

## Drexel 2030 Podcast: Areas of Excellence & Opportunity Transcript

**Gwynne Grasberger:** Thank you all for joining us to learn more about Drexel's Areas of Excellence and Opportunity. I am Gwynne Grasberger, associate vice provost for Research Development. Today, I'm excited to be in a conversation with our panelists: Paul Jensen, executive vice president and Nina Henderson Provost, and David Unruh, senior vice president for Institutional Advancement.

So, let's get started. Drexel 2030: Designing the Future, our strategic plan. The executive committee identified four primary areas of focus for the University to remain competitive — health, technology and engineering, design, and social sciences. Recognizing that these areas would require further refinement, the Office of the Provost, led by Paul, launched a process to do just that. So, Paul, please share with us your vision, goals, and approach to this process to refine these focus areas.

**Paul Jensen:** Great. Well, thanks Gwynne, and thanks for having me. Glad to be here. I'd start by saying, I think this was important as this strategic plan was the first one in my time here — and I've been here 27 years or so — that instead of just saying we're a comprehensive research university, we actually kind of put some stakes in the ground around health, technology, design, social science. I think what we came to realize a couple of years into implementation is two things. One is we needed to be a little more intentional about focusing; you know, the idea that we can't try to do everything. And these are really broad areas, so part of this was just focus. And then part is also a strategic alignment of resources, and I think maybe the easiest way to understand that — and what I think about a lot, so I think it's a good example — is when I work with deans in terms of hiring faculty. What we want — there's a little more guidance for how we could do more coordinated, more intentional hiring.

So, if you just say “health,” it's kind of hard to pick several deans and say, “Okay, let's strategize in health.” So, this was really, you know, how can we be a little more intentional about collaborating across academic units as an example of strategically aligning resources?

So, the approach that we took in trying to get to this area of being more focused and more intentional was really two things: Looking internally at what are the things we're currently really good at — and so, this was looking at our academic programs, where do we have strong programs — and then, importantly, also looking at our research, as you well know, and looking at where we have depth

and where we're really making an impact. And then the other piece of this that was really important was that we don't want to just sort of focus on what we are good at, and kind of, operate in our own little world here.

So, it was important to look outside and ask the questions: What are important growing needs in society? What are growing trends in terms of employment? What are the skills that are needed? What are, you know, looking at what the government is funding — which I partner with you and your team on. What are the trends there? Where are the areas where we see growing opportunities? So, it kind of defines itself: Areas of Excellence and Opportunity, and that's literally what we're looking for. And so looking at those intersections, and that's how we arrived at these 10 areas.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** Great! And so, speaking of the strategic alignment and intentionality, you often speak of connecting the disconnected assets. And of course, that resonates with me because I see myself as a connector here in the institution. And so, with the identification of these 10 Areas of Excellence and Opportunity, how do you envision their integration into the characteristics that define Drexel, which are experiential learning, research and innovation, scholarship, and civic engagement?

**Paul Jensen:** I think there's a couple thoughts on this. I think, first of all, on the things that define Drexel: We've always been known for experiential learning, being pragmatic, and really being connected to the community and society. And so, in thinking about Areas of Excellence and Opportunity, you know, what I think about a lot is this idea of solving societal problems and what is really required for us to be effective in that. And I think this is the big opportunity for us moving forward: Instead of thinking about the things that we do — civic engagement, research, education — as separate activities, how do we think about them as being more tightly connected, right? So, it's the integration of these things that define us that I think is really an opportunity for Drexel to kind of set ourselves apart in terms of what our mission is, how we can influence how higher ed. as an industry moves forward. So, I think this frame of being focused on solving societal problems gives us this ability — this need, in fact — to connect our various activities that define our mission, and then, you know, how this connects to Areas of Excellence and Opportunity is sort of where we're choosing to apply this, right?

As we talked about a second ago, part of the process of identifying AEOs is looking at what are the needs. And so, something like sustainability surfaces when you start asking the question, you know, “What are the growing needs out there?” And so, sustainability and working with our faculty, our staff, our

students to figure out how can we — in meaningful ways — tackle these problems, and now, all of a sudden, you're looking at what are we bringing to the table in terms of research? What are our students interested in? How can we bring that that applied research into learning opportunities for students? How do we engage the community in that process? So, that's how I see sort of the connectivity of the Areas of Excellence and the things that define us.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** That's fantastic! So, going back to the strategic plan: In Drexel 2030's plan, it's built upon six strategic imperatives to ensure institutional excellence. And so how are the six imperatives interwoven into the areas of excellence? I mean, you just spoke about integration and connection, so can you expand on that a little bit?

