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How Innovative Universities are Ditching Competition and Joining Forces

Christine: You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues and higher education. I'm your host, Christine Ravold.

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Christine: This month, ACTA's released its new report, Bold Leadership. Real Form 2.0: Improving Efficiency, Cutting Costs and Expanding College Opportunity. This report features some of the most innovative college campuses, systems, and organizations who are making a real difference in bringing costs down and improving student outcomes. One of the organizations featured in this report is the University Innovation Alliance, otherwise known as UIA, a coalition of eleven public research universities that's made a real splash since launching in 2014. This week, I'm pleased to introduce one of the most innovative people in higher education, according to Washington Monthly, Bridget Burns, Executive Director of UIA. Welcome Bridget.

Bridget: Thanks for having me.

Christine: Thanks for being here. UIA is finding out what works and sharing it with other large universities across the country. The goal is to help more low income and minority students graduate and do it on time. Can you tell me, Bridget, how did UIA come to be and how did you get your start in this new program?

Bridget: The UIA was founded by the eleven presidents and chancellors at these institutions, who represent some of the largest, most innovative, campuses in the country. They came together in 2013 to figure out whether or not there was a shared sense of urgency around a few driving challenges, and there was. It was a real sense of urgency around the fact that we're not producing enough college degrees to meet the economic demands of our future, and we're doing a really

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bad job when it comes to low income, first generation and students of color, and those are having a combined effect. These institutional leaders think that going it alone to try and solve those really important challenges is a waste of time, energy and money and that students are the ones paying the price. So these presidents came together, and chancellors, and they realized that they did really have a similar sense of hope and a purpose and they wanted to figure out if we could design a way to work together that would not hinder the progress of the campus but would actually help the campuses move faster together. So in 2014, we came public and unveiled what was going to be happening. Since then, we have been innovating, scaling up what works, and trying to share everything we learn.

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Christine: How did your involvement begin with UIA?

Bridget: I was there from kind of the beginning so I actually was an ACE Fellow at Arizona State, which is kind of like baby president school, and I spent a year following him around – Michael Crow – to try and understand what was uniquely different about his view of the world and his leadership versus the rest of higher ed. I grew up as a low-income student who went on to college, barely made it, ended up being a student body president and being on my first Presidential Hiring Committee when I was twenty-two, and then being appointed to the State Board of Higher Education shortly after, and being involved in the advance support representation of universities, and later became the Chief of Staff for a university system. So over the past fifteen years or so, I have worked with twenty-seven different university presidents and chancellors, and have staffed and supported boards of trustees, been a member myself and worked with others. So I came to ASU to truly understand what was different. Was it just the story I was hearing? Or was there something fundamentally different about what was going on there? While I was there, I discovered “yes,” there was something

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totally different. But also while I was there, Michael offered me this idea they had, which was the UIA before it was the UIA, and he kind of threw it my way and said, “See what you can make happen.”

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My background had been working directly with presidents and chancellors but this was a totally different challenge of trying to build a collaborative that would help them move faster, not distract from the campus priorities. So that was while I was there. We worked on prototyping the UIA, getting it stood up, raising 5.7 million dollars when we first went public figuring out – no small feat... I think that was the most productive ACE Fellowship in history of ACE Fellowships. Here I was, living on a air mattress in Arizona and really in the epicenter of innovation and transformation and trying to figure out what was relatable, what was transferrable—it was scalable elsewhere—and what were the challenges being faced by these other campuses? Was there actually a shared sense of challenge? And I found that there was. That everyone is struggling with the same stuff and the organizational design of higher ed, the highly competitive environment, prevents us from reaching that understanding. A lot of these challenges would benefit from people actually knowing that they’re all struggling with the same stuff and working together to share what they’ve learned so that other people are not repeating each other’s mistakes.

Christine: That requires a lot of transparency, not only within the school but between the schools. Does that make them uncomfortable in a lot of situations?

