Changing Higher Ed Podcast 142 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Robyn Symon

Study Abroad Programs and Their Implications for Higher Ed Institutions

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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 00:31
Thank you, David. Our guest today is Robyn Symon, a two-time Emmy award-winning writer, producer, director, and editor. She produced the documentary *Do No Harm*, which brought to light the silent epidemic of suicide and burnout among medical students and physicians.

Robyn joined PBS in 1991 after 4 years as a TV news reporter in Texas. At PBS, Robyn produced documentaries, public affairs programs, and TV series, including the series *Voices of Vision*, hosted by NPR's Scott Simon, which focuses on the work of non-profit organizations throughout the world. She has produced national TV specials on Robin Williams, Michael Jackson, and an investigative program on the opioid epidemic.

In addition to two Emmys, Robyn has been honored with numerous national awards for writing and producing, including three Telly awards, two NABJ awards, and honors by both the *Associated Press* and *United Press International*. She joins us today to talk about her latest project that focuses on university study abroad programs.

Robyn, welcome to the program.

Drumm McNaughton 00:00
Robyn, welcome to the show.

Robyn Symon 00:02
Great to be here.

Drumm McNaughton 00:02
I'm looking forward to having you. This is going to be a little different program for our listeners today. You're a documentary maker with an incredible background. We're going to talk about an upcoming documentary you're in the process of starting.

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Robyn Symon 00:20
You're going to Hollywood today.

Drumm McNaughton 00:22
Oh my gosh. Well, I've just lost all credibility with my listeners, at least those who are university presidents.

Robyn Symon 00:31
Hang around. This is going to be an important show.

Drumm McNaughton 00:36
I think so. Robyn, give us a little bit about your background. How did you get into this type of work?

Robyn Symon 00:43
I started my career as a TV news reporter in Texas. I was then a producer at PBS based in Miami. Then in 2007, I became an independent producer. My first documentary film was called *Transformation: The Life and Legacy of Werner Erhard*. Erhard was a pioneer of the multibillion-dollar self-help movement. He is the founder of EST. If some people remember, back in the '70s, *The Human Potential Movement* was a very successful film. It was on Netflix for seven years and seen around the world. Other films followed.

I did one documentary film that took me to Timbuktu in Mali doing a story on nomadic tourings. I've also done TV specials on Robin Williams, Michael Jackson, and the opioid crisis. My most recent documentary is called *Do No Harm* about suicide and burnout among physicians and medical students, which aired on PBS stations. It is now on Amazon and being screened at medical schools and hospitals around the world.

Drumm McNaughton 01:59
Wow, that is impressive. To add to that, you've received two Emmys and some other awards as well, have you not?

Robyn Symon 02:07
I have two Emmys, one for a short film documentary while I was at PBS about Ernest Hemingway's life in Key West and another one about an inner-city boy who dreamt of being a ballet dancer. So those were the two. I also received a few Telly awards and others from the *Associated Press* and *UPI*.

Drumm McNaughton 02:34
That obviously says that you know what you're doing when it comes to these types of things. What kinds of projects do you pursue? How do you choose your projects?

Robyn Symon 02:46
When you take on a film, it's often a multiyear commitment. So, I'm very careful when I'm agreeing to do a project. I always say to people, "If I had $1 for every time somebody pitched me an idea to do a film, I'd be rich."

Drumm McNaughton 03:04
You wouldn't need to do any films.

Robyn Symon 03:08
Exactly. I wouldn't need to raise funds for these films. Because it is a huge commitment. For me, it has to be about an issue that serves many purposes. It has to inform people and create greater public awareness by

shining a light on a subject that could potentially save lives and that could actually change public policy. That's what's interesting to me - a subject that is hardly known, that should be known, and that could be a cautionary tale and really help people.

That's what's great about film. I love film, which is why I don't do commercials. I feel like documentaries give a voice to the voiceless. These people could toil away on a topic and try to gain attention to change policy on their own and create more awareness but never move the needle. But when you start working on a documentary film about their work and screening it at festivals, now you've got something to share. You can share the film at universities, colleges, and high schools, and do broadcasts. So, it creates a wave—a tsunami—of interest and dialogue about any particular topic. It really does give people a voice.

Drumm McNaughton 04:39
Just like your documentary about physician burnout. That had to be incredibly relevant during COVID, and we're still going through it now, to some degree.

