

Dr. Jason Altmire ([00:05](#)):

Hello, and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report, our podcast, and we have two of the luminaries of higher education policy just in thought leadership and higher education. We are so honored to be joined by Robert Zemsky, and he spent his entire career at the University of Pennsylvania focusing on how best to keep universities true to their missions, at the same time returning market value. So striking that balance that so many colleges and universities struggle with. And for 20 years, he served as the founding director of the university's Institute for Research on Higher Education. And as everyone knows, that's one of the country's major public policy centers specializing in educational research and analysis. And in his research professor Zemsky pioneered the use of market analysis for higher education, and we're going to talk a little bit about that.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([01:03](#)):

And he's done a lot of work recently with chancellor Lori Carrell, and Lori is the chancellor of the University of Minnesota Rochester, and she's served there as a very innovative campus leader and has been there since 2014, and she was appointed as the second chancellor in 2018. And her speeches and publications and scholarly work, Lori focuses on human communication as the catalyst for transformation in higher education. So we're going to talk a lot about that. They co-wrote a book on that subject, and they've also done a lot of work in thinking about moving towards three year degrees in some programs in higher education. I wanted to start with professors Zemsky. We've heard a lot about the financial state of universities in higher education, and for more than 20 years, a lot of the preeminent thought leaders, people like Peter Drucker, Clayton Christiansen, Andrew Rosen, the CEO of Kaplan, all very high profile thinkers, had said over the past couple of decades that they thought universities would eventually die off. That we would lose a number of universities because of some of the factors in the marketplace.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([02:22](#)):

And now data exists to measure the viability of schools, and the department of education has financial responsibility scores. Forbes does an annual financial grades edition. Different states have different ways of measuring the financial state of institutions, and different think tanks have that same measurement. And professors Zemsky wrote a book along with some other co-authors in 2020 called the College Stress Test. And that estimates the market viability of about 2,800 undergraduate institutions using four different variables. New student enrollment, net cash price, student retention, and major sources of external funding. And the book of course received a lot of attention, not just in higher education, but in the business community, and was written about across multiple national publications. And I was wondering, professor Zemsky, what did you find when you looked at those factors?

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([03:25](#)):

I think the most important thing we found is we shouldn't have been surprised. This was a long time in coming. We reduced our findings to a simple sentence. The big are going to get bigger and the rich are going to get richer. And that means that the institutions thousand

students are less, are going to be increasing trouble. The market in other words is coagulating at the top. The place like I'm at at Penn, Penn now gets something like 50,000 applications for 3,300 letters of admission. And that would be as true of Stanford or Princeton or Rice or any of that ilk. But it's the institutions in the middle that were of most concern to us, and that we now know are most at risk. And they're most at risk if they aren't paying attention. What does it mean to be paying attention? Well, first off it means pay attention to your first to second year retention.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([04:27](#)):

I've been following this trail for a long time, so to say that I'm surprised is a little unusual, but I was genuinely surprised because when we started the research building the database, what we said is we're going to look at four year graduation rates because that's what everybody else did. And after a while the models weren't working out, we weren't getting the results we thought we would get, so we began looking at what was the retention like at the end of the first year of college? And that was the shocker. Almost half of those 2,800 institutions Jason's talking to you about, almost half lost a quarter or more of their freshman class in the first year. It's very hard to be a viable business if you're losing a quarter of your customers in the first year. And that led us to begin to speculate that what's really going on here is some real fundamental dissatisfaction with the product. That students do know what they're getting into, and aren't really comfortable with it.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([05:32](#)):

So we began speculating that maybe part of the problem is the faculty think that their students are just like them when they were students and that's not true. I think that one of the things that we've learned to focus on is these young people, that is the 17 to 22 year olds, really are different. They are gamers more than anything else. I actually knew Lori's predecessor at UMR, a psychologist named Steve Lehmkuhle. And Steve Lehmkuhle taught me something very important. You need to know that UMR is physically embedded inside the Mayo Clinic, and therefore not surprising a key part of them and their identity is medical education or pre-med education. And what Lehmkuhle discovered is that he had a lot of very bright students who were having real trouble with calculus as math. And he made the decision, "Well, we'll teach them advanced statistics in the first year. And it was a real breakthrough." Calculus is a philosophy. Statistics is a game.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([06:38](#)):

And what he discovered was that if he appealed to the gamers, they did much better at what they wanted to do. And we've sort of generalized that inside. This is not ours, but we generalized it. The institutions that aren't at the top of the pecking order, that is the great middle, that for them to thrive, they've got to figure out how to do things fundamentally differently. It means different curricula. It means that you don't, as Lori taught me this, actually, you don't ask the question what do you want them to do at the beginning? You ask the question, "What do you want them to do at the end? And what do therefore they have to know how to do at the end that they learned at the beginning? And that's a whole different design.