Bridget: We’ve kind of applied the same rules that you would have for friendship. Right? You share your stories with the people who’ve earned the right to hear it. So part of the design of how we do our work is creating trust and real relationships where people truly know each other. We had to first start by getting to understand what transparency would look like for us, and so we made sure to actually vet what data they currently have, what were they comfortable sharing,

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what were they uncomfortable sharing, what are the real things that they're being held to the fire about in terms of accountability metrics from the outside. So that first year was a deep dive of what was our shared measurement and data going to look like. Since then, now it's very commonplace. It's what we're used to – that we have data dumps multiple times a year. Our campuses are sharing up to student unit record data in some cases. And we trust each other. We trust each other. I don't produce anything that is a comparative of them unless it really serves a purpose because there is far too much comparison and a sense of scare-city in higher ed that does not cultivate collaboration and trust. And it doesn't help people actually achieve what they need to. So we have to be very strategic in how you present data and making sure that everyone's actually part of the process to develop those metrics really mattered.

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Christine: How does that collaboration look for UIA? It's a major theme in our report and we have multiple different ways that some consortia have worked together. What's it look like for you guys?

Bridget: I think every consortia relationship has to come up with its own brand of how they're going to do their work. For us, it started by looking at all other examples out there. We're certainly not the first and we frankly have borrowed a lot of our best ideas from elsewhere. So I looked at the CIC. We looked at Carnegie's Improvement Science. We went through their trainings. We've looked at other different collaboratives in the Association for Collaborative Leadership. So everyone has their own vantage point. Ours is directly connected to our objectives. So we want to produce more graduates, produce more college degrees from across the socioeconomic spectrum, share our data, hold each other accountable, and share our innovations and hold our costs down. Those are very crisp outcomes. To do that, it starts with: we discovered that administrators are tremendously overburdened and so we scaled an idea from

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Arizona Stated called the UI Fellowship, which is a place where he has early career folks come into the institution and they help prototype and incubate his ideas so they are ready to be implemented elsewhere.

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Christine: And these are Michael Crow's ideas, I guess.

Bridget: Yes. It's called University Initiatives and it's run by this fantastic woman named Jacqueline Smith, who was a UI Fellow a long time ago, and it's a direct reporting relationship with the President. I saw that UI was one of the reasons why ASU was so unique because they actually have a space to incubate all the good ideas. Most Presidents have good ideas but they don't have anywhere to put them. They have to ask themselves exactly which category of individual they would ask to work on that. "Is this government relations? Is it communications? Is it academic affairs?" And rarely do the good ideas fit neatly in one of those spaces and most of the people who report to the President are pretty overburdened. So Mike solves for that by actually having a designed space called UI and we scaled that up on the UIA campuses. So we created this fellowship that's called the UIA Fellows Program where we sought nationally early-to-mid career smart thinkers and doers who are essentially like a chief of staff or a project manager to the person who is the primary responsible party for students' success on that campus. So that person now has a direct reporting relationship and whole FTE to help them be successful. And then we convene those people, we call them the liaisons, the direct report from the President who oversees student success now—whoever that is depends on the institution. Sometimes it's the VP of Undergraduate Studies. It really depends. If you want to figure out who they are, you just follow the work because the presidents and chancellors give the work to that person because they always deliver and so you'll find them and they're really overburdened often, and so we give them a team, a staff, and then they form a team. Then how the UIA works actually is that

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we bring all the teams together and we hold convenings a couple of times a year, and we have different rules about how we convene. We don't have keynotes. We don't have panels. You talk for seven minutes at a time and then you have off-the-record breakouts where people can actually ask the interesting questions that they would be embarrassed to ask in front of a group. We have failure sharing sessions where people share about the stuff they're struggling with, and it's all confidential and off the record. We try and iterate each convening with a new model for how we're going to do this work. So it's the fellows. It's the liaisons. It's the teams. And then after those convenings, they provide a plan to the presidents and chancellors. So that's kind of the dream scenarios for CEOs is that someone actually has a plan with a timeline and how they're going to deliver it.