Robyn Symon 04:52
The timing of it, Drumm, was really interesting because I started working on that film in 2014. Nobody was talking about physician suicide or burnout. It was a taboo topic. It was a hard sell. Suicide was a problem in general, so why were we focusing on physicians? Then when the pandemic happened, it shed a light on exactly what healthcare workers go through. Because they are in this high, exalted position, they can't get emotional help. It can jeopardize their careers.

So, by shining a light on this, the question now was how it relates to the general public. What are the consequences? If you have a doctor who's burned out, suicidal, and maybe self-medicating, what kind of care are you going to get as a patient? I connected that to a very high rate of preventable medical mistakes. All of a sudden, it became, "Wow, this is a public safety problem that we need to talk about. We need to destigmatize mental health." Healthcare workers can get the mental health they need. They don't have to drive hundreds of miles away under an assumed name and pay cash. They should be able to get help without putting their careers in jeopardy.

We started this conversation, and a lot has changed since then. Now medical schools and hospitals have created programs to destigmatize mental health. Medical Boards take questions on a licensing exam about whether or not you have ever had treatment. Now, it's important to know if you are currently suffering from an illness that could compromise patient care. Yes, we have a right to know that. But if you've ever had mental support? That's not relevant and shouldn't exclude you from getting a job. Films can do this. They can start a dialogue and lead to policy change and legislation. That's why I'm excited.

Drumm McNaughton 07:22
Which is critical. Right now, higher ed is suffering. Students especially are suffering from a mental health crisis. We'll have to talk about that another time. Your current project on study abroad programs fascinates me. Why is this project important to you? What's the premise behind it?

Robyn Symon 07:43
The film is called *Trip of a Lifetime*. Study abroad programs are generally safe and are incredible opportunities for adventure, friendship, and learning about the larger world, especially now as our world economies become more and more interconnected. Studying abroad is a great opportunity. That will be part of the film. We're not saying that it's not an incredible opportunity. But the film will shine a light on the fact that this is a multi-billion-

dollar industry that has very little transparency and very little, if any, regulation. For a huge industry like this, regulation or some kind of greater oversight may be needed to prevent tragedies from happening.

What happened was two mothers tragically lost their sons during study abroad programs and reached out to me. They started to fill me in on what they've been doing for the last 10 years. They formed a nonprofit organization called Protect Students Abroad. At the time, there was nobody tracking deaths or accidents during study abroad programs on school campuses.

As many of your listeners may know, there is legislation called the Clery Act, which mandates reporting crime on campus. But this doesn't extend to study abroad programs even though the students pay tuition. There is no reporting outside the campus.

Robyn Symon 09:40
For me, this was interesting because we have these glossy brochures at college campuses and universities that tout these incredible opportunities. But parents really assume that because it's presented by either the university or college, these programs are completely vetted. But many times, they're not. And some parents find out too late or the hard way that some of these programs run on shoestring budgets and don't really have the same kind of safety standards that we're used to in our country.

Drumm McNaughton 10:27
You had talked about an incident in Paris where a fire broke out where students were staying. Paris does not have any safety regulations that require smoke detectors.

Robyn Symon 10:40
That's a great example. In 2011, these students were going to Paris. It was an amazing opportunity. They were staying in housing that was part of the program, and a fire breaks out. They were on the fourth floor. So, because there were no smoke detectors, by the time they found out that smoke had engulfed their floor of the building, they couldn't get out. There were no fire escapes—things that we have here in our houses due to our safety standards in the US. So, they had to jump from the fourth floor. Three of the four female students died. One of them survived and was able to tell us what happened.

There are no regulations in Paris mandating smoke alarms. If the parents had known that there were no smoke alarms, they could have taken portable smoke detectors with them. They exist. In fact, when the father of one of the female students who died started a nonprofit organization to offer smoke detectors to universities, they declined because of the liability. So that's troubling for me as a filmmaker and for many other people. They're putting their own interests before safety. That's a red flag.

Drumm McNaughton 12:26
What attracted me to having you on the show, and vice versa, was you're not all about “exposing.” You’re not a *60 Minutes* kind of producer. You always tell a balanced story. One of the reasons why we're talking today is you want to solicit input from people with experience. Could you talk to us a little bit about that, would you please?

