that are already out there. Wouldn't it be great at both a policy level and at an

institutional level, if it's much easier for the workforce training system and the community college and the local regional university to integrate programs, to make things make more sense, as their learners in all three of those systems are coming in and out of all of them?

The second is doubling down and looking at the 39 million Americans that you mentioned before, that they have stopped out of school, and policy-wise, we make it incredibly difficult and incredibly expensive for them to come back. Too often if they've stopped out because of academic performance or finance difficulty, they're not eligible for Federal Student Aid, even if that happened 10-15 years ago. We need to take a look at pathways so we can get them back in.

Our third set of solutions is thinking about higher learning much more broadly than higher education. How can we recognize the skills that people have in different contexts. Things like opening up credit for prior learning and accelerating the use of that. Opening up Pell grants for some higher high quality shorter term programs that can be a gateway to a further degree program? We need to be asking those critical questions at the policy level, and then getting out of the way and enabling institutions to create those partnerships to engage with their learners, and meet them where they are.

Drumm McNaughton 21:00
Policy is fascinating to me. But given what's been going on, i.e., we haven't had a Higher Education Act passed in over 12 years. And there are a few things that have changed in those 12 years. We had a pandemic. We have far more online learning, CBE, you name it. I could probably name off 10 things that have changed significantly. How do you get that to happen? How do you get legislatures and the Department of Education to understand things have to change and then to be able to shift them? That's one and the other is to get the buy in from the accreditors and the universities to do this?

Julie Peller 21:48
I go back to what I started out with. I think the urgency is an economic mobility question. In order to weather our changing economy after the pandemic, and with the potential of a recession, we need to recession proof and our country and our most vulnerable people, which we saw, again, through the pandemic, those without degrees are the ones who fared economically worse. And whereas that's an individual goal, it certainly is a public good goal as well.

I think we are certainly not in an era of broad scale reauthorizations. We may see some sort of some sort of activity along those lines, but for too long, we've said, “Okay, reauthorization is not going to happen, we need to wait for that broad scale reform.”

We don't need to wait. There are things that we can do now, in both policy and at the institution levels. That is the message that my team and I bring to the Hill quite often. Yes, a full scale reauthorization, taking a full take step back and look at the system as a whole, would be wonderful. But in the meantime, we can talk about things like credit for prior learning; we can talk about resetting Satisfactory Academic Progress for returning students. We don't have to wait for that broad scale revision to make incremental and meaningful change. I think that that's really where we can start the ball rolling on some change.

Drumm McNaughton 23:28
That would be really important. We've seen starting to see that with respect to transcripts. Students who owe money to a school in the past could never get a transcript to transfer to another school. Now, there're many states who are actually coming out and saying, “No, you cannot do this any longer. If a student needs a

transcript, provide him a transcript." This makes far more sense because you've got much better chance of getting that money repaid if they get a degree.

Julie Peller 23:58
Absolutely. And, often those fees owed for an institution are not very much. But for a learner or for an individual without a degree, they can really stop them in their tracks.

Drumm McNaughton 24:14
What can what can colleges and university presidents do widen the path?

Julie Peller 24:24
I think two things. First and foremost, take a hard look at who's on campus and who's not on campus. Who's in the community, particularly for public institutions, but also for private institutions. Who's in your target community to serve that's not coming on campus and why? And then think about the programs like Dr. {Russell Lowrey] Hart has done. How can you make sometimes seemingly small changes in supporting students outside the classroom in order to get them success in the classroom?

Drumm McNaughton 25:06
I'm going to interrupt you for just a minute. When you say who's not showing up on campus, what do you mean?

Julie Peller 25:13
I mean that 39 million with some college and no degree. If you are a metropolitan serving institution either at a as a community college or as a four-year institution, who is not coming through your doors? And what are the barriers that are keeping them out of there? We know that the there's a desire for a college education, there is still the motivation that we see in surveys and in conversations with people. But finances and timing and support services and culture can often keep people out of the door. And so while there are needed policy changes, and those of us in DC are having those conversations, I think there's a lot that can happen just to make the culture more welcoming, and ensure that the services are there for students.

Drumm McNaughton 26:07
Yeah, that's a really interesting point. The last time I spoke with Russell, he said that they had 99 students in one of their recent terms go homeless due the pandemic. Only one person dropped out, because they were able to provide the services, with their connections to the community, to make sure everybody stayed in. I mean, that to me is, that's beyond amazing. That's just incredible.