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Campuses need to actually form a Student Success Team that's not a catch-all committee, and having a meeting is not an outcome. You actually have to have a specific plan and time for your team to be pitching, catching ideas and prototyping and coming up with new ways they're going to do this work. And those teams have to have allies, which is what the UIA does is we bring all those teams together so they actually have friends they can trust who are working on similar projects and they can empathize with each other, they can come up with new solutions. It's a much safer space than if they were doing it just within their own institution, and this is a way for us to diffuse more rapidly.

Christine: Can you tell me a little bit about the mentor and mentee relationships that you guys have expanded on?

Bridget: So when we first started, that was what we language it as and we've actually moved a bit away from that because over time it's more like friendship vouching that's happened. What it is, is I get a lot of ed tech companies that want to come and pitch UIA campuses. The reality is, the way we work, is if a campus has done something and they've tested it and they believe it really works and

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they're willing to share their data with the other UIA colleagues, and they're willing to vouch for the produce or the idea or the innovation, that's how we then scale things up. It's really about someone has tried it first and they know it's real and they actually think this is worth everyone's attention. Part of our campus convenings are designed for us to kind of come in and almost kick the tires and understand exactly how something works, ask the hard questions that you wouldn't ask in, like, a normal convening, and be able to learn enough and borrow each other's—whether it's template language or a prototype or even just the first five questions they would ask about their institution is they were trying to figure out readiness. That's the stuff that helps campuses move more quickly. So that's what we try and focus on.

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I think that originally we thought it was going to be mentee/mentor. It turns out, nobody wants to be called a mentee and everyone is actually a mentor on a different subject. Every one of my campuses is doing something innovative and none of them are doing the same innovative thing. Yes. We've had to evolve our language over time.

Christine: That's pretty cool. What's your favorite innovation that has come out of these projects?

Bridget: I think the best is – it's hard to even call it an innovation. Probably the best piece is the way that we work together. It's our brand of collaboration or our spin on it. But the way that I could explain it is what happened at Georgia State and Michigan State. Georgia State, for those who don't know, is the national model for student success.

Christine: They've closed the gap, right?

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Bridget: Yes. They've eliminated race and income as a predictor of outcome, which is something no institution has been able to do; not by changing their entry requirements or cherry picking as some would say, and they doubled their graduation rate in a matter of seven years. So they did all this great stuff and they also had a 40-million dollar deficit. So it's not a campus that had a ton of resources and they really proved that by rigorously focusing on the data, building the right team, and testing, iterating and deploying different interventions, they have over time shifted the institution from being reactive and playing defense to being anticipatory and playing offense to some degree with students. So they know that a student is off track before the student knows. Whereas most institutions find out when it's, frankly, too late.

Christine: After they're not able to graduate on time.

Bridget: Mm-hmm. To explain how that works is essentially Georgia State gathers data from 800 different sources at any point in time. They have 800 different indicators that have been identified based on their predictive analytic system and their historical data. They know that these things, these 800 things, are the ways that you would know someone was off track. Most institutions don't actually know what those are. So that's one, if you're a trustee trying to figure out how to use this. That's part of the process. So they get those 800 indicators. Their algorithm then tells them every Monday, "These are the students who are about to get off track," based on these indicators that are currently off track but they're about to. That Monday, Georgia State deploys three thousand advising hours that week. So that's how they work is they are anticipatory and they intervene when there's enough time and they actually know how to intervene. But when they first started this process, Georgia State started by process mapping, which is a business, a process improvement strategy, that is often used in design thinking. It's often used in design schools and engineering. It's not particularly



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that new. But they started by process mapping the interaction between the student and the institution when they first showed up. At a UIA convening, they shared this and Michigan State was inspired. So they went home and they decided to process map from the time the student gets admitted to the time they show up on the first day of school.

