

EDUCATION FUTURES PODCAST

Full Transcript

Rob Reynolds:

Greetings everyone. This is Rob Reynolds, the executive director at TEL Library. And I'm very happy, I'm joined today by Shane Mountjoy, the provost at York College in Nebraska. And Shane is a great leader and a visionary at a small liberal arts school institution that is really doing some interesting things. So I thought it was a great time to have Shane on to talk to him to get some of his views as a leader at a higher ed institution, as someone who has a deep passion about students and about education and to talk about a lot of things, how his college has evolved and how they go through the process and decision making process and their ideas about serving students and some of the things they're thinking about, and then also how they're serving students in the current crisis and what they see beyond this and in the future.

Rob Reynolds:

So with that, first of all, welcome Shane. It's really great to have you here with us today.

Shane Mountjoy:

Thank you, Rob. It's really good to be here.

Rob Reynolds:

So Shane, I think it'd be helpful to give people some context as they listen to this. If you could talk just a little bit about York College, a little bit of the history. And then where you are today, and then take us on that journey just a little bit, give the people context and a foundation for the rest of our conversation.

Shane Mountjoy:

Well York College has been here for some time. We go all the way back to 1890. That institution at that time was founded by the United Brethren, they closed in the early fifties for a couple of years and then the individuals associated with the Churches of Christ reopened them in 1956, and we've been here ever since, working with them.

Shane Mountjoy:

York College, some people will talk about the old York College or the original York College, and then York College since 1956. There are still some old timers around that remember both. And it's really interesting, stories from the 19 teens and 20s and 30s, it's very much the same character of institution that we see here today in the 20 teens, and what we hope will be the 2020s. We are a small institution that is very

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relational. We're very centered on really seeing lives transformed by the power of Jesus Christ. And that's really our story in a nutshell.

Rob Reynolds:

Well, that's great, Shane. So I think one thing that strikes me in hearing that is what's got to be an interesting, not dichotomy, but a relationship between the old and the new. It's interesting to have that continuity, but to have almost these two histories that go into an institution. I think that's fascinating. Now, has York always been located there in York, Nebraska?

Shane Mountjoy:

Yes. It has. It's still on the original property, and the city of York itself is not all that large, about 8,000 people. I think that's some of the character of our institution as well, just because of our location.

Rob Reynolds:

Now, I know from my conversations with you that one of the real components of York's existence, its identity and its mission, it's not just relational with people on the outside, but you're also extremely focused on relationships with your students and having that personal connection, and going back to this mission of transforming lives. How do you go about that from a day to day process and thinking about, we're here to serve students? I know people use those words a lot, but I know that you take it very seriously. So how do you as a leader and other administrators and faculty, et cetera at York, think about that and then try to embody that idea, we're serving students and serving the community?

Shane Mountjoy:

Well, I think the first thing you've got to do is be willing to listen to students and see where they're at. And it's really trying to get a good sense of what their needs are. Some of that's through listening, some of that's through watching. And I think most of it is just living up close and personal. We live in community here. Again, the city of York itself is a small community and when schools are in session, our classes are in session and we're not living through COVID-19, we have daily chapel, and a lot of folks eat in the cafeteria, lunch every day, and it's just on a small campus of about 425 or 430 students, you bump into each other quite often. And you go to their activities, you see them and on the field or on the court, you see them on the stage, you see them on the risers and it's just really living in community with them and determining needs or seeing needs based upon that close relationship that you have with so many people.

Rob Reynolds:

Right. I know that one of the things that is special about York, and you talked about that community, it is not just serving your students, but the community around you

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and really trying to reach out into underserved markets. I know one of the areas where you have a passion is in the prison partnership, and with people in the correctional center. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Shane Mountjoy:

Yes. That's a program we're still excited about and very proud of. The only adult female, a women's prison in the state of Nebraska happens to be on the other side of York. So we, about four years ago, or three and a half years ago now, began a program out there that essentially is the opportunity for inmates to earn an associate's degree. And it's a small cohort program, just a couple of classes together each semester, so it takes a little bit longer. But that's been so transforming, not only for those women in that program, but for the faculty that have gone out there and had the privilege to be a part of that.

Shane Mountjoy:

That particular program, we're wanting to help break that cycle of recidivism. And so, if an inmate's going to be getting out, we want to be part of that transformation, so when they come out, they're equipped and they're able to enter into society. We've had one member of that first graduating class, that first cohort, she is now out, she's released and actually a full time student at York College.

Rob Reynolds:

That's fantastic. I know that's just got to feel so good to just watch that up close and personal, that transformation that happens in those women's lives, and knowing that because you're providing that education, the likelihood of them getting back in the trouble, it's not eliminated, it's lowered so significantly, but it really does open up the opportunities for them.

