Changing Higher Ed Podcast P151 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Dr. Kent Ingle - Framework Leadership: An Innovative Approach to Higher Ed Growth

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
Thank you, David. Our guest today is Dr. Kent Ingle, president of Southeastern University. Ken has been with Southeastern for 12 years. Under his leadership, the university has made tremendous strides. Over the last five years, it's doubled its endowment and student body and added more than $80 million in new facilities. For these and many other things, Southeastern has been recognized by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of the country's fastest-growing private nonprofit Baccalaureate institutions.

Kent's path to the presidency was different from the usual one. He spent ten years as a television sports anchor for *NBC* and *CBS* in Los Angeles and was the pastor of a church. Through these experiences, he's learned many lessons, including how to apply holistic and systems thinking to organizations and leadership. Kent joins us today to talk about what he calls

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framework leadership, a holistic four-step approach that uses appreciative inquiry as its foundation for transforming organizations.

Kent, welcome to the program.

Kent Ingle 01:42
It's great to be with you today.

Drumm McNaughton 01:43
Likewise, I am very much looking forward to our conversation. You are the president of Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida. You've been there for about 12 years now. But Lakeland, especially Southeastern, looks very different than when you first took over. Tell us a little about your background because it fascinates me.

Kent Ingle 02:07
As you mentioned, I am the 15th president of Southeastern University and have served in this role for about 15 years. But before that, I had two other careers. My first career was in sports television. I spent a decade in television and loved that role. Every so often, I miss that role and wish I could step back into it because it was an amazing opportunity to meet so many incredible people, and I love that. I love broadcasting. But I did that for ten years and then stepped into ministry leadership. I had the privilege to lead as pastor of a church we planted in Northwest Los Angeles and served in that role for ten years. Then I went into higher education. I became the dean of the College of Ministry and Theology at Northwest University in Seattle, Washington. I served there for about six years and then became the president of Southeastern University.

Drumm McNaughton 03:07

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Well, that's quite a leap, from sports to ministry, to higher ed. Does it feel like a whirlwind to you?

Kent Ingle 03:19
Oh, definitely. But I have thoroughly enjoyed every role I've had the privilege to serve in. There are two things about those roles that connect them and that I am passionate about. The first thing I love is serving people. I love to work with, encourage, empower, and come alongside people to make them the best they can be. I love that. And every role I've served, whether in television, sports, or higher education, it's coming alongside people. The second thing is that I love communication. All three of those involve communication. I've been able to use what I learned in broadcasting, even in ministry leadership and higher education. So those two elements have tied all of those roles together.

I've always found, too, that if you follow your design—your gifts, your talents, your abilities, your experiences, the people that come into your life—all of those will help you know what career to step into or when to change careers. So, it has been an amazing journey. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Drumm McNaughton 04:23
Well, you certainly have the radio voice that would help with television for sure.

Kent Ingle 04:27
Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

Drumm McNaughton 04:29

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Being in the ministry, you have to ask good questions. You have to be able to listen well. Those are all traits that are incredibly important for university presidents.

Kent Ingle 04:40
Right. Absolutely. When I look at my role as president, we have the opportunity to come alongside a generation of students who will become incredible solutions to issues, challenges, and people groups and have the chance to shape, mold, and pour STEM knowledge education into their lives. It's so important that you can relate, communicate, and know how to lead them effectively so that they can step out into their calling or career of choice.

Drumm McNaughton 05:13
That takes us right to what we will talk about today, which is how you've used this holistic thinking to turn around Southeastern. But before we get into that, you spoke of one of the first concepts of what you call framework leadership, which is listening.

Kent Ingle 05:32
Yes. Absolutely. I remember when I was being interviewed. It was the final couple of days before the board of trustees would take that vote to elect the next president. But those two days started around seven in the morning and ended at ten at night. I met with every constituency group, including faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, and community leaders. Of course, they want to hear from you. They want to know your story. They want to ask questions. And, of course, the number-one question that every group asked was, "What's your vision?" I'll never forget their faces when I answered that question with, "I don't have a vision." You could see it on their faces. "What

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do you mean? You don't have a vision? Well, you're not going to be our president, that's for sure." I could tell.