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They got their Fellow, their UIA Fellow, trained in process mapping and then they convened everyone who works in Student Success into a room, and the first time ever, for just a couple of hours. When they process mapped how the institution was communicating, they found that they were sending over 450 emails from 450 email addresses that end with msu.edu. There were 50 types of holds a student could have on their account that they didn't know about. There was not one person in charge of Need Based Aid or one person in charge of Advising. So with processing mapping, once you see it you can't un-see it. Since that happened, Michigan State has totally transformed their student experience and they've used process mapping over and over to try and diagnose and redesign their campus around students. So that's an example of how the UIA works is we create a safe space where Georgia State tells their story but they tell how they really did it – the really painful stuff, the hard stuff you wouldn't share on the front page of the New York Times. And we create a space where, in our convenings, our teams actually have team time where they actually get to build their plans and spend time alone really prototyping what they're going to do.

And so Michigan State was able to hit the ground running immediately when they got back to campus. Now they've got massive changes underway, that they're ready to unveil some new data. So that's how it works is basically we help campuses share ideas and move quickly.

Christine: If I'm a trustee, I'm hearing words like "predictive, analytics and process mapping and scaling," and I think it could be pretty intimidating to come

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in and say, “I want to do all of this.” What should a trustee know or what’s the basics to get started on this really productive track?

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Bridget: If I was a trustee, well I was a trustee [*laughs*]... So the thing I would do is I would first ask, “What is the delta and outcomes for low and high-income students, and first generation and second students, and students of color and white students?” So if you get very clear about what that delta is: How are we performing for this population in comparison to high-income students? That kind of clarity lets you know at scale, so you want the number and percent because if you have eleven low-income students, that’s not as helpful. Right? But if you’re serving thousands, you need to understand that. So I think a clear sense of what the benchmark that matters, and I would say that that’s one. And then the second, I would ask for process mapping. I do think that, if I was a trustee asking questions of the president, I would ask questions about data. So one, a question that you can’t really answer if you don’t have the right kind of analytic infrastructures, the number and percentage of students who are currently on track to get their degree. They can tell your retention, but that’s not what I’m asking. The number and percentage of students who are currently on track to get their degree on time. That is not what retention is. Retention is we retain them and continue to charge them tuition. Progression is different. So most institutions can tell you retention. They can tell you graduation at certain intervals. So I would try and diagnose that problem around... What are the bottlenecks is the second piece and the way that people could get at that is process mapping and asking, “How are we communicating with our students when they first come onboard?” Again, I think these are things that should come from the president and should be reported to the board and that should be a part of the conversation about how the institution can redesign itself around students and student success. Those are just a few things I would start with. But in terms of predictive analytics, just know

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that it's very easy to say you have it and not to actually just have a contract with a vendor or be dumping your data and actually not have it stood up.

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Understand what I just described about Georgia State, that that's actually the ideal where the institution has knowledge, is using past experience with students in their algorithm to actually intervene, to identify students who are off track and support them rather than just wave goodbye as they walk out the door. I think that's where I would go.

Christine: There have been a lot of murmurings about policy change coming in 2017 in higher ed. Are there any policies that you are following or have caught your interest this year?

Bridget: Oh, all of it. *[Laughs.]* I think it's a fascinating time right now. I think in terms of policy-making that you're seeing, obviously folks are talking quite a bit about performance funding and you're starting to see a lot of focus on outcomes. We come from a mindset that's a little different. We actually think institutions can lead in this conversation. We don't think they need to be pulled by the caller, by policy makers, both state and federal. We've seen that our institutions are moving much more aggressively than the policy actors are asking of them. So I think the biggest challenge for us is figuring out "How do we share that in a way that enables other institutions to make similar progress and that we're not an impediment to them being successful?" because they're being compared with broad measures that might not apply. So we don't do a lot of advocacy around policy at this point.

Christine: That seems totally reasonable to me. We featured ASU and Purdue as two case studies in our new report. What are some of your favorite things you've at these three schools that implement?