Shane Mountjoy:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rob Reynolds:

So what other things do students do at York? Or what programs do you provide for them to be involved in these types of programs or to do service work elsewhere?

Shane Mountjoy:

Well, I think a couple of different things. One is I think the modeling you see on campus, and sometimes you'll see our tagline is, "Be more at YC." We really encourage and emphasize the developing mind, body and spirit. It's developing the whole person. It's not just growing intellectually, it's not just growing athletically, but also spiritually and socially. And so opportunities to maybe try things that you normally wouldn't try.

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Shane Mountjoy:

One of my favorite times of the year is in the spring, we have a stage show called Songfest, and it's put on exclusively by students in terms of the performers. And it's interesting to me how many of those performers are on stage and they've never been in anything like that in their life. Instead, they are track athletes and they're basketball players and soccer players, and they've maybe played sports their whole, but they've never done anything like this.

Shane Mountjoy:

So it's just the opportunity to be more, to be involved in more, to do more while you're here. And so the leadership opportunities, while you're a student here on York College campus, you can be an RA, you can be in student government, you can be in clubs. We have academic societies or clubs, I think is the way they're commonly referred to on campus.

Shane Mountjoy:

So there are many opportunities really to scratch that itch and grow and develop as a person. On the spiritual side, we've been involved with sending students on summer mission trips for years and years, and there's always those opportunities there as well.

Rob Reynolds:

So Shane, being a leader at a such an intimate community and an a learning community like York, how have you adjusted and how did you go through the process of COVID-19, talking with students and parents, your supporters, work through that and then come out on the other side, working with them with a solution and then moving forward?

Shane Mountjoy:

That's a great question. Everything really ratcheted up and the speed of everything started moving very quickly while we were on our spring break. So in some ways, that was a disadvantage because probably the primary way that we usually communicate with our campus community is through chapel announcements each and every day, 30 minutes a day and we're all in one place to gather together every day, five days a week. And we didn't have that. We were on our spring break, so there was no chapel going on. So most of ours was done through email. And I would say every email I send out to the campus community, it sparked a large number of responses to my inbox, asking me for clarifications from students, from faculty, from staff, and in some cases students would forward that to their parents and I would hear from the parents as well.

Shane Mountjoy:

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So it was just the opportunity to really communicate that way. And, and I think just the modality we had to be able to use email like that, and obviously phone calls and other ways. But it started with the email. We extended it to our website, and of course a lot of conversations, either through phone call, some face to face, because we did still have some students on campus. But I would say for us it moved very, very quickly.

Rob Reynolds:

Did you end up moving to virtual on all your courses?

Shane Mountjoy:

We did. For the model that we've used and that we've switched to, because we are so community and relationally based, most of our classes right now, all of them are online first of all, but most of them still meet at the same time, or for a designated time through the week, two or three days. Most of it is video conferencing that we're doing. There are some that are recording because we do have students from the West coast, even a student from Hawaii, which if you've got an 8:00 AM class, that time change is really going to be hard to get up for that course every Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

Rob Reynolds:

No, I can understand that. It is a challenge. I think that's really important. And it's certainly a good example of who you are at York, that in designing this experience, you really wanted to keep a focus on what you do well, which is community and really nurturing the students and being with them, and having a true presence with them. I think that's-

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. And I want to say something else about that, Rob, because a lot of institutions maybe, for whatever reason, essentially doubled the length of their spring break. We took two extra days. We invested that time in our faculty. We provided training and opportunities for them to practice some of these things. And we dove right in, and I'm so proud of our faculty, they worked so hard at this. They knew it was going to be a steep hill to climb, and they ran at it. And they continued clawing and running until they got it figured out. And I'm just so proud of the work that they've put in.

Shane Mountjoy:

Our students have noticed, and on one hand, I guess I didn't expect anything less. And yet at the same time, it's just surprising and so gratifying to see the type of effort and commitment that our faculty and our students, because there's always glitches in this, but just the commitment that all of them have had to try to make this work and trying to make this work and as well as possible way. Again, there's been glitches and there's been bumps along the way, but the experience has been very

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rewarding, and I've, I've heard from a lot of students just how thankful they are and how much they appreciate all that our faculty are doing, and how much they're enjoying seeing each other online during class time.

Rob Reynolds:

That's really fantastic. And kudos and the tip of the cap to your faculty for jumping in like that and understanding the mission, and really being able and ready to embrace that call.

