

In the Classroom 60

A Recap of the SUNY Online Summit, Part 1

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thank you ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things and you're hanging out with me. Today I woke up to some good news regarding the podcast. I just went over 2,000 downloads. It may not seem a lot to you, but it's huge to me. I'm really grateful for the folks that have taken time to listen to this podcast. This week, I am going to do a recap on the SUNY Online Summit. It was a conference workshop that was held in New York City last week and a wonderful opportunity. It's always good to reconnect with individuals that I've come to know across SUNY, fellow directors and instructional technologists, and just to share a lot of good ideas. This particular summit was focused on online learning and really specifically focused on sorely online students. It was interesting.

My trip to New York, always wonderful. I like New York City, I like the diversity, I like the hustle and bustle, and always wonderful things to eat, but let me focus a little bit on the conference itself. The conference really was just focused on what's happening in the SUNY system, the State University of New York system, and it opened up with Dr. Tod Laursen, who is the senior vice-chancellor of the SUNY system. Basically, it's a look at where SUNY is right at this moment in regards to online learning. They're looking at doing very powerful things as a system in a hole in order to basically get back all the students that are leaving SUNY to pursue online learning through other systems. That's basically what they're doing. They don't want to be another Southern New Hampshire University or Western Governors University or Arizona State University, or any of those that are aggressively going out and working on the online market share. They want to leverage what is uniquely SUNY and learn the lessons from these other powerhouses that are out there.

This is what really Dr. Laursen had to speak about. How do we build online programs that will scale? How do we tap into these post-traditional learners? Right now, we have some gaps in our system. One-third to one-half of the students are learning online, but overall only 10% of our faculty are teaching online, so there's a gap right there. How do we fix that particular gap? Being able to leverage something at a system, and the SUNY system, there are 64 institutions each with their own culture, their own set of students, their own programs and disciplines. How to pull that together and have SUNY work for them as a system as a whole. I have been watching this for the last five years, ever since I've come into the SUNY system, and it has been fascinating.

When I was coming in here, there was a transition between Open SUNY where they had well over 600 programs into that system, and then there was Open SUNY Plus. There's a smaller number. There's over 100 programs that are involved in the SUNY Plus, but now they're taking this to just another level, the SUNY Online Initiative that

right now has about 30 campuses involved, and these are focused on solely online learners at this time. What does it take to deliver a high-quality program to these learners? This is what the conference focused on. Some of the things that they recognized that they're really trying to address, that 100% online learner. They recognize that these are post-traditional learners. This post-traditional means that education is not their primary thing. If they were to identify themselves, it would not be as student first. That's interesting. That's an interesting way to look at post-traditional students.

They want to be able to scale programs where they're hitting 1,000 plus students in those programs, and they're trying to aim it in about three years to be able to do that, and how to leverage the whole SUNY system in terms of marketing, which is a huge bonus for the smaller campuses being able to ride on the pigtailed of SUNY as they're doing the marketing thing. They have deeper pockets, they're able to basically see a larger aspect of the population, being able to build those look-alike audiences, being able to retarget at a higher level. They can also at the SUNY system see where there's gaps in the programming. Across the whole system, are there areas of opportunity that we could tap into in order to get these 40,000-plus residents who are enrolled in non-SUNY schools or non-New York schools? How do we tap into this? When I'm talking post-traditional, we're looking at somewhere around 33, 34 years of average age.

They also outlined some of the goals that they're aiming for. They certainly want more learners in their system, but also to partner with corporations and being able to scale those partnerships. They have a huge interest in satisfying the demands of the New York State workforce. They want to align programs more with those demands and basically be able to adapt across a lifetime. They want to be able to build lifelong learning into this whole SUNY system, which is something that needs to happen. That at one time you could go to college and that was enough college to take you for the rest of your life, but that is no longer possible. The fact that the institution recognizes that and that it's working in that direction. They also want to optimize their operations where it's very student-centric, and that they're using the data to help make better decisions using data-informed decisions and looking at ways to create efficiencies across the system. As they have moved forward, they have been focusing on the platform, what is the stack of technologies that they have to put together.

Collaborating. They're collaborating across 64 institutions that are very independent and have their own visions to get that all the work together. That's a huge undertaking. Then also the workflows to make sure everything's going. They are definitely moving things forward in those areas. They talked about their different social media campaigns and they're doing quite well. I won't go into the numbers on those, but they're doing quite well. One of the things they also are recognizing and working hard to make more seamless is the transfer programs. Half of the students transfer to another institution to complete a higher-level degree, and to make those transfers as easy as possible, that's something that is also part of this and that they recognize.

When you're building out these platforms you figure out what technologies you need, but then you also need to select the right technologies in line with support in order to make this student-centric. Having a concierge program or kind of a one-person stop

where students can get help, that's certainly huge. Making sure that they're ready for online programs, giving them orientations, what the tutoring is, any early alerts. Artificial intelligence, they mentioned. It's going to be an increased factor in this as we go forward, and then certainly being able to have the helpdesk, so definitely important things. Other questions that are coming up as they're doing this are intellectual property rights. As a faculty member creates a class, whose class is it? Can it be used by others? There's certainly contractual language that can go in to make that work. The whole idea of marketing is really important. Making sure that we get the right programs in front of the right people, and so they're working on leadership and a team that's going to focus directly on that. That was really the things that Dr. Laursen had to share.

