

Next Practices - Ep. 29 Transcript

Katy Oliveira:

In this episode I'm talking with Dr. Frank Dooley, chancellor Emeritus of Purdue Global. We're exploring what it really means to understand the students that we serve, whether they're traditional college freshmen or working adults. Returning to school, you'll hear why one size fits all support just doesn't work, and how tailoring a student's education to fit their lives is making a difference. We'll talk about the difference between student populations at Purdue and Purdue Global and what keeps students from asking for help [00:00:30] and why we need to go beyond institutional elitism. To truly make higher education accessible, you'll learn how to better support adult learners, balancing work, family, and coursework, and why flexible student-centered approaches are the key to helping them stay the course. Dr. Frank Dooley, former chancellor at Purdue Global, significantly expanded the institution's reach and revenue focusing on delivering high quality online education to 38,000 [00:01:00] working adults. Prior to this as Senior Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at Purdue University, he spearheaded numerous academic initiatives including Impact, an award-winning faculty development initiative. He has now returned to faculty as professor of agricultural economics and is on sabbatical for 2025. Welcome to next practices. Frank. Thank you for joining us to share [00:01:30] how institutions, how we can better help students succeed during their college experience.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, Katie, it's just great to be with you and I look forward to the conversation we're going to have today and there's so much to discuss. So let's go.

Katy Oliveira:

Let's dive in. So start by introducing yourself to our audience. We're curious to know a little bit about you, your mission and higher ed, and a little bit about the work that you've done in your career.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, it's a long career, so that could take the whole podcast, [00:02:00] but I'll maybe give you the last 15 years. So I'm a professor of agricultural economics. I've been at Purdue for since 1998. I went into the provost office in 2011 and worked with undergraduate programs, so I became the senior vice Provost for teaching and learning, and that encompassed everything from curriculum to student success, et cetera, et cetera. It was marvelous job. In 2020, I became [00:02:30] the chancellor of Purdue Global, another Purdue entity, which is very different from the Big 10 campus, and I was chancellor there for almost five years. I stepped down in December of last year and I'm on sabbatical right now.

Katy Oliveira:

Oh, how lovely. Nice to have a little time.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

That's perfect. Yes.

Katy Oliveira:

Well, I want to dive into your rare experience of working at both Purdue and Purdue Global, two institutions that serve very different student populations. Can you share [00:03:00] how that dual perspective that you have has shaped your understanding of what students truly need to be successful in higher education?

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, the first thing I'm going to say, Katie, is appreciate how you quickly grasp that. Purdue is somewhat of a different kind of a university in that it is chosen to both serve the traditional 18 to 24 what we think of college when we watch movies and things like that. But also Purdue then took the extraordinary [00:03:30] step of saying there is a whole bunch of working adults who need quality education. And at the end of the day, there's a couple of ways to think about it. I'm just going to come about maybe how the students learn, and I think there's a great deal of familiarity with, I'm going to call traditional colleagues, big 10 experiences. You go to class, you take labs, you get involved in student organizations, and in many ways [00:04:00] it's an extension of the learning model. You had in K 12, you take three tests, you write papers, et cetera.

What we find for working adults, most of the students that come to Purdue Global have college. They had maybe a year, but it didn't go well or maybe it went well, but they didn't have the financial wherewithal to succeed. They didn't see the relevance of what they're doing. So they said, I am just going [00:04:30] to go to work and for whatever reason they like lots of people get to the end of that freshman or sometimes sophomore year and choose to leave school. They're now 28, 29 working and they have an employer says, Katie, you're an extraordinary worker, but I cannot give you the promotion you deserve because you don't have the requisite education. And what we find with the learners who come back, here's how [00:05:00] they differ. They have all kinds of experience, but oftentimes the experience is somewhat siloed in a narrow area. So what they need to be able to do is they need to be able to take that and expand it.

The other thing is if you went to college when you're 18, 19 and it didn't work, if we want to use that as an outcome measure, you come back at 28, 29, you're not starting with a lot of confidence [00:05:30] that it's going to work. Now you've been away from school for a long time. Moreover, your life has really changed. So when you're working with an adult, the model is much different in that it's not a model built upon three tests and a paper if you would. It's much more on lots and lots and lots of assessment in smaller bites because one of the things

you're trying to intentionally do is to build up their [00:06:00] self-efficacy, to build up their belief in their ability to be successful. So the model that you come at it is very different. And we even have different words that talk about pedagogy versus andragogy, but at the end of the day, you end up in the same place.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah, I know from working with such a wide range of students from traditional undergrads at the Big 10, Purdue, main Purdue campus, and then working with [00:06:30] adults who are balancing their jobs, their families, their coursework, and then also having a little bit different point of view or mindset, I think when it comes to going to college, those differences I think really change the experience for the student. How have you seen those differences change the way we should approach teaching and supporting those students throughout the experience?