**Paul Jensen:** In some ways, these things are unrelated, and let me, let me start there. And then in some ways, they're very much related. So, what do I mean by they're unrelated? You know, when we talk about partnerships, we talk about impactful research — the AEOs help define where we're going to do that. You know, we're going to focus on urban issues. We're going to focus on artificial intelligence. And as we're doing that work in these areas, we bring the ideas of partnership, of research, of adaptable curriculum, equity. You know, equity and the impact on society — it bleeds into most of the work that we do across Drexel. So...

**David Unruh:** Paul, can I interject on that? I've always looked at those as sort of the “how” — the imperatives are how we do our work, the values that guide our work, and those should remain constant — and the AEOs are really the “what” and the “why.” Right? So, what is it that we're going to do? And why are we doing it? What is the impact that we want to have? Why are we choosing to have that impact? But the “how” we do it will be consistent throughout, you know, that those values, those, those commitments to partnership, et cetera, stay the same.

Maybe that's a very simple way, but it works for me.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** And so, with these 10 areas of excellence...that's a lot to tackle. Where are we in the implementation?

**Paul Jensen:** As we rolled the AEO effort out, what we decided to do was identify five areas where there was immediate need and immediate opportunity.

And this is coming in the form of external funding in some cases and in some cases just needs, you know, for Drexel and for Philadelphia. So, we have

identified the first five AEOs as an opportunity. So, we're going to focus on these five, leverage the opportunities that exist, and to be clear about what some of these opportunities are. Sustainability and climate resilience is one of the five that we're focusing on first. We received a two million dollar grant to do work in this area, and that money is going to be funding some interdisciplinary research. This is a great opportunity for us, and we've had some success with this, doing some convening events.

It gets back to your question earlier about connecting disconnected assets: Sustainability is an example of something where we have enormous talent across the University, but they don't always know each other. And to go after the problems that we really want to solve, we first need to connect these folks and, I know that that's one of the things we're trying to do through your office and part of the strategic plan goals is to be more intentional about bringing these teams, these interdisciplinary teams that are going to go after larger funding opportunities.

So, sustainability is one that we're going after. There are amazing opportunities for funding, and we just completed a call for work around computing and artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing. So, I think we just awarded four faculty teams seed funding to get going in those areas. We've done some convening events around urban futures in that area. One of the problems that we want to focus on, initially, is dealing with urban crime and victims of crime and violence. And we, again, it's an area where we have a lot of expertise as a university — not all those people know each other, so we're bringing those folks together. And then again, we want to provide seed funding to really stimulate activity in that area.

I don't know if I hit all five there, but the intent of starting with these five is really to give us a chance to learn how to be most effective in terms of developing strategies and tactics for convening faculty and connecting them to external funders, connecting them to community members that we're working with. And so, what we learned through this piloting in these five areas we will then roll out into the other five areas relatively soon.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** To the convening events around some of the pilots — there have been three so far: one around cell and gene therapy, we had a symposium back in May; there was also a manufacturing and materials computing AI cyber event; and then one with the Collaboratory around climate and sustainability. And those last two do have the seed funding opportunities attached to them, and I know on the manufacturing materials and on the AI computing and cyber side, we've provided seed funding for projects and then on

the Collaboratory side, I know they're really preparing now to do the same. What do you anticipate is the next steps from these events?

**Paul Jensen:** So, in terms of next steps — let me answer specifically in the context of the two research calls that we just did, which was computing and artificial intelligence in cybersecurity and advanced manufacturing — so, in terms of next steps, we'll have these groups working with their seed funding, doing their work. While that's happening, we're really kind of going back to some of the work that we did in the initial AEO process where, during that work, we were able to do a certain amount of asset mapping and understanding — you know, who the experts are and what assets we have across the University. We really need to continue that work. And so, one of the things that we're doing is beginning to build expert teams to support the work around AEOs. And so, you know, these will be teams of roughly seven individuals who have expertise in these specific areas, and one of the first things that we need to do there is sort of complete this asset mapping.

We know we don't have a complete picture. We have good ideas, but we really need to sort of complete that asset mapping. And the combination of those two things, the work that's happening through these teams that just won the seed funding and the convening of these expert teams and better understanding the expertise we have across campus, all of that will be important in terms of setting up the University to be positioned to go after these large complex grants that we know that we can have more success in than we have historically. So, I think being intentional in this way is something we've talked about through the entire strategic planning process in terms of, you know, how do we grow our research impact? And so, I think these next steps will really be important in helping us achieve that.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** Great. So, David, what roles do foundations and philanthropy play in the implementation of the AEOs and the seeded projects?