Then I began to explain it. I used a quote from one of my favorite writers, Jim Collins. He wrote a book called *Good to Great*. Many people are familiar with that. One of the things that he says in that book that resonates so well with me and that I use all the time is, "You can never know the potential of an organization until you know the potential of the people." I began to explain to them that a great leader, a visionary leader, will take time to listen and learn everything that they can about that organization so that they can begin to formulate. When you take the time to listen, learn, and discover, you can start preparing the right vision for these particular people that will help them excel and go to levels they've never been before. That starts with listening because you need to know where you are right now and where you want to go before you know how to reach your destination. That begins with active listening,

Drumm McNaughton 07:19
Active listening, contextual audit, and where you are via a SWOT. One of the things I liked when we spoke a couple of weeks ago was your use of appreciative inquiry. Now, only a few folks understand what appreciative inquiry is. But it's one of the most powerful change mechanisms you can use.

Kent Ingle 07:40
Yes, it really is. Every time I utilize the strategic planning process of appreciative inquiry, it's fascinating to see how it unlocks vision. People start to dream about what could be. That's why they call it appreciative. It's straightforward. Many organizations want to start with what's wrong with an organization; all you want to discuss is the negative. I've always believed in

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approaching it by looking at what's good about an organization, business, or university. Asking specific questions like “If you could dream about what this place would look like in five years and ten years, what would that be” creates this desire to dream and focus on what the future could look like in your particular context, role, and opportunity. I've always enjoyed using appreciative inquiry. It sets the pace for what can be an amazing mission and an amazing vision.

Drumm McNaughton 08:44
It is so powerful, and so few people use it nowadays. I use it with my business frequently, whether you call it an appreciative inquiry or the magic balloon ride.

Kent Ingle 08:55
Yes, absolutely.

Drumm McNaughton 08:57
You get people thinking. Look at the past to see how you got here. What's great about the organization? How do you appreciate what's going on? That unlocks so much creativity in an organization.

Kent Ingle 09:15
Yes. It creates differentiation, too. You want to celebrate their uniqueness, experiences, gifts, talents, and abilities. If you utilize that, you can do things that other organizations can't do. That’s actually what sets your university apart from other universities. It makes it unique.

Drumm McNaughton 09:49
Great way to look at it. I hadn't thought about that. We talk about boards of directors. When you see one board, you’ve seen one board. When you’ve

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seen one university, you've seen one university. It's made up of people, which they all are. But each group of people is unique. So how do you leverage their strengths to make it a special place and take it to new levels?

Kent Ingle 10:17
Right, right. You also discover that when you listen and use appreciation to celebrate and move forward. A phrase I always say is that we're building a map to a place we've never been before. If we're going to grow and achieve great success, we're going places we've never been before.

Drumm McNaughton 10:35
A couple other things that go with your leadership framework are clarifying goals and vision, which come right out of the appreciative inquiry. One of the most important things, and where many institutions fall, is aligning the vision, the strategy, the structures, and the people.

Kent Ingle 10:59
Right. Yes. Absolutely. Once you've taken the time to listen and audit the context, the understanding, the challenges, the competition, the limitations, the people, the resources, and all that, you start clarifying the goal where you become that careful, intentional observer, receiver, and provider of feedback and make sure that everybody's on the same page. That's when you're ready to start aligning the vision.

I've always believed that leaders who carefully attend to the alignment of people, strategies, and processes will create an engine for velocity amidst change. Good alignment will bring about that sense of flow. When you think about it, it's an environment where people operate at such a high capacity without needing lots of managing or instructing. So, naturally, you'll begin to

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respond and do what's required to make the organization healthy, strong, and able to grow.

