

June 2020 WCET/SAN Podcast Transcript

Dan Silverman:

Good day listening public. Today is June 10th, 2020. And thank you for listening to General Disclosure. The podcast from SAN. My name is Dan Silverman and I'm joined as always by my cohost Cheryl Dowd. Cheryl, are you both present and accounted for?

Cheryl Dowd:

I am present and accounted for. Hi everyone.

Dan Silverman:

Great. Today's guest is Jon Becker, who is a professor in the school of education at Virginia Commonwealth University and has 12,000 Twitter followers. That alone is more than enough to get an invitation to General Disclosure, but John is also the former director of online education at VCU, a lawyer, and ed tech expert. He's also my friend and former boss, and sometimes it's just fun to talk to a friend. Jon, are you there?

Jon Becker:

I am here. Thanks for having me.

Dan Silverman:

Sure. That is the longest intro we've ever had. So we're off to a good start or some kind of a start. I'll start you with the questions that we start out with, which is defining your career or your job in any way you'd like. Why you do it, you could do a lot of things. Why do you do this?

Jon Becker:

Oh boy, I've always wanted to be in the world of compliance. No, that's actually, that's not really true, and in fact there's a certain irony there because I think the way I live my life, the way my wife and I parent our kids is as much not about compliance as possible. And so it's funny that I'm talking to some folks who deal with compliance issues, but the true story is my mother is an educator and so I think I was sort of drawn to education, but I also wanted to go to law school out of college. My mother [inaudible 00:01:44].

Jon Becker:

And so that was the path I was headed down somewhere in the education law world, maybe juvenile justice. And didn't like law school very much as most people don't or do and took an education law class with Dr. Diana [Polunin 00:02:06] Boston College. She became my mentor. We crafted a joint degree program and from there I got my law degree, but went into my doctoral program and just knew that I wanted to be in the world of higher education, thinking, studying, researching kind of living a life of the mind and so that's how I think of the work that I do, as an opportunity to help the world. And while also living a life of the mind.

Dan Silverman:

If higher ed were to evaporate overnight, what would you do instead?

Jon Becker:

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Wow. You know, I don't cook that much and I don't cook that well, but I watch a lot of content on the Food Network, and I think it's because I believe that if... I don't think of it in terms of higher ed evaporating, but I think if I won the lottery and I didn't have to work, like what would I do? And so I think I would go to culinary school and learn to cook. And as much as I know, like the restaurant business is harsh and brutal. I think I'd like to go to culinary school. And that would be kind of where I'd head.

Dan Silverman:

Well, John, you don't have enough degrees, so you need more school. I think that's what everybody always says.

Jon Becker:

Exactly.

Dan Silverman:

So since the COVID induced shift to online learning, some SAN members are getting more acquainted with instructional design and ed tech. So what's the history of instructional designers? And how does that change the role of a faculty member?

Jon Becker:

Yeah, I suspect a lot of people think instructional design is kind of a new field, but it's not really and it even predates really sort of the distance education that we know now. We've been designing instruction in face to face classrooms for a long time. And it's very much a... I would argue a profession in that it has its own language. It has its own kind of entry points. And it is certainly seeing it's time in the spotlight right now. And I don't track the classified ads much these days, but when I was in the last couple of years, I would say more than anything else, that's where the need is, is around instructional design. And that even predates the coronavirus as universities are scaling up online learning one way to do that is to build your own internal capacity and that would be through hiring instructional designers.

Dan Silverman:

So [inaudible 00:04:57] a lot of acronyms. I'm going to give you three that some of our members might know, some of them might not. Kind of a lightning acronym round. So LMS, OPM, and CMS.

Jon Becker:

Okay. Well, I'm going to start with OPM because I want to link back to what I just said about instructional designers. As probably lots of your vast listening audience knows, if universities want to scale up their online programming, there are a few ways to do that. The two that are most, I think, common are to build your own internal capacity to do that. That's what I talked about in terms of instructional designers. So you hire instructional designers, you hire some technology folks, you hire maybe some video people, and of course, a compliance person, can't forget that person. And you build up your own team to be able to scale up. The other way, one other way I should say, is to hire what's known as an online program management company or an OPM, and that's basically a third party vendor, a for-profit vendor, who will solve every problem that you have, or as they'll tell you, they'll solve problems you don't even know that you have.