Robyn Symon 12:55
Yes, that's why I was interested in doing the podcast. Even though I love to come back and talk to the subjects of the film about the documentary after production, while I'm in production or starting production, as opposed to when the film is done, I think it's important to tell a balanced story. I want to present all sides of the issues. I want to present the challenges and the solutions. Maybe there are universities that have a great program to vet

study abroad programs. Maybe they do their own risk management that isn't required, but they do it anyway and they have a great track record. I want to know about that. I want to know what universities are doing. I want to know about what other organizations are doing.

There are two main organizations that deal with study abroad programs. One is called NASA and the other The Forum on Education Abroad. We're going to be learning about what efforts they've been doing. But the question is, do we need federal legislation? There have been universities and university lobbyists that haven't supported legislation. I want to know why.

This is a critical time. I encourage any university administrator or president to reach out to me. We can give them the information to reach me, Drumm. They can do info@tripofalifetimefilm.com or they can email me at Robyn@symonproductions.com. Let me know what you're doing because, yes, in the end, I want this to be a fair and balanced story and I can only do that by speaking to all sides of the issue.

Drumm McNaughton 14:45
And for listeners, Robyn's contact information will be part of the show notes.

Robyn Symon 14:50
There was a subcommittee hearing on Capitol Hill back in 2000, which led to the creation of The Forum. But what's been done since then, as far as I know from the families that I've spoken with—and there have been many—hasn't been enough. There are still no regulations. There are guidelines and best practices for these programs, but no regulations and no consequences.

After the tragedies that happened to their families, the parents that I spoke to said that many universities said to them that they were not privy to the information that happened during the incident. The walls went up. This is troubling. There is a congressman representative, Sean Maloney, who introduced legislation called the Ravi Thackurdeen Safe Students Study Abroad Act after one of the students who died. Unfortunately, he lost his bid for reelection. So, the mothers will be back on Capitol Hill this year to fight for new legislation that doesn't do anything more than increase transparency and accountability.

Drumm McNaughton 16:12
A few things. The Clery Act came into effect in 1990, and back then, the study abroad programs were not as big a deal as they are now. I would guess probably a third of all universities and colleges have something like this. Who typically oversees these programs from a liability perspective and what's done to ensure student safety?

Robyn Symon 16:48
There is a designated office person who's in charge of study abroad. But what's being done is what's agreed to by the university, and there is no system in place to vet these programs to do risk management. I'll give you another example. One of the two moms I spoke with had a son who went to Costa Rica. The study abroad chaperone brought them to a beach that was known for drownings. None of the locals would go to this beach or into the water because of the rip currents. But because other beaches were crowded, the chaperone brought the students to this particular beach, and Ravi Thackurdeen drowned. It was very difficult for his mother to find out what had happened exactly. It was frustrating. If the student is underage, they have to sign a liability waiver. There's no real accountability or consequences for the university. It was very difficult to sue and for them to get information because Ravi, in this instance, was over 18, so the parents weren't privy to this information.

The son of the other mother, Elizabeth Brenner, went to India. Three months into the program, the chaperone took the students on a hike. It was rainy and slippery. The mother Elizabeth actually retraced the steps of her son, so we saw exactly where they went on the hike. It was a cliff that was very narrow. He lost his footing and fell 300 feet into a river, and his body was never recovered. I can only imagine that if prior risk assessments had been done of where the chaperone was going to take the students, it would have said to not take them to this beach or on this hike when it's raining.

Some things you think are just logical, but they happen, and they could have been prevented. There are some things, Drumm, that can't be prevented. I'm not talking about instances where college students party until three in the morning on their own and something terrible happens. I'm focusing only on instances that happened when someone from the program was actually guiding them. You could make a case that even if they're not, more should be done to make students aware of what to do and what not to do. But I'm mostly focusing on deaths and accidents that happen while with a guide.

There was another case in India where a bus overturned. Turns out that this road is known for accidents, and the students were supposed to take a plane to the next location. But someone local in the program decided that they were going to take the bus, and a tragedy happened. So, these could have been prevented if a risk assessment was done and if it was clear from the university's point of view that they were not to deviate from the program that was agreed to. But it's not being done as far as I know.**Drumm McNaughton** 20:50
There are a lot of things that I know you're going to be exploring in your documentary, from challenges to more effectively vetting programs and program offers. I don't know what's done with that, at this point. Are they vetted at all? I would assume they have to be.