Drumm McNaughton 11:54
A good change process through that roller coaster of change is when you come out the other side with a group of self-starters who know what's necessary and are willing to do it. But it also takes a special kind of leader to give that permission and empower their people.

Kent Ingle 12:18
To create strong alignment, what you need to do as a leader is build a team of people with diverse gifts, viewpoints, abilities, temperaments, and backgrounds. Often, the breakthrough you seek depends on creativity, intuitiveness, and relentless questioning of assumptions. You want that so you can move forward. When you create a diverse team that is united by a common person, it naturally will align the focus on the organization's long-term mission.

Drumm McNaughton 12:52
Leadership is so critical because, as you said, it focuses on one person. But it also focuses on that one concept. When that leader can step back and say, "Everyone here is a leader," the magic happens.

Kent Ingle 13:09
Yes. You also recognize and constantly communicate with these people. I talk about it like a calling. This is more than just a job. You are called here. You are important to who we are and what we can do. We want to celebrate your contribution. When a leader approaches it that way, it creates an amazing culture of empowerment and collaboration. People will be anxious to be a part of what's happening in that environment. Again, it creates that

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engine for velocity amid change. You can move faster toward the kind of growth that you want to see happen.

Drumm McNaughton 13:54
It's so important what you're talking about. One of my first jobs after leaving the Navy—and we talked about how I used to fly airplanes and spy on people for a living—was Dell computer in the mid-'90s. Michael Dell had built an amazing organization. They would get the sales teams together after every quarter and celebrate. Before getting to our new goals, they would celebrate and appreciate those people who made the current goals.

Kent Ingle 14:35
Yes, and we do that. We build in regular patterns of celebration, where we celebrate what we've achieved. But, again, it's like fuel that creates continual energy and excitement to reach new milestones of celebration. So, it's very important to take the time to celebrate with people on achieving what you know the organization needs to succeed.

Drumm McNaughton 15:00
Let's get into the situation. You came on 12-15 years ago to Southeastern. What basing?

Kent Ingle 15:11
Yes, the context. When I came on as president, they had gone two years without a president. The former president had served about ten years and had grown the university. The university was almost bankrupt. The auditors said, "I don't know if this thing can survive." And the board of trustees felt like, "No, let's give it one more shot." They brought in a terrific change leader, Dr. Mark Rutland. He came in and began to build the university. He used system development, much like framework leadership, and they grew

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from about 600 to approximately 3,400 students over those ten years. Then he went on to become president of Oral Roberts University.

But they went two years between his leadership and my leadership. Everybody knows that no organization does well when you have no leadership for that length of time. And, sure enough, that's precisely what happened to Southeastern University. Over those two years, they lost over 1,000 students, and enrollment translated to quite a bit of a revenue loss for the university. So, the task at hand was to turn around an organization that had definitely plateaued and was now in decline by creating a strategy that would ensure we were on the trajectory of growing once more and, again, building a map to places we'd never been before.

That's why we use the system that we use. We realized there were crucial, urgent issues that we would have to face: enrollment, systems development, governance, and cultural issues because morale was down due to a lack of leadership. We had to create a system to help us design a new visionary framework. I've always felt like a visionary framework has three components. Principles that will help you lead the change, principles that create values like whom we want to become as an organization, and the third thing is the actual strategy we will use to accomplish the growth. That's why we use the framing system, which we briefly touched on: listening, auditing the context, clarifying the goals, and aligning the vision. And out of that created the new vision that we would need to lead SEU to growth.

Drumm McNaughton 17:34
We talked about sigmoid curves when we spoke a couple of weeks ago. It fascinated me because you're the first president I've talked to who thought

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about these things as a product launch. Tell us a little bit about what the sigmoid curve is and how it's applicable.

Kent Ingle 17:58
Yes. The sigmoid curve is all about organizational growth and health. It's the process for any living organization. You have the start of life, the birth of an organization, and you start the climb of growth. Of course, as you begin the climb of growth, there will be challenges and issues that you'll have to face unexpectedly. You will work through those but continue to grow because your system is in place. That creates the start of what we call a new curve.

