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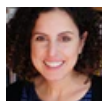
Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Tim Renick

Interviews *with* **INFLUENCERS**

DR. TIM RENICK

Vice Provost and Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success and Professor of Religious Studies, Georgia State University

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Chances are if you work in higher education policy, Tim Renick is a household name, and for good reason. For the last 12 years, Dr. Renick has been at the helm of Georgia State University's student success and enrollment efforts. The strategies implemented under his leadership resulted in the fastest improving graduation rates in the nation. He was named "2016's Most Innovative People in Higher Education" by *Washington Monthly*, has twice been invited to speak at the White House, and testified before the US Senate on strategies for helping more students get across the finish line–just to name a few accolades.

Our interview with Dr. Renick was slated before the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, but we found our conversation to be especially timely as institutions of higher education closed their campuses and moved learning online over the last few weeks. It was humbling to chat with someone on the frontlines of the higher education response to the virus, and we found the conversation to be a source of light in these otherwise dark and uncertain times.

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Q: These are unprecedented and uncertain times, and we know the effects of the coronavirus will be far-reaching and devastating. How is Georgia State responding to the pandemic, and how do you think the higher education community will be impacted in the long run?

A: It's tough, and we're right in the middle of it. I am an optimistic person and I went into the challenges we face at Georgia State with the belief that the students we enroll can succeed and can have much better lives. There's a knee jerk reaction and simple argument out there, and it's not due to [the] coronavirus. In fact, it predates it by several years. The argument says that now that we have online education, universities and colleges are going to be obsolete. Why do we need in-person learning when we can deliver it all via iPads and smart devices? What we're seeing on the ground right now is just how far away from that scenario we really are. Students are in crisis because they need day-to-day support. They need to be part of a community. And this is one of those circumstances where you're trying to make the least harmful decision. It's a no-win situation.

We're experiencing all kinds of losses. All the seniors who are in their last semester of college have now been notified that their commencement was canceled—we'll, of course, reschedule when it's safe to do so, but it's a significant loss.

But college is so much more than learning information. It's about interacting with people, having discussions after class, sitting and having coffee, being part of clubs and organizations, and doing internships, and these are all the things that we're canceling now because of the coronavirus. All these interactions and traditions are falling apart, and we're left with this thin shell, which is nothing like what we think of, or should think of, when it comes to higher education. Hopefully, if there's any bright lining, it will get some people to realize that higher education is more than just putting an encyclopedia in front of students and expecting them to learn some facts.

And we've got the virtual systems already in place. If there's some minor blessing here, and some advantage that we may have, it's that we've invested so much in trying to overcome the

inability to communicate in a personalized way with our students, that in this crisis, it's

inability to communicate in a personalized way with our students, that in this crisis, it's becoming quite useful. Within the first few days of distance learning, our advising team had already hosted 180 virtual meetings with students.

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Q: What inspired you to work in higher ed?

A: That's a great question. I wasn't intending to until quite late in the game. I was a senior in college and was planning to go to law school. I took the LSATs and went to DC for a semester on an internship working in a congressional office. It turned out to be an eye-opening experience for me, but it was largely a pretty cynical one as well, that a lot of my idealism about what happens in politics was dashed. I returned to Dartmouth and in my senior year and completed a second major: religious studies with a focus on religious ethics. There I found the ability to do what I found was most interesting and useful: solving problems. Whereas on the ground, at least in Washington, DC so often the discussion is reduced to what was going to win votes.

Q: The rising cost of tuition and crippling student loan debt dominates the headlines, but the lesser known equally as devastating issue plaguing our higher education system is the completion crisis – where less than half of students who enter college earn a degree. Under your leadership, Georgia State decided to do something radical to address low graduation rates. Talk a little bit about the strategies you've implemented and why you think they've been successful.

A: Let me start by saying something about the premise of your question about the high cost of college. While it's undoubtedly the case that higher education debt is a huge challenge nationally, and a great burden upon thousands and thousands of individual families, the reality is there is no surer and more reliable way of enacting social mobility than through higher education. Georgia State has gotten some attention for improving our graduation rates, but another detail is that when it comes to the issue of social mobility, moving students from lower-income brackets to the upper half of Americans by annual household income,

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Georgia State now ranks among the top institutions nationally. In fact, in one ranking by the Brookings Institution, they look at 2000 institutions and Georgia State was number 25 in the nation.