Julie Peller 26:37
That is amazing. And that brings me to the second thing that I think institutions can do right now is forging connections and partnerships with the community services that are already there. Figuring out how to share data and make it help students that are low income and eligible for means tested programs, and connecting them with those services. The institution doesn't always need to be the one to be the human service agency, they don't need to be filling that need. But they can play a big role in connecting the learner there.

Same thing with employers. They can be sure that there's an open conversation, but their programs are preparing their learners for the jobs that are in the community and vice versa. If the employers understand more of what the institutions doing, they may be more likely to hire learners coming out of that program. And that relationship can foster a lot of innovation, but also a lot of transparency.

Drumm McNaughton 27:45
One of the kind of interesting points, sidelight, there is one of the things I recommend when I'm working with an institution to help them build enrollment, their strategies, etc, is “you've got a lot of folks out there, who are potential enrollment for your university, how are you connecting with the employers to create that seamless transition for them?” It's so important that is there.

One of the things I recommend to university presidents, deans, etc., is to create an advisory board of your local business leaders who can tell you exactly what it is they need. They're not your board of directors or board of trustees or advisors, but they can be invaluable in helping you figure out the enrollment keys.

Julie Peller 28:47
Absolutely. I also think that institutions should be thinking about the employees of those employers as potential students. It's not just a one-way street anymore, where institutions provide candidates for employment, but the employer has a set of people who want to and need to continue developing their skills. The institution can do that. It's really should be a symbiotic back and forth relationship, because people aren't just kind of going through that linear path anymore.

Drumm McNaughton 29:23
We see Arizona State creating programs for lifelong learning. Because, frankly, if someone depends on the skills that they learned only in college, then they're going to get left behind. They need to continue that learning throughout their career and through life.

Julie Peller 29:50
Absolutely. They need different things at different times. It may be a degree pathway at one point and credential or certificate or a certification at another. We shouldn't just assume that it is kind of an Associates to a Bachelors to a Masters to a PhD. Certificates are a separate thing in a whole other system that people are really pulling things together through that lifelong learning.

Drumm McNaughton 30:18
I read something this morning, and it just blew me away. There are over a million credentials in the US alone.

Julie Peller 30:37
That is amazing. Our good friends over at Credential Engine, do that assessment every year. What they're trying to do and building is putting kind of taxonomy behind that, how do we take that million and make it make sense for states, for employers, for individuals. This credential can do X, Y, and Z. And I know, these 10 providers do that. Because that landscape, it is the Wild West. But if we can start categorizing it, hopefully we can make some sense of it and Credential Engine is doing a lot of work along those lines,

Drumm McNaughton 31:20
As is Accredible, Danny King’s group. They're taking the transcript, and instead of just listing courses, credits, grade, they're listing the learning outcomes. This is what a student who went through this course did. And it's not only through the university, it's all the credentials that they take, all of these things just add to it. And that one thing would change how employers hire people.

Julie Peller 31:52
Absolutely. It gives individuals the agency and the language to be able to say, “I know how to do this, and It's verified by this system.” We professionals do this in interviews all the time. Why are we not giving people early in their career or while shifting a career the same language?

Drumm McNaughton 32:19
Exactly. So, Julie, this has been wonderful. I really appreciate the time. Three takeaways for university presidents and boards.

Julie Peller 32:29
I think,

- Looking at who's on campus,
- Making seemingly small but really meaningful to your learners changes, and
- Look around in your community and who's already doing the work to serve the people you want to serve.

Drumm McNaughton 32:43
Great, thank you. Thank you. Those are great takeaways. What we're talking about, in many respects, is a fundamental change to the way higher education works. It's not throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but it's looking to make it more acceptable and adaptable to the younger generations.

Julie Peller 33:13
Not even the younger generations, but also the older generation that's living in a new economy that as employers. The workforce is changing higher education needs to change along with it.

Drumm McNaughton 33:25
Exactly. So thank you. What's next for you? What's next for Higher Learning Advocates?

Julie Peller 33:33
As we go into the new Congress, in the new year, we are really focusing on this Widen The Path campaign. How can we bring partners together? How can we lift up voices of both learners, institutions and community members who are doing this and bring that story to Washington so that we can make change.

Drumm McNaughton 33:54
That's great. Well, I wish you all the best in that what you're doing is so important, and let's stay in touch. As you know, I'm fascinated by all the policy stuff and so thank you.

Julie Peller 34:06
Thank you so much for this conversation.

Drumm McNaughton 34:10
It's been my pleasure. Take care.