**David Unruh:** Yeah, thank you, Gwynne. So, I'm really excited about the emerging Areas of Excellence and to have a robust and well-defined strategic plan, because it really helps us sharpen our approach to potential funders — both individuals as well as foundation and corporate funders.

I think there's two levels I would speak to. One is — and we talked a little bit about the imperatives of the strategic plan — we always continually fundraise for activities that support our basic mission delivery, student success, quality of our programs, hiring faculty, et cetera. That's a fundamental part of the work that we do. So that goes on, and we would sort of tilt our approach with funders

when it makes sense to ensure that we are directing scholarship support, fellowship support programs, faculty support, towards Areas of Excellence to help reinforce those general themes. More specifically though, the Areas of Excellence, as they become increasingly defined, really enable us to go to particularly large potential funders, whether those are individual philanthropists or major foundations, with a very compelling case of how we can bring those assets to bear to solve significant problems.

So, if you think about a lot of the big national funders — the Pews, the Kresge's, the Rockefeller Foundations, the Ford's, et cetera — they're looking to invest in major projects that can be replicable, that have significant impact. There is little value in us approaching them from the standpoint of a specific project, but rather to go to say, “If you help us bring all of these assets together and maybe partner with the federal funding that we've received, for example, and kind of surround the activities, then we can do something really powerful, not only in our own community, but also in perhaps in other communities” as an example. So, it really gives us a much better platform for philanthropy at every level, but especially at the most impactful level for us going forward.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** And definitely in the federal landscape, they are looking for additional funds to, you know, expand on the work that they are also funding. Paul, any concluding thoughts for our listeners?

**Paul Jensen:** Yeah, you know, we've just talked a little bit about, kind of how AEOs will impact research and fundraising, and I think one of the things that I'd like to focus on for a minute is, you know, our students.

I think one of the things that's most important for us is, obviously, serving our students is top priority. But as I think about academic programs, AEOs for us is really an opportunity to begin shifting in a direction of being much more interdisciplinary than we have historically. And this is going to be important for our students. I think it's going to be important for how our communications team thinks about its strategies, how enrollment management thinks about recruiting — but importantly, you know, how we build programs. So, for me, I will know we're successful when, as an example, you know, sustainability isn't just something that the students in BEES are studying, right? When sustainability is integrated into business programs, design programs, engineering programs — that's when we'll know we're really there. So, I think that's a critically important point in terms of this whole AEO initiative and our strategic plan...and it's hard. It is not easy, but I think this gets back, Gwynne, to this idea of connecting disconnected assets, and the more we're convening people from across schools and colleges — just the familiarity, right? — will

help us begin to rethink our courses, rethink our programs in ways that will really set up our students for success, but also, you know, for us as a tuition dependent institution, just make our programs more attractive. So, I think that's a really important aspect of this whole initiative.

**David Unruh:** Paul, not to take the last word from the provost, but I think one of the advantages that I see Drexel having with our historic co-op program is that it also provides that opportunity for partners to help actively inform the curricular structure — what the current and future needs of learning are for our students so they can be productive in those corporations and because they are also looking at these challenges from multiple viewpoints. Or, if they're not, we actually can convene them and bring them together, right? So, we can bring a pharma company and a business company and a healthcare entity together, for example, and look at issues perhaps differently than they might in isolation, which also then adds value to our student learning. It really begins to position Drexel as a much more value-added place even than we may already be considered.

**Paul Jensen:** And just to make sure you don't get the last word, let me build on that for a second. So, I, no, but Dave is 100 percent right. And this gets back to something we talked about earlier: about integrating the different pillars or silos of our work, because it has been too siloed, right? Our research, our teaching, our civic engagement...but our partners are hugely important in this whole AEO initiative because, getting back to disconnected assets, a lot of times we don't even recognize how our faculty could be working together, right?

As David noted, I think about our partners and the challenges they face — in the business world or whatever space they're working in — those problems, those challenges for us become a catalyst for how do we see the connections, right? How do we start thinking about our research differently? How do we start thinking about our academic programs differently? And so, I think this is one of the huge advantages we have as Drexel: You identify the problems our partners are working on and then you map the skill sets needed to tackle that problem onto the University. And that becomes that sort of roadmap for the disconnected assets, right? So that's a great point, and I'm glad I got the last word.

**Gwynne Grasberger:** Thank you both for joining us. To learn more about the AEOs, please visit the priority section of the Office of the Provost website. Paul and David, thank you again for participating in this highly informative and engaging conversation.

**Paul Jensen:** Thank you.

**David Unruh:** Thank you, Gwynne.