Dr. Frank Dooley:

That's a great question and I think it's probably the central question to everything that we're trying to do. [00:07:00] I think probably the most important thing to do, especially if other institutions are contemplating, and if you read the literature, it says lots of schools are contemplating now trying to be more intentional in serving the working adult. Number one, you have to throw out the playbook that you've built, the support you have for faculty and the student support systems you have for your traditional population. You need to be thinking much more, and you alluded to it, and [00:07:30] we have students who are worried about childcare. We have students worried about their jobs. Most of our students are part-time rather than full-time. Close to 90% are part-time, and so they come at it with a much different pace, but they come at it with the same intentionality. I think I'll just share two quick things.

Number one thing that they probably need, especially early in their courses, [00:08:00] is there probably needs to be more support. And if you want to talk about the support and it's across the institution, whether it is an advisor or it's a student success professional, or if it's a faculty member, I need to be giving you assurances. You're doing good because you don't believe in yourself at this point in time. I'm going to say for my time on West Lafayette campus, and I know lots of the other big 10 schools very well, the 18 year olds coming to those campuses [00:08:30] have a belief in their self, and they've largely been successful in this model of what I've called testing. They tested well in high school, they tested well in the SAT, they get to school and they continue to test well. And so the entire experience that they have is built around.

Once again, I said, we're not doing a testing model for assessment. It's more going to be taking assignments and break them into component pieces and giving you feedback on each one in part [00:09:00] to make sure your life is not that you're going to come to class Monday, Wednesday, Friday from nine 30 to 10 20. Your life is, we have one session a week where the student is expected to come, but we understand that not every student can much more of the work is on you. So you need to have this number one feedback. Yeah, what you submitted,

Katie, is meeting what we expect or you need to have honest assessment. You kind of missed the point here, but go back and do it again. [00:09:30] The second thing that we have found and here comes from looking at data.

We find that the vast majority of the work in adults are going to submit their homework within a two hour window almost every week. And when you start to think about it, well, they got a job, so they can't be doing it from whatever, 10 to six. They have kids. So they're probably, and it turns out it might be a window on [00:10:00] a Tuesday night from seven to nine o'clock. So one of the things that we've done is you take a look at the window and all set, we see a student who has almost always submitted in that window and you missed the window. So what are we doing? Two hours later, you're going to get an email from your faculty member saying, Hey, Katie, I noticed that you didn't get your homework in this week or assignment in this week. The question then becomes is everything okay? [00:10:30] So it's not an accusation that you slug, you do. It's actually did something happen? And inevitably the response is, well, my kid has been sick, or I've been pulling a double shift at work, or I will share one commonality that you see regardless of type of student students are really lousy at asking for help.

[00:11:00] I don't know, and maybe people are in general, but you certainly see it with students. So it can be the student on the West Lafayette campus or it can be the online students. So anything we can do to take away that I'm asking for help, but turn it around to is everything okay? Then you can get to the question. And so that's how we've been trying to deal with that issue.

Katy Oliveira:

Issue. Yeah, I think what you're saying that using data to understand not just [00:11:30] the performance of individual students, which is where I think people have been traditional, like what's the GPA? What's the DFWA after the fact? And it's sort of reactive rather than proactive is using data. And anybody who listens to this podcast regularly knows that this is a big theme of what we're talking about, but using data to be proactive because often the students who are most likely to raise their hand when they need support are the very students that are probably at the least risk because they're go getters, [00:12:00] they know how to advocate for themselves, they know how to access to the resources. And I know that when I was in higher ed, there was this whole school, this old school notion of like, well, they have to learn to ask for help or that's part of it.

And I just think so many folks are, there's so much more to it than that. Like you were saying, they're so busy, they're juggling so much, especially non-traditional students, adult working students, but even traditional students who maybe are working jobs to [00:12:30] be able to fund going to school often have so much going on and they don't know that that help is for them or their shame around accessing those help that help. Those are some of the barriers that I've often seen. I'm curious, what are some of the barriers you've seen and how do you think

institutions can do a better job of enabling students to actually use the supports that we put in place?

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, no, I think that's exactly what I'm saying, and I think [00:13:00] I'm going to probably give different answers for the different populations. I'm going to say for the traditional student, it's probably something you need to be normalizing in their freshman classes right out of the gate. And there's lots of ways that it can probably be done. I taught, so I spent a long time teaching and I actually taught freshmen when I was in the classroom. [00:13:30] A couple of things I did is I had TAs with me and I made sure that the students knew who they were. The TAs were sitting in the front of the room and we were using technology at that time that basically, if you want to call, it was a chat going along with it where students could be asking questions because part of the hard thing, if you're teaching a class of 400 students, am I going too fast?

