

## **A Conversation on Student Success: Reimagining Gateway Courses**

### **Dr. Rita Cheng, president, Northern Arizona University**

[00:00:05] Hello, I'm Sherri Hughes, assistant vice president for a professional learning at the American Council on Education. And I'm pleased to welcome you to the inaugural episode of A Conversation on Student Success. This new series offers an informal opportunity to learn from a range of leaders and experts on timely topics relevant to student success. And a conversation on student success is produced in collaboration with the Association of College and University Educators.

[00:00:39] Today, we're in for a treat. Our guest is Dr. Rita Cheng, president of Northern Arizona University. She's here to talk about a use complete and successful redesign of a gateway formerly weed out course. Rita, it's a pleasure to have you with me today.

[00:00:58] Thank you. I'm really excited to be able to talk about some of our transformational programs with you.

[00:01:05] Terrific.

[00:01:06] So before we get into the specifics of that org, can you tell us a little bit about what attracted you to Northern Arizona University and maybe tell us a little bit more about your goals for the university, including specifically your goals around success for all students at Northern Arizona University?

[00:01:24] It's a very special and unique institution.

[00:01:30] We sit on the Colorado Plateau in northern Arizona in the pine forests, actually the largest contiguous pine forest in the world. And it is so different from the rest of the southwest because of the mountain atmosphere. But most importantly, we are neighbors to many of the tribal nations in the southwest. And as a result, our diversity of student body is amazing. And our role in it in serving the Native American and Hispanic communities in the in Arizona is historic. I came from institutions that were highly accessible and transformational institutions. I myself am a non-traditional student. So I feel really, really strongly that education can transform lives and that we have a mission to ensure student access and success.

[00:02:35] Terrific. Thank you. So let's talk about the specifics. I understand that a few of your faculty with support and guidance from NAU's E-Learning Center recently revamped your Biology 181, which was an important gateway course that was experiencing a 30 percent dropout rate. And they did it with great results. And I think this is only one of a number of efforts that you've made to help students be more successful. So can you talk about Biology 181 and also some of those other efforts?

[00:03:10] Well, certainly. Let's start with the Biology course. This is, a course, as you mentioned, that was a weed out course. We had so many majors on the campus that required this course. And indeed, one in 10 students needed to pass this course in order to go on to their desired majors. We had a significant failure rate, our DFW rate, that was really unacceptable. We tried a lot of different methods. We had supplemental instruction. We had other tutoring and mentoring and peer review type of approaches to the course. But it wasn't working. And so the instructors in the course, along with our teaching and learning staff, got together and really were sparked by the ACUE Effective Teaching Practices course and decided to tackle this course and with phenomenal, phenomenal results.

[00:04:20] We were able to cut the DFW in half and our underrepresented students, those that we care so deeply about providing access and opportunity saw even greater results.

[00:04:35] That's really terrific. I think most colleges like you have teaching and learning centers. How did your faculty take advantage of those resources to guide this work?

[00:04:48] Northern Arizona University has had a very strong faculty interest in student learning and success and our staff in our teaching and learning center are highly respected by the faculty. I have a cadre of a presidential teaching fellows and we also have college teachers of the year that are part of a teacher's academy on campus. And so that group is highly supportive of efforts that we've made across the campus to improve the teaching in in in the classrooms at an all of the classrooms, but particularly in our first-year courses. We also have a head approach of adaptive learning and technology in the classroom that goes back decades. So the faculty embrace the idea of looking at ways that we could push the envelope and do things in a in a much more deliberate way with a team of individuals so that we were able to accomplish what we accomplished in the Bio 181 course.

[00:06:05] Terrific. Thanks. So why would you say it's important to invest in and focus on faculty development that allows you to enable these positive changes?

[00:06:16] Well, we have a new title for one of our staff persons in the Teaching and Learning Center, and it is the Director of Teaching for Students Success. And I think that really captures the approach that we're taking at NAU. Faculty development is key to ensuring that not only new faculty, but faculty who have been in the profession for a number of years, can feel supported in trying new things. And in bringing the latest in the literature to the classroom, Flower Darby, Laura Dixon and their team have really captured the energy of our faculty. And we have a teaching day every January where we bring in a scholar to talk about effective teaching and its impact on students' success. And I think for the first time we're really linking that effective teaching and professional development with the outcomes that we want for our students to be successful and complete their degree.

[00:07:31] Great.

[00:07:32] And so I think you mentioned this earlier, but maybe we can talk a little bit more about this. It sounds like you have created a community of faculty who really are working together supporting each other around the issues of teaching effectiveness and student success. Have you all found that this work translates into a variety of disciplines and in courses at different levels and that you're really able to think about? I think you said you started with first-year courses, but are you seeing the work sort of expand beyond that?

[00:08:11] Yes, we're in our third year with the ACUE course on Effective Teaching Practices. We had two cohorts the first year and last year and this year with the cohort. And we're talking about two things. One is directing the next cohorts to our first-year experience courses so that we have as much impact as we can.

[00:08:34] And rather than a volunteer effort that diffuses innovation, we're going to direct it to our first-year seminars. In addition, we're very excited about possibly being in the inaugural group for Online Effective Teaching because of the breadth that we have in our programs. Twenty seven percent of our students are educated off of the Flagstaff Mountain campus in sites around the state and in online courses. So we're very excited to be able to bring effective teaching practices and concepts such as what we've done in Bio 181 to do our first-year seminar courses and online.