Rob Reynolds:

One of the questions I have, Shane and then we'll move into our discussion of YC Academy, the initiative that we're doing together. But, a lot of higher ed institutions are making these plans based on COVID-19, the disruption. What happens? What if? What if? What are we going to do in the fall? And those are all legitimate planning exercises. But at York, with the relationship you have, et cetera, and you look at your normal recruiting, what do you see at a small liberal arts school like you are, as potential impacts? What are you doing to maintain momentum as you reach out to potential students, et cetera? How are you adjusting in that way?

Shane Mountjoy:

Are you talking about the traditional students or...

Rob Reynolds:

No, traditional students. Right.

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. Well, I think doing some of the virtual tours. There are some things that we're doing just to keep connected with our campus community and with recruits as well. And that is, we can't have chapel every day, just the limitations on the size of the group and whatnot. But we do have a chapel thoughts each day or a chapel moment, and different recorded messages that are being posted on Facebook. And those things get a lot of clicks. There's a lot of people viewing those. More clicks and views than there are students here.

Rob Reynolds:

That's great.

Shane Mountjoy:

That's one of the ways we're reaching out. We've suspended all of the on-campus visitations right now, our campus visits. But, that's something that's very important to us. We find that a lot of folks, it's hard for them to visualize themselves being here until they stand on our campus and they walk on our grounds and in our buildings and they meet some of our folks. And then what we find is a lot of those folks can't

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imagine themselves being anywhere else. And that's really important for us, again, because of the relational community aspect of our experience here.

Rob Reynolds:

Right. So let's talk just a little bit about YC Academy then. That's a very recent initiative with York College you've partnered with TEL education to launch that and to get it ready. It'll start in the fall. So for the people listening, YC Academy is two things. First of all, it is offering an associate in arts degree that is designed really specifically for early college high school. So it's meant to target high school students who are juniors or sophomores, who have completed all of their eligibility requirements to take and to complete at the time they graduate high school. So the concept is for a very affordable price, students in high school can go ahead and also complete an associate degree. At the same time, YC Academy offers traditional single dual credit courses a la carte, or students at schools who just want to take a couple of courses here and there.

Rob Reynolds:

So Shane, as you look at that opportunity, this is something you're rolling out nationally that we're sharing with people across the US in different markets. And this is different than your traditional students in that experience you have in the traditional campus. So go into your thinking just a little bit about why this is attractive from an institutional perspective first. And what makes this something that makes sense for York College?

Shane Mountjoy:

Well, the rising cost of higher education is something that makes the headlines, it makes for a lot of stories in the news, and it certainly gets some in government certainly upset about it and concerned about it. I think parents are concerned about it. I've got a daughter in college as well, and so I understand all of that as a parent. It's expensive, and I think this is an affordable way for students to get a headstart, if you will, on their college experience, at least in terms of coursework. Especially for those high achieving students that they have the capability and they want to grow and they want to earn that dual credit and earn some credits toward hopefully completing an associate of arts before they even graduate or as they graduate from high school, to be able to take that with them when they go into college.

Shane Mountjoy:

I think that presents a real advantage for those students. It's an opportunity for them to already have that GPA, to already have those courses under their belt and to be ready to focus on some of those major content courses that are, I guess you could say more geared toward preparing them for their career. It's those career prep courses, when you get into your upper level courses.

Shane Mountjoy:

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For York College, it's just an opportunity to expand our mission. Again, we've got a spiritual component in part of our associate's degree. There are some courses that you're going to learn about Jesus, you're going to learn about God's people in the Old Testament, and you're going to come face to face with some material that challenges you in terms of what would it be like to live out a Christian lifestyle in today's culture. So those are important parts of our values, those are important parts of our experiences here. And I think for a student in high school that in some cases, if you've got to take the science and the math and the English and history and some of these other courses anyway, here's the opportunity to earn some college credit while you're also fulfilling those high school requirements.

Rob Reynolds:

That's very well put. And I think that's so important. You mentioned the rising cost of higher education and the challenges that presents for a lot of families. In the price of YC Academy, \$4,000 all inclusive, so if you're beginning your junior year, you take two to three terms a year, you're taking courses, you're going to spread that out at a minimum of four terms, \$1,000 a term, and it could be even less than that if you were over three terms. So that's as an all inclusive program, that doesn't include texts, has no additional textbook costs or other fees. That is a real bargain. And I think it's amazing that you've gotten behind this, see it as part of your mission and a way to reach more students.

Rob Reynolds:

What are the things that you've thought about as now you're reaching out nationally from York, Nebraska, providing this opportunity for students all over the US? What are you thinking about from a York perspective, and things down the line that you can add into the program to create some of that same Yorkness, that intimacy, that connection with community, if not immediately, down the line? Anything come to mind?