Am I going too slow? You don't know. And [00:14:00] with this model that we had, we were able to have the TA would say, Hey, they don't know what MPC means. Alright. But sometimes in the chat, another student would answer the student that MC is marginal product contribution and off they would go. Now that's a use of technology to do it, but I think at the end of the day, I think you have to humanize it. I think you have to make sure that it is conveyed to that set of students that [00:14:30] this is here for you.

I think that especially the students who come into the residential campus, once again, they've largely been successful most of their life to get there. They haven't had to have help. And I think for them to say is that here's the resource set for you to get to that next stage and from day one, but once again, the advisor has to be there. [00:15:00] We use supplemental instruction was one of the programs we used for some of the courses and basically what says we're going to work through problem sets, and we identified that I think 15 high DFW cases or classes. And once you've got the students telling other students that this really helps, that peer-to-peer communication can become important. Going back [00:15:30] to the online thing, one of the things that's really different with online is it's harder for the students to build those relationships with their classmates not going to the union after class or they're not sitting next to you in class and things like that.

We have set up some things like we've tried peer-to-peer mentoring groups and things like that. I'm going to say it was a good idea in my mind. For us, it didn't [00:16:00] work particularly well. I think their lives are so full already. I do think it becomes really incumbent within the class structure to actually in the webpages that we have, if you need help, it's a prominent button on every page, so it's not something you have to go find. It's something that you're putting out there in front of them. And then as the instructor, it's important from time to time as maybe especially in those early lectures. [00:16:30] And if any of this didn't read or if you need a review, remember we have this available to help you.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah, I think what you were saying too, that something so traditional and a traditional experience as a support is having a peer mentor, which works so beautifully at a lot of traditional programs and campuses. In fact, we have lots of evidence amongst our client customer base of using peers. The university, Utah Valley University [00:17:00] uses peers in all kinds of ways to provide support to students and it's wildly effective, but understanding the particular student's needs and that there's not one size fit all approaches, and you can't do this in broad strokes that you really have to understand who is our student or who are the groups of students that we have on our campus that might need support, and then what are the barriers to them accessing that support and what kinds of supports are actually truly helpful, and what kinds of supports might actually be [00:17:30] a burden or difficult to use

Dr. Frank Dooley:

No entirely, right?

Katy Oliveira:

Because they have a limitation in their time, their capacity, their mental capacity, their resources. And so that's really interesting that something, so a best practice like peer mentoring may not be as effective in this kind of environment. And so figuring those kinds of things out I think is super important to building supports and experiences that actually help that particular student cohort succeed.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

And [00:18:00] I'll just riff on that just a little bit. I mean, I think one of the areas where you see it is increasingly recently, there's a whole question of students who are on the autism spectrum, and it's a spectrum, so it's fairly wide. And if we go back 15, 20 years ago, some of those students probably weren't going to college or if they went, they probably didn't feel very welcome. They didn't feel supported at [00:18:30] all. And I think we've made great strides, but once again, it's very, if you want, I mean another way, am I an introvert or an extrovert? And there's a certain population of students who just thrive and are looking for the group to be part of because I think that there's a lot of desire among a lot of people, but there's other individuals that I don't know if I want to be part of a group. So it's even that recognition [00:19:00] and understanding, and I think you have to have a certain allowance, but now let's go back. There are truly the students who struggle in a group setting. So if you have a course that is just built around group projects, you better think very carefully on how you're going to be evaluating the contributions of that particular as part of the group, things like that. So it gets complicated really fast.

Katy Oliveira:

Can [00:19:30] let's dive a little deeper into one of those groups for adult learners especially. And we've started to touch on this earlier in the conversation, but I just want to dive just a little bit deeper into it, especially those returning to school after some time away. You were talking

about maybe they tried this before or maybe they couldn't try it because it wasn't accessible to them when they came out of high school and maybe they have a narrative that college wasn't for them. I've experienced this and now they've hit a place in their life where maybe an employer is encouraging them to go back, [00:20:00] or they see that they need to go back to open doors or they want to go back because they want to get that education finished out because grown and they're a different person. What are some, I know you started to touch on some of them, but what are some of the unique challenges that student faces that's different than the student who might be entering the West Lafayette campus of Purdue, and how can educators and institutions better support their goal of getting to that finish line? I know [00:20:30] we did a study a few years ago and that a huge amount of students, many of them have 75% of the credits or 90% of the credits. They're so close to the finish line often I think we think they try a semester and they drop out, but many students try many, many, many semesters and it's kind of at the end, close to the finish line that they're not able to continue. So just what is it that institutions can do to better ensure that those kinds of students get to their [00:21:00] goals?