When you think of the power of the impact of taking families and individuals who have had one trajectory in life, one set of opportunities, limited access to healthcare, all these other sorts of issues, and moving them to a much better prospect, that's meaningful. For all the criticism that higher education receives, in some cases deservingly, for high costs and debt, we can't lose sight of the fact that it's still serving this critical function nationally. There's nothing else to fill that spot. There's nothing else that has been proven to be as effective in helping people move from one income bracket to another. That ties back to the first question you asked about, how I got into higher education. It's also how I got into student success work 12 years ago, and it connects back to my field in higher education. I'm a professor here at Georgia State in religious studies, but my specialty is religious ethics.

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I saw, on the ground, as I taught religious studies courses for 20 years here at Georgia State, the good things Georgia State was doing, but also all the harm we were causing at times through just an incredibly excessive bureaucracy, non-student friendly policies, and ultimately by not providing students the support they need. And 15 years ago or so, we were losing about 70% of our students. Our graduation rates were around 30% and most students were walking away with debt and nothing to show for it. When I took this position 12 years ago, I came in with the understanding that we could and must do a lot better. Part of the argument we've used at Georgia State has explicitly been a moral argument. These are students and families who have entrusted their future in us, and we have an obligation to do a much better job.

What we did, as far as specific initiatives are concerned, all started with the same premise. Let's put the mirror on ourselves. We're clearly part of the problem. What can we do to make things better? We got a lot better with the data. We use the data teams and data intelligence we developed to put the mirror on ourselves and begin to look at very specific things that we were doing that were tripping up students. Then we used that same data in order to introduce

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We've done that again and again in a whole host of areas. I'll give you one example. It's probably the one Georgia State is most noted for, which is in academic advising. We were a very typical university seven, eight years ago when it came to academic advising. Meaning, we had academic advising services available if the students sought it out and proactively contacted somebody and explained that they had a problem, and so forth.

But when we looked at our data, what we found is about 80% of the students over a 24-month period were not accessing any help. They were struggling in many cases, but they weren't getting any help for the issues that they were facing. We realized we needed to be a lot more proactive. Rather than the model which has prevailed in higher education for a long time, which is we'll set up a sign saying "here are the advising services" and wait for students to come to us.

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In 2012, we engaged in a big data project. We used two and a half million Georgia State student grades, and 140,000 historical Georgia State student records to determine if we could identify any recurrent behaviors from our students that correlated in a statistically significant way to their dropping out or flunking out of the university. What are the early warning signs of a student who's going off track? We postulated we might find a few dozen. We actually found 800 different behaviors that correlated in a statistically significant way to students dropping out of the university.

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What we've been doing now for almost eight years is tracking every single Georgia State student, over 40,000 undergraduates, for every one of those 800 risk factors every night. Of course, we're not doing it manually. As we update all our data systems, we're looking for any of those behaviors, and as soon as one is identified, the very next morning the advisor assigned to that student reaches out and says, "We just saw something happen. You didn't do well on a quiz, you registered for the wrong course, you got a grade that puts you at risk for next semester, and so forth. Let's talk now about what we can do to help."

We call the platform for the students <u>GPS Advising</u> because we want them to think about it like the GPS in their cars. When you are driving your car and make a wrong turn, the GPS immediately says, "Ooh, you made a wrong turn," and you're back on track oftentimes in 15 seconds. We want our advising system to work the same way for the the students. The second they go off path, we are getting them back on path again. Rather than taking the wrong class, nobody noticing it, they get a D or F in the class, and they'd be on a downward spiral.

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Q: If an institution had the capacity and funding to implement only one innovation, what would you tell them to focus on?

A: I think depending upon the resources available, there's a range of options there. The advising initiative we implemented at Georgia State was frankly quite expensive at the front end because it requires building up the analytic capability to track students and identify these problems. That's only about 10% of the cost. The real cost is staffing up and training all the people who need to intervene once a problem is identified. It's great to know that a student is struggling in the third week of their accounting course and to notify that student, but you can't call them into an office and say, "Oh, by the way, you're struggling in accounting. Good luck." You have to say, "You're struggling in accounting and here's what we're going to do to help: Tutoring, here's support, here's supplemental instruction and so forth."

Our initiative came with a hefty price tag, but the Gates Foundation hired Boston Consulting Group to conduct an ROI analysis of our advising changes over the last decade, and they basically concluded that these initiatives pay for themselves. Because while you're investing

$2 million into supporting students, you're holding on to many more students who then

$3 million into supporting students, you're holding on to many more students who then continue to pay tuition and fees. The reality is, since we launched this approach to advising based on predictive analytics back in 2012, our four-year graduation rate is up 62%, and we're graduating 3,000 more students every year than we were back then.