Then Kim Scalzo, who is-- Her title keeps changing, but she's like the czar of SUNY Online. Since I've known her, totally high speed, she's got all kinds of things moving, and they just keep making it better and better and better. I've been very impressed with what I've seen out of the SUNY system. Room to grow, but I think they're doing a bang-up job. She talked about the history, the things that I talk about. Open SUNY, how many degrees, how many campuses, all that that was going in the Open SUNY. This is campuses, funded all the support. Basically, in order to get a class in Open SUNY, you had to have SUNY and nice ed, which is the New York State of Education basically provide approval. The SUNY Plus, that's a step up. Our institution, the community college that I'm at, we're in the midst of this. We have some programs in the SUNY Plus. Part of it is there is a review using the Online Learning Consortium Scorecard to do a review of the campus to make sure that you're providing the adequate support for the students, and how you are addressing those things. I've had experience with that. That was eye-opening coming from-- Well, I hadn't been doing a lot of online work at the institution level until I came here. Going through that institutional review was eye-opening in terms of things that you should keep your eye on. I certainly recommend it for any institution.

Now we're going into the SUNY Online. This is the next level. How they can work this as a system, and I've talked a little bit about that. Right now, they have 20 to 30 programs involved in this. SUNY is providing the support. They have a single stack of technologies that they're working in, and they're working out a financial model. They have definitely a list of programs that they're interested in in moving this forward and getting those weaved into it. She went at length to talk about the different pieces that were involved. Everything from marketing and recruiting, the different campaigns that they had, what they were building out, partnerships for enrollment, getting people into the same student information system.

The fact that they're looking at how to tie this SUNY Online into different aspects from applied learning, the research component, focusing on veterans and members of the military, how to better do cross-campus collaboration, how to tap into the international market. All this is part of their partnerships for enrollment to get those things right. Then onboarding. How do you take students from 64 different institutions and give them a great learning experience? Being able to identify them in the system so they're not confused, being able to have a single sign-on, and how to navigate that.

Then also training faculty. Being able to train faculty so you have a common experience. The content can be different, but the students need a common experience. She talked a little bit about that, and really just talked about a lot of the different technologies that were available and that they were using as part of the learning stack. ThinkingStorm, Starfish, building a student portal that basically made it easier to process all these different experiences. Those are the things that they're currently working on. Then also providing services for faculty. Being able to do quality reviews on courses. They certainly use Oscar, the institutional review which I think is important in being able to support all that.

Once Kim was done then we got briefings from other individuals regarding their specific pieces of the puzzle and how they were supporting. For example, Harry Cargile. He talked about the stack. He called it Salt. Salt is the SIS system, the Student Information System, authentication, the learning management system, tools, and support. Basically, he just broke that down. Some of the challenges, some of the wins that they had. Dealing with an SIS, how to navigate that single sign-on where you have multiple campuses, but you also have this single place where they're going to go do their online, and how to do that federated authentication. Then having a common template for each course but branded for the campus who was actually teaching that course. I thought that was cool.

The LMS, they're using Blackboard for the learning management systems. In that, students have an orientation and like I said, the different courses are branded based on their header. Then he went through all these tools. Actually, he didn't. Someone new on the team talked about all the tools, Carrie. I don't have her name in front of me, but basically all the different tools that were involved, from Allied, SafeAssign, VoiceThread, Examity, Starfish, Cengage, and Pearson, just all these, and being able to support that through their helpdesk. They're increasing their hours in their help desk, they're adding new staff to the help desk, but they talked about how they did this. Then talked about getting a course up and going in this learning stack, what the process was. They basically have a timeline that they try to move these courses through in order to make sure they're adequately reviewed. That way, they're ready to go when the term starts.

They spent a lot of time talking about lessons learned. The difficulties about integrating these different student information systems and the authentication and getting that all to work correctly, but they are definitely moving in a great direction. One of the last parts talked about basically the marketing for scale, getting students enrolled in courses and keeping them through graduation. They talked about how much money was spent in 2019. It was \$17 million-plus that were spent on advertising. They're learning a lot of lessons at the system level that can help definitely keep these costs down and be able to help fill up those pipelines.

Part of this, they also talked about the number of online students in the SUNY system and the reason why students were taking classes. We've talked about this. Online classes are really convenient for students. They have other priorities in addition to being a student, so they need these online classes. Oddly enough, SUNY has a lower percentage than nationwide in this. Larry Dugan, he was leading this track and/or this presentation, and he talked about basically the marketing. One of the important pieces

is, he asked a question, "If we do everything right, what if it works? What happens? What's the consequences when these things align?" They found this out when basically they flipped the switch for the online marketing and suddenly it was working, that they were getting all kinds of leads. They were only set up to handle a certain amount of leads and this basically initially overwhelmed them, but they adapted and were able to move this thing forward. This is part of running pilot programs and testing is when you turn things on, what if they work? They basically streamline systems. They've mapped systems out, figured out where the bottlenecks were and are trying to work those, and just try to reduce the time it takes for a request for information. I found that interesting.

He shared a lot of lessons learned, how quickly colleges responded to the application. They're trying to figure out how to do a better self-serve, creating a series of webinars to educate potential students, and figuring out what are really hot leads that they should be devoting energy to. He also has changed up the support role for online students, having a person who's their advisor, who's their coach, one person that can handle it all. They're working on that system, and being able to really touch base with students before they get overwhelmed and backed up and frustrated and quit. Basically, having one person that they can go to for students is huge in order to help them out.

This was a wonderful conference. I really enjoyed it, but that was only really the first day. The first day focused on SUNY. I'm going to definitely come back and talk to you about what happened over some of these other sessions because there was lots of great things in those sessions and definitely topics that are I'm going to turn into other webinars or other podcast episodes as we move forward. That's what I have from this day. Exciting just to really see, take a deep dive in what SUNY is doing in terms of online learning, and it's definitely exciting. That's what I have for you. Before I let you go, here's a plug for my book.