Dr. Frank Dooley:

I think that's a fascinating question, and I think it's a very relevant question. I think that the first thing that becomes important, and I'm not sure what your experience was as a student, but oftentimes many institutions, when you look at a curriculum or if you want the curriculum, is the collection of courses, which include your [00:21:30] gen eds, which include your pre-reqs to the higher level courses. But a curriculum is a set of courses. You complete this plan. We're going to give you a degree. One of the challenges for the working adult, let's say that I've been working in retail for a decade. Many of our very larger companies, you are, you're undergoing constant training [00:22:00] and some of the training programs that you would've taken, let's say as I'm a store manager, an assistant store manager, you're going to learn about hr, you're going to learn about inventory reconciliation, you're going to learn about a whole bunch of the things that Purdue Westlaw, it's trying to teach you.

So what you have is, while you may not have the course completed, you may have already mastered the content. So one of the things [00:22:30] that's really important, and I think defines an adult serving institution is their ability to give credit for prior learning. And I can tell there's all kinds of horror stories and there's a lot that's been published in the last year about how credit doesn't transfer from school to school. And there's been a couple of really large studies done. Well, giving credit for prior learning is even [00:23:00] more difficult for a traditional school. You've never done it. But that's one of, we have an entire center at Purdue Global, and I think one of the things in part, it's going to have to be the culture of the institution. And I think many, I'm going to call us big 10 institutions, but many traditional institutions.

Part of the reason transfer credit is hard is because there's somewhat of a presumption of what I do on [00:23:30] my campus is unique or better or defined to the population of students that I would, but moreover, the institutions aren't really set up to evaluate transfer credit. Now, if I'm

looking at English 101 and things like that, if you want to call 'em almost a commodity course, yeah, we can do that. But if you get to anything that maybe here's the first student that's brought this course for our university consider [00:24:00] in the last three years, we go, whoa, we don't know how to evaluate it. We haven't spent time and we haven't built the systems and processes on campus to do that. Now, flip it around. You come to me, you have been working in the US military as a medic, you have all kinds of training that would transfer into an EMT type of a degree, but I don't have any of the processes or offices [00:24:30] within my campus to be able to evaluate how well you're doing with that.

So I think in part, it's people, in part it's process, in part it's culture. And I'm going to say the biggest difference for an institution like Purdue Global is the presumption when we start evaluating what you presented to us is, Hey, you completed this training in managerial or store management. We're going to take that. We're going to give it to the faculty. You always have [00:25:00] to have the faculty involved, but they're going to be looking for the content in there, and now they're going to come back to you and says, you know what? Out of the 40 hours you need in the major, we're able to give you credit for 10 hours. That to you, number one, why that becomes really important to that working adult. It just says, you know what? This last decade of when I've been working, I've actually been moving forward. I have been learning, I have been alright. So I think that's [00:25:30] probably why it's so important.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah, I love that it's giving value to that experience that you're not just working to make a job, but you are learning in an experiential way, in a real world applied way.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

And it's also important, especially if the employer is sponsoring the student for the employer to have the recognition that what they have done, and I'll give you one thing, one of the questions we're going to ask an employer when they present to us [00:26:00] their training programs, I would say, so what happens when Katie completes this program? If your answer is, well, she's going to get a promotion, it's based on evidence. And if the employer is saying that, show me your ability to master this. It becomes hard for us not to say, well, then we're not going to give you credit or we're going to go back and make you take HR [00:26:30] 101. Makes no sense at all.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah. It's just wasting time and resources and for people who don't have time and resources to waste.

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, and the other thing is when you come back to school at age, let's say 30, you are wired different. And many of them are not looking to join clubs. Their outside life fills everything else