So while the study was statistical, and while the study identifies the institutions at risk, we like to think, those of us responsible for it, think that what we did was laid out an interesting future for a higher education that said we really need to do things differently and we better get started now.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([07:41](#)):

And that work from 2020 perfectly carried over into 2021 with the work that you did with chancellor Carol on communications. You are one of the preeminent experts, if not the preeminent expert on communications and the use of it in higher education and in other settings. And in your book that you did with professor Zemsky, *Communicate for a Change: Revitalizing Conversations for Higher Education*, I think you took an interesting approach in that you focused on nine conversational topics. You included other outside experts. And these were topics that you and Bob had had multiple conversations on your own. And you decided to turn that discussion on these very important topics in higher education into a book. And some of the topics that you cover, just as an example, why doesn't the public see faculty as heroes in the same way that they used to in the past?

Dr. Jason Altmire ([08:42](#)):

Money in higher education? Well, what can be done about that? What is the impact and the effect of money in higher education? Why doesn't the curriculum change? Why is it slow to change? Something we're going to talk about in a moment regarding the potential for three year degrees. Why don't higher education leaders know their students in the same way that they used to in the past? And then of course, a very topical conversation about race and gender in higher education. And there were other topics. But I wonder if you could talk, Lori, about what spurred your interest in that book and in those conversations and what were your findings?

Dr. Lori Carrell ([09:20](#)):

Well, as Bob is saying, higher education certainly needs to be revitalized. And in our conversations over the year, Bob and I, together with other colleagues, we're just quite aware that many of the impediments to innovation are impediments within the system of higher education. Sure, there are pressures from without and market pressures are part of that, but when we know what to do that will help students succeed and develop the potential that society needs to have developed, but somehow we don't make those changes, the problem is a problem of human communication. So these structured conversations over time to connect the disparate parts and to discern new ideas and to move those ideas into implementation, that's what the book is all about, is how we can communicate in ways that will bring about change. It's the purpose of human communication, really, the function of it. We shape one another's thoughts. We have the potential to connect across difference, but often struggle with that. And we can bring new ideas to fruition for the betterment of the whole. So we hope these conversations model that, even as Bob and I sometimes disagree.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([10:47](#)):

And I mentioned that one of the topics that you focus pretty heavily on is this idea of the perception of faculty, and school administrators. And as we sit here today, we live in a world where there's distrust of institutions generally. Of the government, of financial institution, and perhaps that carries over into higher education. And I wonder in your conversations that you and Bob have had and other educational leaders, what did you find on that topic? What's your conclusion on why that lack of respect or diminished respect has happened over the years?

Dr. Lori Carrell ([11:26](#)):

Well, you're certainly lifting to our attention a multifaceted problem. So I think our conversations were not designed to find a solution or a key variable, but rather to open up those complexities. For those of us who have been educators all our lives, sometimes public reaction or speculation about motives is really mystifying to us. Most educators at all levels, including higher education, really love learning, love students, believe that we are pivotal to human progress. So we can be surprised at those perceptions, which is exactly why we need to talk about them and understand them. I think something that Bob mentioned is critical here, and that is the conversations about the perception of faculty will not advance unless we talk with students. So the distance between who we were when we were initial learners and who we are now, and all that has happened in between is distance we need to cover in those conversation.