Robyn Symon 21:09
I know parents wrongly assume that these programs are vetted because we're talking about prestigious universities. We have standards in our own country. There are too many false assumptions on the part of parents. So, we want to create greater awareness among parents to ask questions. After researching, Elizabeth Brenner found out that, in previous years, 12 students had died in the same program that her son Thomas went on when he fell from the cliff during that hike. If she had known that, she might have decided to have him enroll in another program. So, parents are not given the information that they need to make an informed decision.

Drumm McNaughton 22:08
I can see there are going to be various aspects that will go into your documentary. What have you found? Have you started production at this point?

Robyn Symon 22:18
We start production on March 1. We're going to be at a conference on higher education and the law. I'm hoping to interview some university presidents and some risk assessment people. So that'll be the start. There's another conference later in the spring. So, we're really at the beginning. I'm on a fact-finding mission. We're doing research on what's been done.

Drumm McNaughton 23:04
To tell the balanced story that you plan on doing, I would assume you've got to do fact-finding, not only about the programs themselves, but about the oversight and risk aspects of what has happened and what went wrong, for example.

Robyn Symon 23:23
Yes, and there are many different kinds of programs. Some involve university personnel going with the students or just contracting with companies overseas and not having much interaction with them. We'll talk about that as well as exchange programs and how the relationship differs there. But there's a general need for greater information between the student, parents, and the university prior to the visit to reduce the risk for the student.

Drumm McNaughton 24:02
I am so looking forward to seeing the final copy and having you back on the show. I think there are a lot of great takeaways for presidents and boards. What do you see as three takeaways for presidents and boards to be thinking about when it comes to these kinds of programs?

Robyn Symon 24:21
Some of the most important things are, what is the risk of these programs? Have we properly vetted the study abroad programs? How much do we really know about the programs? What more can we do? Ultimately, no one wants a student to die during a study abroad program. No one is out there for some nefarious reasons, wanting to hurt people. Everyone cares about students and wants them to be safe. We should all be on the same team. So, one of the most important things is what are we doing? What can we do to prevent a tragedy? Because, let me tell you, it destroys these families forever. It's not just the student. It's complete families. And not just them. Everyone who participates in that program is impacted by a tragedy like this. They never forget it. We need to be vetting and looking at what more can be done. That's really the most important thing.

Drumm McNaughton 25:41
I would add that it's important to stay in communication with families and to understand about liability, etc. Stonewalling families as far as what happened, I think, is not right. That's a legal strategy. But that's not the humane thing to do.

Robyn Symon 26:02
We see that in the medical field when a medical error occurs. The lawyers say, "Don't say anything." But sometimes all families want is an apology. Sometimes they just want communication. So, you're right. Communication is important. These families are hurting and what they want to know is as much information as possible. That's what the priority should be.

Drumm McNaughton 26:28
Yes, very much so. So, Robyn, what's next for you? You've got this project that you've already kicked off. You'll start production on March 1. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Robyn Symon 26:41
I have a couple. During the pandemic, I was stuck at home and my film tour for *Do No Harm* was put on hold. It came to an abrupt stop. I actually wrote a couple of screenplays during that time, and one of them has been optioned. I hope to get into production and direct that, which is quite different from doing documentary films, but it's an interesting challenge. I hope to get the other screenplay into production, too. The pandemic has created a little bit of a detour where I've been getting into narrative features, as we call them. That should be interesting. But I'm really excited about *Trip of a Lifetime* and getting this into production. It will be in production for about a year and then it will go into editing. It'll be probably 2025 when *Trip of a Lifetime* is actually completed and ready for screenings and film festivals. Hopefully, we'll see where it winds up being broadcasted like Netflix or Amazon. It's a journey.

Drumm McNaughton 27:46
I've never had an Oscar winner on my program. Hopefully, that changes.

Robyn Symon 27:51
Wouldn't that be nice?

Drumm McNaughton 27:53
Well, Robyn, I wish you the best of luck. We'll have you back on the show after you've wrapped up production. I'm looking forward to it.

Robyn Symon 28:01
Same here, Drumm. Thanks for having me on.

Drumm McNaughton 28:04
My pleasure. Take care.