that they have, but they are very, even though they're going part-time, [00:27:00] very intent on getting done as quick as possible, and there's a couple reasons. Number one, they want to get life on. If you told 'em it's going to take seven years to complete their degree, any time horizon that's long, it just doesn't seem feasible. But if I'm able to say, look, if you take two courses a term, every term, summer's included, we can get you done in two and a half to three years. [00:27:30] All of a sudden. Really, oh, and by the way, we're going to give you a year's worth of credit for the work experience that Oh, so you've chipped that number down and all of a sudden it goes from being, I don't think it's even something I should be thinking about. It's something that you can actually see in your mind. And I'll tell you, one of the big motive, probably at least half of our students, when you ask 'em why they're doing this, I need to be a role model for my children. [00:28:00] I think 70% of our students have dependents. So if they're not going to be done until their children are out of high school, what kind of role model? But if their kids can see them walk across the stage for graduation, that's a pretty big motivator.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah, huge motivator. And that's really telling that they see the value and [00:28:30] they want to get there as quickly as they can so that they can get onto the next thing in their lives. This is my last big question. I want to tie together two concepts though. I think part of this too is we're talking about folks going back to college and then folks going to college right out of high school. And I know in our current climate there's a little bit of mistrust or people don't buy the fact that they need to invest in the college education to have success in their professional [00:29:00] career, and people are sort of questioning the value of a college experience. And in an earlier conversation, you and I were also talking about how there's a lot of elitism that surrounds higher ed and that I'm wondering if part of it is how we conceptualize what higher ed traditionally was versus what higher ed is and is becoming, and how do we break down or dismantle those? That sense that going [00:29:30] to higher ed as it's sort of an elitist experience and it's something that I probably don't need and it costs a lot of money and it's not what's really going to get me. I can get out of high school and get a good job that pays. And why is it important that we value different kinds of educational experiences and institutional types so that we can build a more inclusive and effective higher ed

Dr. Frank Dooley:

System? I'm glad you used the word system because it very much is a system. I think if there's any [00:30:00] it, and I fully understand this notion of elitism, and to a certain extent, elitism plays out. I'm going to say in our media, especially movies. When you show a movie, what do you do? You're showing a college campus that looks like West Lafayette and just 97% of the freshmen are first time they're 18 or 17 years old. When they start 90, 95% are going full-time, et cetera, et cetera. They look [00:30:30] like the movies. You don't see movies of working adults trying to go to school or if that movie is there, it certainly hasn't captured the common

mindset, but that's understandable that we create this idea that a college, there's Ivy Walls, et cetera, and it droning on old professors and whatnot.

So to a certain extent, [00:31:00] I think what becomes important is it becomes important on the institution to do a couple things within their local geography. And the local geography might be the entire state or it might be a region, but it's really important to tie to the employer base that you have. There's a thing called the CHIPS Act right now, which is trying to build chip factories across the United States. [00:31:30] And I know there's one in Ohio and several in Arizona, New York, I believe there's some other states including West Lafayette. Indiana is looking to have a chip plant come into town. It'll be a thousand jobs in West Lafayette. Around a third of those jobs are going to be electrical and computer engineers. About a third of those jobs are going to be computer technicians. One of the things underline the CHIPS Act is we have the engineers, in many cases, [00:32:00] we don't have the technicians, Ivy Tech Community College or Purdue might need to create some other degrees to meet that employer demand.

So unless the institutions are doing a good job of engaging the local economies, we're never going to meet those needs in many cases. I think it's one of these things that people don't realize it is happening in many places across the country. So [00:32:30] there's probably more good news here than people realize, but sometimes it's not the most story to be publishing. And I think the other thing that's gotten hard is if you went back even 30 years ago when you think of media or how you're going to tell your story that the channels were relatively narrow and you could get it into a few pipes and people are going to receive it now, [00:33:00] the way people receive their information is so diffuse. And so we're doing a podcast here in part because we know there's people who listen to podcasts as a way to become informed. But I don't know what the demographics of your listenership is, but how do we make sure that this gets a wider distribution? And I think with the spreading of media across so many different channels, [00:33:30] we speak to micro audiences rather than macro audiences. And it's probably something that somehow we need to get back to a grander scale or somebody to pick up the mantle and say, this is an important question for us as a country to figure out and to deal with.

Katy Oliveira:

Yeah. Well, I know we've covered a lot of ground during our conversation, and so before we sign off, I want to give you a chance, is there anything else that you'd like to share that we didn't get a chance to talk about?

Dr. Frank Dooley:

Well, that's [00:34:00] a very dangerous thing to say, to be, I guess I would simply close with the notion that we we're in a time where AI is surfaced and we have institutions and corporations trying to figure out what does this mean? Some people are promising that's going to be great productivity enhancement, other people, but we're going to lose jobs. So there's

this tension [00:34:30] with this shift in technology. I think that's another thing that higher ed and our corporate partners and society in general needs to get our arms around. What is AI and how are we going to be dealing with that? That could be a whole nother podcast in and of itself. I'm not an expert on that, but I am cognizant enough of the importance of it as an issue as we go forward. And I simply want to thank you for the conversation. This has been delightful.

Katy Oliveira:

Well, thank you so much [00:35:00] for coming on the show. This has been a great conversation. I really appreciate your time.