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Cultivating a Spirit of Innovation on Campus

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In recent years, innovation and entrepreneurship have emerged as significant strategic initiatives on college and university campuses. In a 2015 *Fast Company* article titled “The Next Hot Trend on Campus: Creating Innovation,” the author notes that “innovation centers are transforming higher education campuses and powering the future of learning.” A 2016 *New York Times* feature highlighted innovation spaces such as Northwestern University’s interdisciplinary accelerator space (aptly called “The Garage,” since it was built in a former parking garage) and Cornell Tech, a campus on Roosevelt Island in New York City that is focused exclusively on innovation.

The emergence of such facilities on campuses across the nation raises some questions: How will this innovative spirit take root at colleges and universities, and how can it be infused throughout an institution, both within and beyond innovation spaces? I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Rod McDavis to discuss these topics. Currently the Managing Principal of AGB Search in Washington, D.C., McDavis spent 28 years in higher education administration, most recently as the President of Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, for 13 years.



*Dr. Rod McDavis, Managing Principal,
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During your years as President of Ohio University, how did you cultivate an atmosphere of innovation throughout your campus?

I made innovation a part of Ohio University’s strategic plan. Innovation was included under several goals of the plan. I also talked about the need for Ohio University to be innovative in my annual State of the University speeches to the campus and in my presentations at Board of Trustees meetings. The best example of an

innovative initiative during my tenure as president was The Ohio Innovation Fund that Ohio University created in partnership with The Ohio State University. The Ohio Innovation Fund is a venture capital firm specializing in early stage investments for start-ups and small businesses that focus on technology transfer and commercialization. Through the program, faculty and students are able to receive funds to continue developing their start-up companies. On a long-term basis, the Ohio Innovation Fund will generate funds to support the university’s academic programs and scholarships for students.

How did the need for innovation evolve over your 13 years as president? How did “business as usual” change during that time?

A culture of innovation already existed at Ohio University when I arrived as President in 2004, and I used that strong foundation to expand the development of innovative initiatives within the university. We understood that expanding innovation would help to generate new streams of revenue to support our academic programs in future years. We also knew that

cultivating and supporting a culture of innovation would excite many faculty and staff and would attract students, faculty, and staff members to want to join our community.

What challenges did you face in advancing innovation on your campus, and how did you meet the challenges to move forward?

The greatest challenge in advancing innovation at Ohio University was getting some members of the university community to understand why there was a need to move forward with the implementation of innovative initiatives. As you

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know, universities can be slow to change. Including innovation in the strategic plan certainly made it a bit easier to do. After a few years, many deans, faculty members, and staff members became strong advocates because they saw the results. The Executive Vice President and Provost and the Vice President for Finance and Administration provided great senior leadership for coordination and implementation of innovative projects and activities. That commitment across multiple academic and administrative areas has had a multiplier effect and has energized the wider community.

How did you go about identifying and cultivating current and new leaders who were champions for innovation?

We asked those faculty and staff on campus who were interested in innovation to come forward with their ideas. We listened to them and worked closely with them to deliver on as many of their ideas as we could. We also asked deans to initiate innovative ideas in their colleges that would have wide appeal to the faculty and staff both within and across their respective schools. Some of these projects do not cost all that much to implement. Faculty and staff want to know that their ideas have value and that good ideas will be supported. Not every project will succeed, but if the culture supports taking some calculated risks, people will step up.

Innovation and entrepreneurship are closely related. Can you identify entrepreneurial projects that you led or encouraged others to

lead on campus and describe how they benefited the institution?

One example of entrepreneurship on campus was expanding our Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine to two new regional campuses, one in Dublin, Ohio, and the second in Cleveland. This decision significantly expanded the enrollment in our medical school from about 140 to 240 students. Fifty new medical students are admitted annually into each of these satellite campuses. In addition, creating two new regional campuses created opportunities for the development of new academic programs at those locations. We were able to reach students in urban areas, and as those students graduate, they can serve a broader population throughout the state. The benefits have a ripple effect of positive outcomes for Ohio University and for the state.

Do you have any closing thoughts about cultivating a spirit of innovation and supporting innovative leaders in higher education?

Doing both of those things is an extremely important and rewarding part of serving as president of a 21st-century college or university. The world around us is changing rapidly, and colleges and universities must be a major part of creating opportunities for innovation for our students and for the communities we serve.



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