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Bridget: I think right now what you're seeing with Income Share Agreements and the Back a Boiler Program at Purdue is pretty interesting. It's also especially interesting that they are taking such an iterative approach to it – the student population size that they're using, that they're working with and that they're slowing growing and that they're openly trying to help other campuses to be able to take this concept and run with it. I think that demonstrates the truly collaborative nature of Purdue and the visionary leadership of President Daniels. So I would say what they're doing with ISAs is pretty fantastic. At ASU, it's just difficult to pick. There's just so much going on. Personally, for me, I would still say what they're doing that's really unique is the concept of university initiatives, the idea that the President has a space for the chasing down good ideas and actually dealing with new fresh challenges and has a team that really is seeding the future talent workforce for higher education, and then giving people a space to be incubated and learn his ideas and how he thinks about the world. And then go out to the institution and help support change. So I think both of those are good examples of how these leaders are uniquely different and they're really focused on true transformation and doing big things that will change the future trajectory of the United States.

Christine: If I'm a university president and I want a UIA Fellow, how would I get one?

Bridget: Please don't. [*Laughs.*] I'm just kidding. We actually do have a problem that people are trying to hire Fellows away. I would say it's not that I don't know that you want a UIA Fellow. I know what you need more of is project managers and you need people who are actually able to support shepherd change. So don't assume that someone needs to be at the institution for 25-years to earn the right to be in a room where big decisions are being made and to help support and staff those efforts. We know that we see a lot of tremendously talented folks who don't

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want to be faculty members, who don't want to follow the typical administrative structure, but who actually really want to provide support.

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And so we find those people. Some of them have Ph.Ds. Some of them don't. Some of them have a design thinking background. Some of them don't. Some worked as journalists. Some of them weren't. Right? The variety is all over. What I do know they have in common is their backgrounds: first generation, low-income, students of color who saw higher education change their lives and they're deeply passionate about giving back. And it's the same thing that's true about my (presidents). All my presidents, they're former first generation low-income students who—they grew up, turned into college presidents, and they actually want to try and change the world. So find young, smart, talented folks. Invest in them by mentoring and supporting them. And create a space for them to actually help shepherd and project manage different work on your campus. They're not the leaders. They follow around the leaders and actually enable them to be successful. It's a capacity problem that you're trying to address. So I would start there.

Christine: Out of curiosity, is it expensive to start implementing these changes or will the eventual savings outweigh the initial costs?

Bridget: It just depends on the project. So process mapping costs \$250 to get certified. The Orion Group offers the certification on campuses. I just went through it. It really takes, what, two-hours to get a group of people on your campus together in a room and a bunch of different colored sticky notes to figure out how you're interacting with your students. That kind of low cost investment can yield massive dividends. Every time we've done it, we found that there are things we don't know about. They're bottlenecks.

Christine: What are your unknown unknowns?

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Bridget: The real crux of the issue is that higher education was not designed around students. Higher education was designed around the work that needed to be done and that has evolved over time. These are highly complex organizations that have to do a lot. We're talking about knowledge, pursuit, research discovery, teaching, campus safety and security, housing, efficiency and accountability. I mean, there's just so much that's happened and very well-meaning administrators who care a lot about students have unintentionally said, "booby traps and landmines for students," that they aren't aware of because the process is often designed around the outcome, not around the user. And so students often... I mean, the best example of this is: every college I've ever been to, we say that we care about graduation. We say that's our objective is helping students graduate. And yet, when it comes to graduation, our process makes absolutely no sense. The student has to let the university know they're ready. The student fills out paperwork and applies. The student then pays a fee. And yet we claim that that's the process that we're all about. Those are not user designed processes. If you were checking out at Amazon, that's not what you would want to happen, right? So it's just kind of that common sense approach of us looking back and thinking, "Okay, when we put on...." I think the answer is empathy, spending a lot more time thinking through the experience of students. But if we give ourselves the chance to be successful at that, we will find they're a lot of things that we're doing that actually don't necessarily make sense for students and we can get better outcomes if we give ourselves the chance to be successful and remove those.

Christine: That's really exciting. And it also offers higher education—like a very optimistic way to look at solving the problems that we're facing. Maybe one of those problems is the narrative that higher education is resistant to innovation.

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You look at the model of higher education and it's been very similar since the middle ages and there's no reason to change that. What's your reaction to that?