For those 3,000 students, that's a great moral victory, but it's also a great financial victory for Georgia State because those students who were dropping out after one or two semesters, were not contributing tuition and fees. If they stayed to the point of graduating that's a lot of additional revenue. Part of the mindset I think we need to change in higher education, especially in difficult fiscal times, is we need to invest better and more wisely, but we need to invest in things that not only serve the students but then will help secure the financial wellbeing of the institution as well.

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Q: Georgia State is often at the top of the leaderboard when it comes to institutions of higher ed that are serving their students well. Who are some of the other rising stars, or as we on our team like to say the next generation of Georgia State's, and what makes them successful?

It is a fun question. It's important to recognize that Georgia State is not one anomaly out there, that we believe that we're part of a movement and that what's happening at Georgia State will become the norm, at least for large public universities over the next five or so years. We've always known personalized attention is what works in higher education. That's one reason why the elite liberal arts schools brag about their low student to faculty and staff ratios. Why even as early as preschool it's a premium if you've got more and more attention to the individual. But big, not particularly well-resourced universities like Georgia State have had trouble historically delivering that personalized attention.

I think what makes Georgia State's approach promising for other institutions is that we're at the front end of a technological and data revolution that is allowing us, for low cost, to deliver daily personalized attention to students. Not just the advising and all those analytics tracking students, but we're using an AI-enhanced chatbot so students can talk to a platform that can

students, but we're using an AI-enhanced chatbot so students can talk to a platform that can give them immediate advice and information they need 24/7. We're using data systems to award institutional financial aid so we can deliver scholarships that are shaped for the needs of the student moment to moment, and so forth. All of that wasn't possible a few years ago.

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The reality is that Georgia State is beginning to close the gap between what goes on at expensive elite institutions and what can go on at a big public university. Over the last three years, we've had more than 500 universities send teams to Georgia State. They spend at least a day, learn about what we're doing, and go back to their schools and apply some of the same approaches and systems. Across the spectrum, we've seen positive results when these same approaches are implemented.

Morgan State University, an HBCU outside of Baltimore (they see themselves as a "little GSU") have been putting the analytics, support systems, and learning communities into place. They've seen not only dramatic gains in their graduation rates, they also just got an award for some of the fastest improving graduation rates by one of the biggest national organizations, the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU).

Indian River State College, is a two-year institution in Florida. They reached out to us and have been implementing some of our approaches over the last three years. They just won the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

Maybe the best example came about because, a little over three years ago, the state of Georgia consolidated Georgia State University with the largest community college in Georgia, Georgia Perimeter College – which was a freestanding two-year institution. Graduation rates hovered around 6 % and most of the students were leaving without a college credential. Over the last three years since Georgia Perimeter became part of Georgia State University, we have been incrementally rolling out the various programs that we deployed at Georgia State, and graduation rates at Perimeter College have already tripled. Georgia Perimeter College was just ranked number 20 in the nation by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by an interesting metric, the combination of graduation rate plus successfully landing students in four-year institutions. Some students who go to community colleges don't want an associate degree, they want to go to a bachelor's program. By that metric, the combination of graduation rate plus students successfully enrolling in four-year programs, Georgia Perimeter is now at 83% of the students succeeding. And they are number 20th in the nation of over 800 community

Q: If you had a magic wand, and you could make one change to our nation's federal higher education policy, what would it be?

A: I think we're at a time where, at least when it comes to federal policy, we need to catch up with reality. A lot of the rules that we have were developed a long time ago. The Pell Program, which I support very strongly, was designed in the 1960s. We have a lot more intelligence now, at least a lot of data intelligence about how to deploy this valuable aid in the most effective way.

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I'll mention one thing that was interesting about Georgia State, and shows a problem with state and federal policy. We enroll a lot of low-income students. About 60% of our students are low-income, 70+ % are non-white. As we began to improve our retention rates, we began to see an interesting phenomenon: as the retention rate went up, we had more and more students dropping out of Georgia State in their senior year. At first, it was puzzling because we had worked with them for three years, they'd gotten through all their toughest classes, freshman year, introductory math classes, and then they're dropping out in their senior year.

Looking at the data, we discovered that the problem wasn't academic. It's not that they were dropping out for academic reasons. They were dropping out for financial reasons. Our students live complicated lives. 85% of Georgia State undergraduates work, and many of them have families, making it hard to graduate in exactly four years. But a lot of the state and federal programs have eligibility tied to a limited period. Our students were dropping out, just short of graduation, because the aid programs were designed for a different time—a time when most students attended college full time and could complete all of their requirements in four years. This is when we created a micro-grant program to help get students though those last semesters. We now give out more than 2,000 of these grants every tear.

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