What happens is that organizations do start to grow. They begin to see change. But here's a dilemma. Many organizations don't stop and reflect on where they're at in that growth process to create a new curve of growth. Many organizations think, "Well, why do I need to do anything different or even check out the context of what's going on? We're growing. Everything is working." But that's most often when you need to make a change. If you don't create a new curve even at the height of your great success, you could start to plateau and decline. That's what happens.

I've always found that if you don't intervene quickly to create a new curve once you plateau and start to decline, the organization will die. So, that's something that we constantly do. Every year, our leadership team or cabinet has what we call "a new curve retreat." All of our VPs have worked with their downline and gone through the framing process where they're listening to them and bringing to the retreat what they have heard and learned, the context, clarification, and alignment process. They also discuss what's next and some of the new curves we could develop.

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We focus on three different areas. It usually includes curriculum development, co-curricular, and experiential education. Curriculum development is all about creating new relevant programs that meet the issues in the workforce today. For co-curricular, we identify some of the things like athletic programs that are relevant today and that we need to focus on. Experiential education is very big in higher ed today. That's where students experience what they're learning in the classroom. They get into the field they're studying through apprenticeships, internships, and practicum programs. Out of those three, we're always focusing on how we can create new curves for growth. We will stay healthy and robust as long as we continue doing that. If we don't, there will come a time when the university could plateau and start declining, like during those two years between Dr. Rutledge and myself.

Drumm McNaughton 20:49
One point that I want to go back to because it's so spot on but that I don't hear many folks talking about is your process leading up to your retreats each year. You don't just show up. You have the downlines talking to people, learning about what's happening, and the new opportunities. It's almost like you're doing a future environmental scanning and SWOT combined to where you come into the retreat with good data and information about what to do next.

Kent Ingle 21:29
Right. You want to be data-informed so that you can make the right decisions. That's why framework leadership—the system we use—is simply a system of stewardship, which is given to you and that you care about and lead. You want to bring the organization's best self into the context. To do that, you must take the time to work through those issues with everyone in

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the organization. It can't be top-down. It has to be grassroots, where everybody creates this new curve.

I think we always stay in the framing process throughout the year. We're always listening. We're always learning. We're constantly checking out the context to ensure we understand what's happening in our environment, the workforce, etc. I can tell you this. The framing process helps you handle the unexpected. And, of course, a huge unexpected event hit us two years ago with the pandemic.

Drumm McNaughton
Really. Pandemic? I've never heard of that.

Kent Ingle
You never heard of that? Because we have this framework system in play, responding to those particular unexpected events was easy. We could walk through those framing issues and immediately create the learning environment to help our students continue their education.

Drumm McNaughton 22:54
It's neat that you brought up that bottom-up approach because we have a saying that when we do strategic planning, people support what they helped create. If you want support for something (i.e., with little or no resistance to change), you get people's opinions before making a decision.

Kent Ingle 23:17
Yes, absolutely. That's why spending time with the people you have the privilege to serve is so important. That's it. You have to understand what's important, especially when auditing the context. This is where the data stops being numbers and starts being real-life people in your organization. We

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must always remember that we are not leading assets. We are leading people. Everything that will ever be accomplished in the organization is by, with, and through the people in your community. So, stay close, do everything you can to encourage, support, and listen to them so that you can celebrate who they are and what contributions they bring to the organization and students, which is our number-one product. We're here for our students. We want to ensure that we're doing everything possible to make it an experience that allows them to flourish, get out into the workforce, and do what they feel passionate about doing.

Drumm McNaughton 24:15
I was doing a strategic plan for an Air Force Wing years ago. They rolled out the plan to 500 people in the theater. The Wing Commander got up and presented the mission. They had been going through the BRAC process, the Base Realignment, and Closure. So, it was a completely new mission for them. What was neat was when he started going through the strategies. I heard somebody behind me saying, "That was my idea." That's where you get the buy-in. It's when you know people are supporting what they helped create.