Jon Becker:

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And the OPM field is diverse. There are companies that will do everything from soup to nuts for the university, anything from marketing, to enrollment, to course design, instructional design, to even teaching the courses, and there's others. There's one called Noodle that VCU actually works with and they are more like a general contractor and they will help VCU figure out what needs they have and then where they need to will outsource that to a kind of subcontractor. So if, for example, VCU decides they need help marketing their online programs and Noodle doesn't have that capacity internally, they'll subcontract to a firm that does do marketing. So OPM is online program management.

Jon Becker:

LMS is learning management system and that is really a software and it's software that allows for courses to be built and delivered. And that is an interesting field as well, maybe not quite as wide ranging as the OPM field, but for many, many years, the dominant LMS was Blackboard and many universities would build courses in Blackboard. Blackboard's market share has dropped relatively dramatically in the last few years and the new big player in the world is Instructure, is the company, and their LMS is called Canvas. And in fact, VCU right now is in the midst of transitioning from Blackboard to Canvas. So we'll be spending this coming academic year, transitioning all of our courses that are in Blackboard into Canvas. And there are also LMS... There's open source LMS, like Moodle, which requires a little more internal capacity to run, but that's what an LMS is, learning management system.

Jon Becker:

And a CMS, go ahead Dan.

Dan Silverman:

No, no, I took it away, there's still one more acronym right?

Jon Becker:

Yeah, the CMS, which is not something I work with as much, but it stands for content management system. And there's, in my mind at least, there's not a lot of agreement of exactly what falls within the category of CMS, but I know WordPress is considered a CMS and because it allows for website building. And at VCU, as Dan knows, we had a significant WordPress installation where any faculty member, staff, or student could create their own website through our installation of WordPress. It was a content management system for folks who wanted to build stuff on the web within VCU. So that's what content management system stands for. How'd I do? Did I pass?

Dan Silverman:

I think so. So what are some [inaudible 00:09:33]. I think you're starting getting there with WordPress, are there alternatives [inaudible 00:09:37] particularly for folks at institutions that haven't done a lot of this as quickly and don't necessarily want, or can afford a full boat like that.

Jon Becker:

You mean a CMS or LMS?

Dan Silverman:

To an LMS.

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Jon Becker:

Well, I'm not entirely familiar with the financial aspects of it, but Moodle is probably less money initially because it requires the university to do a lot of the technical work. They have to host it themselves and then manage it themselves, whereas Blackboard and Canvas... Blackboard, it used to be like at VCU, we hosted our own installation of Blackboard, but pretty much as a lot of things move to the cloud, most universities transitioned to having Blackboard hosted for them and it works the same way with Canvas. So universities are less out of the business of the technical side of running servers and all that sort of stuff. And that's now all done off site and in the cloud with the companies themselves.

Dan Silverman:

I'm going to switch gears a little bit, and Cheryl jump in whenever you'd like to, what's a fact about online learning that state authorization people might not know, but should?

Jon Becker:

A fact about online learning. For me, one of the challenges in talking about online learning is that it's not as monolithic as people, I think, believe. So, Dan knows when we worked together, one of the great challenges we had was in creating definitions around online learning so that we could both collect data and information and also report out information. And so the powers that be at VCU would say to me, "How many online programs do we have?" It seems like a really simple question. I should be able to say we have 11 online programs, but what is an online program? And so the example we would give is we have an actual program at VCU where every semester in the program, every course in the program that's offered is offered as two sections a face to face course, and an online course, and students could choose, if they're taking three courses in a semester, they could choose to take two of them face to face and one online, they could take all them all online and that's true throughout the life of their program.

Jon Becker:

So the question is, is that an online program? You'd have to sort of define it. Is it a student who completes more than 50% of the coursework online, they've completed it. So point is, this thing called online learning is not a thing. It's not monolithic, there's many variations to it. It's hard to define and I suspect for regulators and state authorization folks, that's a little frustrating, but I'm not sure there's really any way around it.

Dan Silverman:

You've done some work to on where students take online courses in terms of, if I live in Virginia, I'm most likely to be taking online courses from where?