Dr. Lori Carrell ([12:45](#)):

Who are these students? Yes, they're gamers. And with the disruption of the last couple of years, they are more. They are challenged in terms of their development, their emotional and mental health. How do we come to understand that, and then not only understand it as faculty, but adapt the way we teach to the way that students learn. That will be at the heart of changing perception. And there are also the broader outcomes. So the talk needs to expand to those who employ our graduates. What are we missing? Where are these students whose human potential we did not develop because they dropped out sometimes with debt after the first year? Why did that happen? So we have much to investigate in our structured conversations and it must lead us to action. It isn't only about recovering the credibility of faculty. In fact, that's only a small slice of what needs to happen if we are truly to revitalize our role in society, is those that function to advance human progress.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([14:10](#)):

Well, I was just going to say, I think that Lori has hit upon something. Also she's getting close to where she and I disagree. You have to remember who faculty were 300 years ago. I started out life as a historian, so I often make sentences like that, but we were a priestly class. We own the truth. And the job of a faculty member was to preach the truth. And that's what's now gotten in our way. We think we preach the truth. We have a colleague who's joined us on some of this work, Joan Gergis. Was the dean at Princeton, was chair of the psychology department. And whenever she would catch me preaching, she would say to me, "Bob, you

know what you need to remember? Of all the people you were talking to, only about 7% are like you, and they don't want to be like you. Try to remember that."

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([15:07](#)):

And that's really important. This is about arrogance of faculty, that we preach the truth, we have the truth. Listen to us and do it our way. And what happens when you have conversations is that you change that dynamic. So 20 years ago I ran a big program for the Pew Charitable Trust. We did round tables on something like a hundred different campuses. And one of them was one of these mountain state campuses that was undergoing political revolution. And one of the persons in the round table was a woman in her 50s, she's clearly a very experienced faculty member. And she's sitting there clearly grinding her teeth. She is really unhappy with this conversation. And I'm the facilitator, I'm actually the outsider. So I've learned, you see somebody like that, you call on them.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([16:03](#)):

And I turned to her and I said, "I don't understand. What's the problem?" And she said the following, "Well, you don't understand the son of a bitch is my son of a bitch and I'm responsible." And I'm sitting there of, "What the hell is this woman talking about? I have no idea." So the president weighed in and he says to me the following, "You have to know, Bob, the man she's talking about is the new Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives. And he was her prize student. And there is this. She preached truth to him, and he went out differently and look how angry she is." I tell that story, I've told it more than once you might imagine, but that's where conversation comes in is that you tend not to preach truth in conversation. You tend to try out ideas. And it's that what we need to do more of, try out ideas with each other, with our students, with all of the above.

Dr. Lori Carrell ([17:02](#)):

There is certainly no room for arrogance in higher education. I'm not saying there is no arrogance, but there is no room in a learning enterprise for arrogance. Entering in humbly means entering in as a learner. So we who are about education must continue to be learners, moment by moment sometimes in the classroom, but as an organization as well, we must keep adapting based on the reality and the evidence and the student's perspective and the changing demographics and the changing societal conditions and on and on and on. It's about humble learning and listening, and that's what conversation brings us.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([17:44](#)):

You have both been champions of disruption across higher education, similar to the conversation that we're having right now. And one of the ideas that you're having, that seems to be getting some traction, has been related to moving towards in some programs three year degrees, rather than the traditional four, which it has been as long as anyone can remember in higher education. You have, as I understand it, at least 13 institutions that have agreed to experiment with you along with this. There are others that are doing it on their own. And I just was wondering why the two of you think that is important, and what does that mean? It does

not mean just packing four years of content into three years and just mean you go over the summer and you have longer semesters. That's not what you're talking about. You're actually talking about limiting the curriculum in a way that would revolutionize the way higher education looks across America. So why do you think this is important?

Dr. Lori Carrell ([18:48](#)):

Well, we see two big problems we want to solve. A first is that as more students need to be successful in college, they stop, either at the beginning or along the way, because higher education costs too much. So we have a problem we need to solve. We need to drive the cost to students and their families down. We have another problem, and Bob referenced it earlier, when he talked about the retention rates from the first to second year. We are squandering human potential. We have not adapted to our learners sufficiently to engage them and to see them through to completion that launches careers. We need the quality to be better and the cost to be lower. Hence the redesign through a three year catalyst.