Kent Ingle 24:55
Yes, and I'll tell you that during the clarifying process, when you clarify goals, that's what you want to discover and celebrate so people feel like, "I had a part of this. I had a role in this. I'm on the same page. We get to do this together." That's what's so important.

Early on, we discovered that through the listening process, they longed to have a new mission and to create and refine what the old mission was and celebrate something new. We went through that process. Again, everybody was part of that organizational process.

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One day, I was walking the university grounds and came upon one of our groundskeepers at one of our traditional campuses in Lakeland, Florida. It's like living in a resort. You have all the palm trees and all of that. Our crew does an incredible job at keeping the grounds beautiful. But I went up to one I had not met and asked the person, “What is it that you do?” I expected that person to tell me exactly how they do their job. Instead, they articulated the brand-new mission. “I am about the mission of the university.” And I thought, “That’s it. That’s when people are all on the same page and feel like they are a part of it in such a way that it will empower what they do individually. But they didn't tell me, “I do this,” specifically. They said, “No. I'm here to do the mission.” And that makes you think, “Man, we're doing this right.”

Drumm McNaughton 26:29
We can go back to where we started with Jim Collins. You can do amazing things with the right people on the right bus in the right seats.

Kent Ingle 26:39
Absolutely. It's wonderful to be a part of that.

Drumm McNaughton 26:42
One of the things that struck me was that you don't do a cookie-cutter approach. You have multiple campuses all over the country. I think I remember it being well over 1,000 campuses.

Kent Ingle 26:57
No, we don't have quite that many. That's yeah, no, we have…

Drumm McNaughton
Or was that next year, sorry?

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Kent Ingle
That probably will be within the next three to five years. But, right now, we have a little over 200 campuses nationwide. We're also now overseas. We're in Moldova, Uganda, and Brazil and are about to launch in Argentina. So we continue to grow in those fields. But, again, part of the process that we discovered is that we want to meet the three most important issues in higher ed today, which is accessibility. People want access to education, whether it's a certification or graduate- and doctoral-level programming. They want access. And we want to create what we call " a menu of access."

Then they want affordability. How do you drive down the cost of education? In my opinion, and I hope other presidents feel this way, too, it's the university's responsibility to drive down some of those costs. On a traditional campus, you're going to have fixed costs. You're going to have the inflationary costs that come with that. So, yes, you're probably going to raise some tuition issues there. But when it comes to somehow creating a menu of cost-effectiveness or driving down tuition, you can do that. That's where our network campuses were able to do that. We're able to go out into communities across the nation and literally around the world and say, "What are your educational needs? We'll provide those programs. They have the buildings." So the overhead cost is not there for our major university. Therefore, we're able to cut the cost of our degree programs by two-thirds of what it would be if you came to our traditional campus. Then you add Pell grants to that and other scholarships. Many of those students who go to one of our network campuses can graduate debt-free, which is a major issue today in higher education. But we can go out there and provide the educational needs for that community and workforce.

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What we do is something I call “DNA driving it.” We don't say, “We'll just give you this cookie-cutter program, and you slap it into your community.” No. We do a version of the framework process. What's unique about this context? What do they value? How can we create a program that meets that and, of course, meets the accreditation standards because that's extremely important? We want to make sure our programs have the integrity to do it. That's where accreditation comes into play. But, yes, that's enabled us to expand our network and why we've seen tremendous growth. When I started, the university was about 2,200 students. Today, we're well over 10,000 students because, again, we looked at these issues, went out there, and tried to meet the needs of higher education.

Drumm McNaughton 29:44
Most institutions do what they call enrollment management or strategic enrollment management. You're doing strategic thinking, period. Holistic thinking. Systems thinking. And you're applying that to higher ed. You're doing a great job with this. Kudos to you.