Jon Becker:

Yeah. And I continue to do that work. I remember early on when I was the director of online learning, reading, or hearing somewhere that something like 90% of students in online courses live within 10 miles of their institution, something like that. And it was this myth that went around the world of distance education, and nobody was ever really able to track it down, but I have been looking at IPEDS data to try and get a sense of... Well, IPEDS data in combination with the SARA data, to take a look at enrollments in out-of-state versus in-state, which is an issue obviously for compliance folks for state authorization reasons, but it's also a big issue, especially now, as universities are looking to generate increased revenue, out of state students they're gold. And so every university wants to develop online

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programs where they can increase enrollment of out-of-state students because they have to pay more money. And I think it's chasing a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that doesn't really exist.

Dan Silverman:

Cheryl, did that ring any bells for you with the use of the SARA data?

Cheryl Dowd:

I just think it's all very interesting as institutions are figuring out their reporting mechanisms to know what they're reporting, because I think that, that's really, not only has there been an increase perhaps of participation, but also institutions understanding how to do good reporting. So I think all of that is converging so it's going to be very interesting. And I know I've had conversations with [Russ 00:14:56] and maybe you all have too, about the structure of IPEDS and how it's due for a revamp to make sure that the data is good. And so I'm also interested in seeing SARA data down the road to watch how experiential learning across state lines is occurring. And if there are, what kind of increases, decreases stability, how does that actually look once institutions are really comfortable and tracking that and then sharing it out? So...

Jon Becker:

And Cheryl, when we're offline, I don't know if he's told you these stories, but Dan has some really fun stories about trying to get people in VCU to give us data about experiential learning.

Cheryl Dowd:

I can understand. Yep. I think all of us that have done this with institutions before have had interesting conversations. So I look forward to talking to Dan about some specific stories. That sounds good.

Jon Becker:

I mean, I distinctly remember him coming to my office once and saying, "I just had a conversation with, so and so in whatever unit within the university, "They don't know where their students are doing [experience 00:00:16:02]."

Cheryl Dowd:

Right.

Jon Becker:

"They don't know?" "Yeah, no, the students just kind of sign up and do it." And yeah, I'm sure a lot of your folks you work with deal with that kind of issue.

Cheryl Dowd:

Well, it's funny too, if you live in a Tristate area too, because you know, people say, "Well, I just went over the river. I just crossed the bridge." "Well, is it a different state over here?" They're like, "Oh yeah, it is." So anyway, but it's understandable. I mean, especially when you live in a Tristate area, you sometimes kind of think of it as one region and so you don't necessarily take it to the next step about state oversight.

Dan Silverman:

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John, another area, you teach higher ed law school, is there a case that we should know about that we don't? Something recent and interesting.

Jon Becker:

Good question. Related to distance education or just in general?

Dan Silverman:

Anything really.

Jon Becker:

Well, I teach with a particular focus on civil rights, and civil liberties, and constitutional laws applied to education. And I just happened to be reading an article this morning about this proverbial law between church and state it's not just being chipped away at, it's almost invisible at this point. And so I continue to track those kinds of issues, but to me, the big one that we're waiting for any day now, literally any day now, we're going to get a Supreme court ruling on Title VII and how we define what is meant by, because of sex, in Title VII and do the protections of Title VII cover gender identity and sexual orientation. That is the [crosstalk 00:18:02].

Dan Silverman:

What case was that? I haven't been following that.

Jon Becker:

Oh, boy. It was actually the combination of three cases. One of them happened to be sort of education law, because it's about a skydiving instructor, so it's got some educational implications, but I mean, Title VII has huge implications for everybody obviously and certainly. Any workplace that has the right number of people, Title VII is going to apply. And so it's... Yeah, I wake up every morning, 10:00 AM, waiting, peeking through my fingers to see if the Supreme Court has issued the ruling or not, because it's coming any day now.

Dan Silverman:

Cheryl, do you have any other followups for John?

Cheryl Dowd:

I have just been fascinated by this discussion today, so thank you very much, John, for sharing how your perspective is after you've been working through these experiences at an institution and with your education experience. So thank you very much for all of this.

Jon Becker:

Yeah, and I just want to add a little, well maybe not funny, but funny to me story, that I'm sure all the people who might listen to this could understand, which is when I first took the job as the director of online programs at VCU, I was appointed on an interim basis. We'd hired someone, she left four months into the job, and so I came in on an interim basis and shot up to where my new office was and it was completely empty except for a giant binder on my desk. And what do you think that binder was? It was the state authorization binder.

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Cheryl Dowd:

Oh, boy.