Dr. Lori Carrell ([19:43](#)):

So it isn't about lopping things off, but rather starting with that backwards reengineering. What are the outcomes we want and how can we get forward to get to them? That involves an inspection of general education so that it functions to move students toward competencies they need to solve the problems that need solving and to launch their careers. It requires us to look at research on learning that is relevant for today's students and to adapt so that learning is experiential. And there is much more that happens in this redesign when we use the catalyst of a three year degree for the purpose of getting better outcomes and lowering costs simultaneously.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([20:40](#)):

So as we've worked with our 13 pilots, for example, and they're moving towards how they get more done, they are also adding more into the curriculum in order to take more out. So one of the big things they're adding into the curriculum is a lot more emphasis on internships and paid internships that also helps the cost. Well, if you're going to do that, that's going to take part of the three years. You got to take something else out. And it's this purposeful substitution. Let's not limit what we can do because we have to keep everything we used to do. The message is you do not have to keep everything you used to do. It is time to change. It is time to purposely experiment. And nothing will make you experiment faster than the commitment to try it in three years.

Dr. Lori Carrell ([21:28](#)):

Part of this redesign can be problem based. For example, we can have students investigating the disparities in the pandemic, and as they do that work with a multidisciplinary project, they earn credit towards sociology and statistics and maybe writing. So the redesign can be quite revitalizing to the experience of the learner. Building in the kinds of practices, like internships that Bob mentioned and other experiential learning that we know propel student retention, completion, success, career launch, that is imperative. So again, it's not about taking

a curriculum and whacking off a few things, but rethinking the entire design of what it means to go to college. We want to do college differently to do it better, and that includes lowering the cost, but it's not the sole purpose.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([22:34](#)):

On that note, Lori, I'll ask one last question. I've always been a believer that the college experience is in part largely about academics, of course, and finding your way and finding a career that will lead to success. But it's also about socialization, and people who came from different backgrounds and different parts of the country coming together, usually in a diverse setting and experiencing what it's like to hear different point of views. And that socialization is part of the four year college experience, and that leads you into adulthood and being able to operate effectively and be successful in different social circumstances. I would fear one of the criticisms that you would hear is that some of that would be lost in a three year experience versus a four year experience. I'm sure I'm not the first person to make that point. What is your response to that?

Dr. Lori Carrell ([23:33](#)):

That point really is top of mind right now, particularly because the students who are coming of age in this period of disruption have particular socialization, emotional, and mental health challenges that diverge from previous generations. And we need to understand that. Redesigning the curriculum to include the golden threads of wellbeing and mental health and development and communicating across difference, that is possible. An example is a course we offer here at the University of Minnesota Rochester called Living on Purpose. It advances students writing, moves them on the path towards some of the competencies that we work toward. And it also sets them up to be self reflective with a team of peers who are diverse. In addition, we do things like build residential life that is also more structured and connect that to the competencies necessary on diverse teams. So the redesign of the college curriculum needs to take into account the whole person. And I'm really glad that in this conversation, and conversations are so important, that you raise that critical issue that's on so many of our minds.

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([25:07](#)):

Let me just add one more point. If I was redesigning the curriculum, and I would be redesigning it for my grandkids, or maybe even my great grandkids at this point, I would do a lot more group work. If you really want to do socialization, you do group work. This idea that we do socialization by having everybody go to class by themselves and yet live elsewhere... So there are lots of ways of doing it. As long as you say, "That's what this is about." And the truth is, on an awful lot of campuses student life isn't about what you've just said. It is about time out, partying. Let's be clear about that. And that's fine too. But the interesting thing, you didn't raise the thing that they hit me over the head with all the time. What are you going to do with intercollegiate athletics?

Dr. Robert Zemsky ([25:57](#)):

It is an interesting question. And the number of kids who really go to college, both women and men, because they want the competitive feel, but that's group work. Think about what athletics is, it's really group work. And even when it's an individual sports like track and field, it's group work. We ought to be thinking more about group work, and given where you guys are, I keep saying that what one needs is not work education, but career preparation. And it is really learning how to organize who you are and what you do. And if that was the theme, then what you're looking for could be done in three years and much better than we do it now in four.

Dr. Lori Carrell ([26:41](#)):

For any of that to happen will take structured conversation. So even faculty talking across disciplines or talking with those who are in residential life and student affairs is unusual. So we must create learning organizations where those conversations happen every day. Then we can revitalize higher education for the good of learners and society.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([27:06](#)):

It has been such a treat to have both of you. I'm a big fan of both of your work. You are absolute leaders in higher education. I'm grateful you've taken the time to be with us today. And this has been chancellor Lori Carrell from the University of Minnesota Rochester, and professor Robert Zemsky, who is a true legend in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, and we are all familiar with your work as well. Thank you both very much for being with us today.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([27:38](#)):

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