Kent Ingle 30:00
Thank you. Thank you. Yes, we love it. It's been a great journey.

Drumm McNaughton 30:05
What are some three takeaways for your fellow presidents? You’ve done a phenomenal job. What key learnings might they be able to apply to their institutions?

Kent Ingle 30:15
Take time to get to know your amazing people in your organization. But, again, that happens when you spend time with them. One of the things that you're going to need as a leader is trust. You want people who truly want to

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listen, learn, discover, and be a part of the solution that creates growth and health. That only happens when you take the time to spend time with people. You cannot be isolated. You cannot sit in your office all the time. You have to be with your people. I'm constantly doing that. I'm walking, having conversations, and being very intentional with that. So, I would encourage every leader to ensure they're building that into their discipline routine. That would be number one.

The second thing I would look at is ensuring you're intentional in everything you do. That is why you want to be a systems thinker. A systems thinker looks at the big picture, vision, and mission but also at all the connecting parts that accomplish the big picture. That only happens when you're very intentional. Part of that intention will include auditing the context, clarifying the communication, and having celebrations. That's important.

The third thing is always ensuring you understand what makes your organization strong, healthy, and able to grow. Put every effort into honoring that. Celebrate the achievements of the people that you have the privilege to serve. Take the time to do that as well. I'll tell you. When people come together because they know you care about them and you want to honor who they are, they're with you. They want to see things. They're ready to charge the front and make it happen. So those are things that I would encourage every leader to make a part of their discipline routine.

Drumm McNaughton 32:32
Those are great. Thank you. I remember the first accreditation visit I attended many, many years ago. There's a reason I have such white hair and so little of it. But that's beside the point. The principal said, "Kids don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care." It's the

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same thing with university employees, faculty, and students. They don't care how much you know. They want to know how much you care.

Kent Ingle
I love that.

Drumm McNaughton
Are you invested in their future? One of the things that I so much admire about E. Gordon Gee, whom I know, is that at the last count, he has had 29 of his VPs go on to be university presidents. That says a lot about the quality of the man and his leadership.

Kent Ingle 33:26
Absolutely. A testament to his empowering those that served alongside him.

Drumm McNaughton 33:32
Absolutely. What's next for you? What's next for Southeastern?

Kent Ingle 33:37
We're continuing to create those new curves and are excited about some of the new programming that we're developing. One of the things that we're excited about is we're launching what we call SEU Trades. So many community colleges have always been so successful at community trades, and sometimes liberal arts universities don't even look at that. But it's a great opportunity, especially post-COVID, where many want to change careers. So, we're looking at launching different types of trade programs. Also, that includes what we call SEU Tech, where we go into the tech field and explore the opportunities there with data science, cybersecurity, coding, and so much more. So, again, we're constantly analyzing what the workforce demands are. What can we do to meet those workforce demands

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and create new ways to deliver education? That's what it's all about—new ways of delivering education to students who want access to education. Everyone deserves access to education.

Drumm McNaughton 34:41
Absolutely. And it's our charter. It's our mission in life to help others transform themselves. And it's up to us to provide that environment where they feel safe and can do that.

Kent Ingle 34:54
Absolutely. And it's a great joy to be a part of that.

Drumm McNaughton 34:58
It certainly is, Kent. Thank you so much. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. I look forward to the next time.

Kent Ingle 35:04
Great to be with you.

Drumm McNaughton 35:09
Thanks for listening. And I'd like to give a special thanks to our guest today, Dr. Kent Engel of Southeastern University, for sharing his recipe for transforming a higher ed institution using framework leadership—his holistic approach to change.

Tune in next week for our 150th episode with our guest, Amrit Ahluwalia, senior director of strategic insights at *Modern Campus* and editor-in-chief of *the EvoLLLution*, the online newspaper developed by *Modern Campus* that focuses on non-traditional higher education and the transforming post-secondary marketplace. Until next week.

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