Jon Becker:

And it was literally, it had like a laminated folder for each state with a copy of the letter that had been sent to every state. And these were kind of early days of state authorization, predating SARA and all that kind of stuff. And my boss said, "There's your first challenge." And I had to learn a lot. And that's why I hired Dan and I could just pass the binder off to him.

Cheryl Dowd:

That's great. I created a binder too, and I would do a happy dance when the certificate would arrive from the state or the letter, because I was like... I was almost disappointed if they only sent me an email. I loved those certificates. That was fun. Oh my goodness.

Dan Silverman:

And what those binders had... They were physical and metaphorical objects.

Cheryl Dowd:

Yeah. Yeah. That's true.

Jon Becker:

Yes, they were.

Cheryl Dowd:

Oh my goodness.

Dan Silverman:

Well, John, thank you so much. We really have learned a lot. Is there anything else that I missed or that you were hoping to get your two cents on?

Jon Becker:

Am I going to get like walk up music for this? Do I get to pick my walkup music?

Dan Silverman:

If you can edit the badass podcast and put it in, you're [crosstalk 00:20:52].

Cheryl Dowd:

We're less than a year into doing this. So we've really moved forward with the tools that we use, which I'm pleased for, but yeah, Dan keeps adding new little pieces, so it's great.

Jon Becker:

Good. And, and yeah, I think I'm only sort of dabbling in the world of podcasts, but it does seem like they all follow a very similar format, which is like something humorous upfront, and then the intro music, and then they start in. So if you can invent a different format, that would be great.

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Dan Silverman:

Yeah, format's great. Speaking of that, that's a good segue actually to my new segment, I'm taking a little break from regulation of the month in a little segment I'm calling Out of Left Field, which is where I find some object in the rest of my life and see how unfortunately it ends up relating back to [inaudible 00:21:38] regulation or state more specifically, depending on what it is. So this month I was reading the book, Can I Play Too by Mo Willems, which is a children's book. Although if you were to ask him Mo Willems, he would say, no, he claims that he doesn't write children's books just because they're illustrated and all [inaudible 00:21:59]. And I mean, no one would think they're not a children's book, but he's an interesting guy.

Dan Silverman:

Anyway, what this book is about, the two characters... And don't worry, I won't give away the ending, but Elephant and Piggy are trying to play catch. They're throwing the ball back and forth. Their friend Snake comes along and wants to play too. Snake, however does not have arms and so they go through a few different guesses about how to play catch with a snake. This book really is about universal design and learning and how accessibility, if done right, it's an argument that accessibility done right, can actually make the whole game better [for everyone 00:22:49], but I won't ruin the ending for those of you who want to read it. So...

Jon Becker:

Is it a story about offering a reasonable accommodation to the snake?

Dan Silverman:

I'd say they, John, they go beyond their legal duty to offer a reasonable accommodation.

Jon Becker:

Okay.

Dan Silverman:

They even make a fundamental alteration of the game, but yet they still have fun. But maybe it's a reasonable accommodation, actually. That's a good... Well, I don't want to give it away. So maybe next time I'll pick back up on that. Cheryl, can you read it between now and then, you think?

Cheryl Dowd:

I look forward to reading it between now and then.

Dan Silverman:

Okay. So then we can discuss whether it's a reasonable accommodation or a fundamental alteration of the game. So that is my new segment Out of Left Field, but that brings us back to everybody's favorite, which is Cheryl on Musicals. Now, Cheryl, we've talked about a lot of the basics over this last year and with no new... With Broadway and all of its [inaudible 00:23:54] dark, it's a little harder, but I have a couple of questions for you. Have you read anything recently, whether a book or an article or, or an ad for turkeys that you think would make a good musical?

Cheryl Dowd:

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You're saying a story, or a movie, or something that should be turned into-

Dan Silverman:

Yeah, that can be turned into one.

Cheryl Dowd:

Well, they're all kinds of odd things that have been turned into musicals. I never thought that I would see Beetlejuice the musical, and because I saw the movie Beetlejuice 1,000,000 years ago and I never would have thought, ah, add music. That's what it was missing. And then again, I understand that it did pretty well for its short run before things went dark. And then, of course SpongeBob, SpongeBob was nominated for a Tony and I wouldn't have expected that. I think that they're always looking... Well currently, I shouldn't say always, they're currently looking at movies these days to try to turn them in to try to reach the public in some areas that they think that they might enjoy the topic area.