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Bridget: It depends on where people sit, but where I spend my time, it's constantly changing and evolving. And it's difficult to keep up with the pace and evolution. I mean, higher education is where the hotbed of innovation is—is where ideas, the pursuit of knowledge and discovery, is happening. It's just that we have those skills but we rarely deploy them towards our own needs. So we solve problems for the private sector. We solve problems for government, for policy makers. But feeling like we have permission to stop for a minute and spend some time thinking about the practice of our own work, that seems like a luxury. So what I find when I bring folks together, and through this work, I find that people are deeply passionate about change and transformation and improving outcomes. And these folks really – it's just that there is a tremendous... We have a capacity problem in higher ed. We have this belief that, again, people—their place will expand and so you have people who are not able to even get through their day. I don't think we've had permission to think through the org chart and ask ourselves, "Does this actually make sense? Should be really so neatly defined where it's 'This is academic affairs and here's all the rest' for the President?"

And the presidents themselves, the roles that they play. I mean, when I've spent time with presidents, they wake up in the morning and it's 5:00 a.m. and they have a crisis with the media. They have something going on with a faculty member. Maybe there was a student suicide or a sexual assault. There is an article coming out shortly. They're going to be on CNN. They've got a board member who's upset about something. They have a legislature who's upset. And that's 5:00 a.m. They haven't even really gotten to their email. Then they spend the whole day firefighting. Fifteen-minute meetings to thirty-minute meetings. The

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breadth and depth of the things that they have deal with, the volume, is just really overwhelming and every interaction that a President has is with someone who wants something from them who works for them.

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So just creating a space where presidents can just have a beat [*laughs*] to actually see that they're all struggling with the same stuff, that change is actually quite hard. It's quite hard in institutions that have existed longer than the church. And that they're actually doing really good work. But this is not something where you just turn on the lightbulb and, you know, it happens. So I think collaboration can step into that space and be a support for them, which is knowing that they're not alone. Knowing that these are real structural impediments. And that they don't have to learn everything the hard way. Yes. I see no shortage of innovation. I just think that innovation alone is slow and waste of time, energy and money, and I think that people should find ways to work together if they really want to adapt institutions for the future of what America needs.

Christine: Are there any myths or preconceptions that you would like to dispel about what it means to innovate a college?

Bridget: I would say that the formula for innovation and change for me is leadership plus change management plus technology. You cannot do it with all those three pieces and they're modifiers. So leadership, I think, the most important characteristic associated with that. First off, most presidents are not leaders. There are a lot of presidents who are not leaders. I think that's probably a controversial thing to say but the truth is to move up to the presidency—that's a whole topic for a whole other podcast—but it's actually quite difficult to lead in these institutions. Dave Frohnmayer, the former president of the University of Oregon, once said something to the affect of, "Being president's like being the president of a graveyard," because you don't actually get to just lead everyone. You can say something but everyone doesn't necessarily listen to you because...



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just whether it's because of shared governance or just because the institutions are highly complex.

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Leadership, the part that matters for me, is the visionary leader who points to the north star and repetition is the most important modifier. You cannot go around anywhere at ASU and not hear about how the institution is not focused on who they exclude but who they include and how they succeed. Right? Michael Crow repeats that over and over so everyone knows. Similar with all these other institutional leaders: it's about focusing on making sure everyone knows the marching orders and we know what direction we're going in. And then for change management, I think the key that matters is teamwork: building teams that actually can move forward with this work and giving them a project manager or a person who can actually support the team. And then focus on the right technology.

Christine: That's great. Bridget, thank you so much for joining the show.

Bridget: Oh, thanks for having me.

Christine: If you have questions or comments about this podcase, or would like to request a copy of our new report, Bold Leadership, Real Reform 2.0, be sure to contact us at [info@goacta.org](mailto:info@goacta.org). To learn more about the University Innovation Alliance, visit [uia.org](http://uia.org). Until next time, I'm Christine Ravold and this is Higher Ed Now.

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