[00:09:18] Great.

[00:09:19] Thank you. So shifting gears a little bit. What advice would you give to presidents or provosts at other universities? Based on your experience about how to have an impact in the classroom on student success?

[00:09:34] Well, I would think that number one, the investment in dollars on faculty professional development has a great return.

[00:09:44] And the purpose and the clarity that we find is, I think, important for other presidents to also note that it's worth the money and the time to invest it in faculty professional development. I would also say that teaching excellence is crucial to a student's success and partnering across academic affairs and student affairs.

And all the support systems and the coaching that we need to do for students is important. The ACUE course in Effective Teaching Practices really did show the faculty of that pathway toward what they could do different in the classroom and how their effectiveness does impact students success in a very concrete way. So it's very exciting to look at as we grow our programs, we can help faculty learn effective teaching practices and then create real and measurable differences in the classroom that impact our students.

[00:10:47] Great.

[00:10:49] Is there anything that you and your leadership team have learned that you would want to share with others?

[00:10:55] It takes a team that it is important to experiment and assess as you go along. That the coaching model that ACUE has and the various technologies that we can use means a difference to their students. And the relationship between the faculty members and those teacher coaches and the Center for Teaching and Learning Staff is just incredibly important.

[00:11:28] Great. Thank you.

[00:11:30] So here at ACE, we're spending a lot of our time understanding the public's perception of higher education. And I think you have certainly seen that some of those narratives are pretty depressing. How do you think these kinds of investments might impact the narrative about the value of higher education on a on an certainly on a local scale, but maybe even on a national scale?

[00:11:57] Student success is the first goal for our strategic plan.

[00:12:03] And investing in our faculty to help propel that student success is an important component. Targeting high need courses in high demand areas such as the Bio 181. That's a true gateway course. It also helps us with achieving our strategic goals too. And in linking that to the importance of why we're doing this, why we are so concerned about student success, and it's really about an educated citizenry and workforce. We have these conversations all the time in Arizona that the purpose of undergraduate education and the importance of completion is directly linked to the economic vitality of Arizona in the future.

[00:12:53] And there's no better way to showcase this than seeing the results of a course like one Bio 181. The value of higher ed is enormous. I'm walking proof of that. And it's critically important that we have student success and particularly those at the earliest stages of their career so that they gain the skills that they need and to move on. And our students also are talking about this because they're talking about that they learn skills in teamwork and they learn skills in learning how to study. And those are really important aspects of what we're measuring and what we're talking about to our funders and our state elected officials.

[00:13:43] Great. Thank you. You actually sort of led me to to my last big question for you, and that is I think your background is both intriguing and inspiring. So would you be willing to share some of your story, including your personal beginnings and how that impacted your drive and your career choices?

[00:14:05] I grew up on a dairy farm in west central Wisconsin. My father was a high school educated dairy farmer, which was unusual in that in that era. And that time, my mother taught in a one room schoolhouse before she got married. And at that time, you couldn't be a teacher and a wife and a mother. So she turned her focus to her children. And I'm the oldest of six children. And all of us sat around the kitchen table to learn our math. And we were all voracious readers. I was the first in my family to go to college. I had no real role models for them than to work hard and to have values that that my parents instilled in me. But after seven years and five universities and a lot of transfer credits, I received my bachelor's degree. I followed my husband around the country. And once I received my PhD from Temple University, we came back to Wisconsin with our children and I spent 20 years at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I went on to the Southern University Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and was chancellor for five years and other incredibly diverse institution. And now I'm at Northern Arizona University and I would say that part of part of my passion for student success comes from my own experience of stepping on college campuses, having no idea what the opportunities were available to me, and finding that doors were opened mostly because of passionate faculty who saw potential in me and through their own expertise drew out my own passion for learning. And this can happen. Each and every day on our campuses and particularly on campuses like Northern Arizona University that has so many first generation students coming from underserved communities.

[00:16:16] That is just a. That's a really wonderful story, so thank you for sharing that. Thank you. So. So before we wrap up, is there anything that I have haven't asked you about that you'd like to share with us?

[00:16:28] I would just say that given that faculty are so critical to student success, we all understand that there's no one silver bullet or no one size fits all approach to bolstering our faculty members practice, but through a variety of programs and empowering faculty to stay informed, partnering with the staff.

[00:16:52] There's instructional designers in our staff and the teaching and learning center.

[00:16:57] We have, I think, a culture of growing body of faculty who are so committed to student success that they're willing to take on this extra professional development to really hone their craft. And I'm really excited about our partnership. Thank you.

[00:17:17] That's really wonderful. That's a that's a great story. So, Rita, thank you for making time to join us in this conversation. It's been really been a pleasure to talk with you and learn about the work that that you and your team and your faculty are doing and the impact that it's having on students. So I want to thank all of you for joining us today on this first conversation for student success on ACUE Engage. We hope that you'll take the time to look around this exciting new virtual platform and connect with your peers. Take a micro course or download a toolkit or a checklist that will help you with the important work on your college campuses. We look forward to being with you again for our next conversation on student success.