Cheryl Dowd:

I know there's been talk of, now this isn't a turkey, but actually I'm looking forward to this. There was a TV show called Smash that lasted for two years. And they're talking about making that into a movie musical. It was a TV show, it was a Spielberg TV show actually, that was about the development of Broadway musicals and the people that were a part of that. And it only lasted two years, but now they're talking about making it into a musical. So I think that there's rich content everywhere and there are talented people out there who can turn it into some sort of onstage production. I look forward to seeing what they're doing. I think the one I'm looking most forward to right now is again, not a turkey, but it was something from our past, is Hercules. Hercules, the Disney movie, there was a stage adaptation that was kind of tested out last summer, did very well, and so there is talk of that being on its road to Broadway. So looking forward to that. I didn't answer your question at all.

Dan Silverman:

Nope. That's okay. I was looking at our Podbean listener statistics, and it might surprise you that the plurality of our downloads come from Utah. And so I want to craft some Utah based content here. Cheryl, have you ever seen a musical either about Utah or that took place in Utah? Have you been to a theater in Utah? What and Utah... What about Utah musicals can you possibly say?

Cheryl Dowd:

Wow, that's very interesting.

Jon Becker:

I mean, is Book of Mormons too easy?

Cheryl Dowd:

Well, there you go. I know those guys are from Colorado, but that's okay.

Jon Becker:

Yeah, there's a connection, I think.

Cheryl Dowd:

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There you go. I think one of the most enjoyable musical experiences that I've had was I got to see the Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas Show last year. I was out in Salt Lake City, working with the Utah SARA folks, SARA Institutions, and I got to see the show and it was just kind of... I was just overwhelmed by how beautiful it was. And then a musical theater person, Kelly O'Hara, beautiful actress was their main person for the show. So anyway, they love... They're very strong performing artists out there in Utah. I mean, think of the Osmonds.

Dan Silverman:

Yeah, John, do you have any Utah performance art?

Jon Becker:

No, but The Book of Mormons was recently in Richmond at our local musical theater venue and we saw it and I enjoyed it a lot. I recommend it.

Cheryl Dowd:

It is a good show.

Jon Becker:

Yeah.

Cheryl Dowd:

It's really funny because I went to the show with lower expectations and kind of was surprised by how really good it was. I mean, the content was not just... Okay, so my boys like South Park, so I was expecting South Park honestly. And I thought that it was much deeper than I was going to give it credit for, but I thought it did a pretty good job and very talented performers.

Dan Silverman:

Maybe South Park is deeper than you're giving it credit for.

Cheryl Dowd:

Yeah, there could be that.

Jon Becker:

But if you'll indulge me, I can wrap this whole conversation with a nice bow. Ready?

Dan Silverman:

Yes.

Cheryl Dowd:

Do it. Please do.

Jon Becker:

Okay, so a little bit of a pitch. My daughter and I watch the show on NBC called Songland. I don't know if you're familiar with it.

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Cheryl Dowd:

Yep.

Jon Becker:

And I just, I love it, and I think I love it because it sort of reminds me of instructional design work because you get to see how a song is made. The premise is that these songwriters come on... Every week, there's a new artist and then four songwriters come on and pitch a song to the artist for the artist, and then three of the four songwriters get to work with three famous music producers to craft the song in a way that's better for the particular artist, and the artist picks the winner and then records that songwriter's song.

Jon Becker:

Throughout the show, you see them, the whole process of how a song gets made. And it's a really interesting look inside the black box of how a song gets made. So as someone who likes instructional design work, I think that's why I enjoy the show. So the way I'm going to sort of tie this all together is that this coming, it's on Monday nights, this coming Monday night, the artist is Ben Platt who played the original Evan Hansen in Dear Evan Hansen. And I had the distinct pleasure of seeing the original cast of Dear Evan Hansen when it was like the first month of production. And it was really... It's a moving, moving show and a really wonderful musical, if folks have never seen it, I really encourage you to check it out. So there you go. Instructional design and musical theater all wrapped up into one.

Cheryl Dowd:

Love it.

Dan Silverman:

We really can't do any better than that John. Thank you so much.

Cheryl Dowd:

That was fantastic.

Dan Silverman:

Thanks to everybody who listens, especially our friends in Utah, and we'll [inaudible 00:30:20] next month.

Cheryl Dowd:

Thanks Jon. Thanks Dan.

Jon Becker:

Thanks for having me.