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. I mentioned Songfest a little while ago, and I think of some of those annual or semesterly activities that are just so well received by our students and have such an impact on so many of our students. And some of them, you can capture them, at least a sense of them with video. And I think just the opportunity to post some of those things, already before COVID-19, we had already shifted to chapel podcast. We have been videoing chapel for a few years now and those are all on YouTube somewhere, I'm sure, or most of them are. And our podcasts for chapel, what we got from feedback from folks, individuals really like that medium and that ability to be able to have that on their phone and be able to listen to it while they're driving or running or whatever they're doing. I think this particular partnership with some of those students, I see that translating very well to that group.

Rob Reynolds:

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I do too, Shane. And I also think about your students in particular. I know one of the things we've talked about is engaging existing York students in even helping in some tutoring capacity, et cetera, to build those relationships, it's so important so that the students study in California or Oklahoma or Louisiana, wherever they happen to be, but they're really meeting and interacting with the genuine college student as well. So they're not in isolation, just out there, during this.

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that because one of the things COVID-19, the situation with that has, I wouldn't say it's forced us to do, but it certainly caused us to speed up the timeline on that. We have online tutoring right now, and that is video, face to face for those individuals. And as you mentioned that, as a York College student, whether it's for dual credit or it's someone who's from the state of Nebraska and living in one of our dormitories, that ability is going to be there and continue to be there going forward. So there is opportunity for interaction there with existing students that are on campus and serving as tutors.

Rob Reynolds:

That really excites me. I also think about this opportunity that, since you have students going abroad, leaving the country, not at the moment obviously, but traditionally in doing that, the opportunity to share those stories, the students who haven't done that yet, and who are sophomore, junior, senior in high school, still trying to figure out what the big world is like, what the opportunities are. And then they have people who are just a few years ahead of them, sharing those stories back, from wherever they happen to be. I just think there's a powerful narrative there and a way to really give the students in YC Academy this first person point of view of what it's like to continue to grow, to gain wisdom, to interact with others. I just think there's some real opportunities there.

Shane Mountjoy:

I do too. And it's funny you mentioned that. I didn't intend to talk about chapel so much here today. We'll have to figure out how to do online chapel, I guess, moving forward. But chapel is one of those places where regardless of the experience that the student is having, you often see those talked about or there are presentations made almost exclusively by students, I should say, about those experiences. So you mentioned study abroad and each fall, there's a group of students from the summer before who will share some of their experiences and things they've learned.

Shane Mountjoy:

So in a sense, because we're so intertwined here, you get to live vicariously through a lot of other folks and a lot of other experiences, maybe things that you'll never get to do, but you gain an appreciation for it because you know them, you've heard them, you've watched the ways that they've grown from those experiences. And I just think

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that's very, very enriching. And we hope to find ways to creatively and effectively incorporate that into the dual credit program here of YC Academy.

Rob Reynolds:

Yeah. You hit the nail on the head. I think that's so important. I think about what York is and how you're really working to design this experience for dual credit and for students who are in high schools all over to have this great experience. It's not just, "Hey, I got some good courses, I learned some things and I got some college credit. It was real good." This is all important, we really want to give more people that access to truly affordable high quality learning at an earlier age and save a little money. But at the same time, we're talking about a program that even initially but certainly over time is going to developed layer after layer of additional experience from existing students, from experiences they're having. These students are also having the support of their high schools, where they're learning or their fam or their homeschool organization, their families.

Rob Reynolds:

And instead of doing what the traditional dual credit experience does, which is, you kind of live isolated in two different worlds, we're trying to bring it all together and creating these many layers of experience and rich textures and an intimacy really of learning and both individual but also vicariously through others through this program. And it's a big challenge. It's certainly something that is a little nontraditional, but I know you couldn't be more excited about it, and I couldn't either because the opportunity to reach more students, to serve them, to really help them move forward, begin this important journey to grow up, and it's like you say, grow up and grow out and gain wisdom is just absolutely critical in today's world.

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. And that layering you talk about, some of that is done in the online courses, just the interaction you have with other students. And it's in an online setting, but because it's asynchronous, it may happen for you at 10:30 at night, it may happen at 6:30 in the morning for someone else, depending upon when they've set aside their time to work on those things. To me, that's one of the key aspects of online learning, that I just think is so rich. I know the courses that I took when I was in graduate school online, I gained a great deal from them and it's because of that interaction in essence, that community of people that in some cases I never physically met, but I only met them in a virtual way.

Rob Reynolds:

Right. And I think one of the things that excites me too is parents. I know in recent press and history, we've had a lot of negative things about parents, for obvious reasons, but parents are an important part of a student's life. And too many times in traditional higher ed, they're disconnected from the experience, really. You just have the students going to school, doing that and then coming home and telling their

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parents about it. I know at York that you certainly are involved with parents. You were talking about COVID-19 crisis. You have parents calling you, parents who have their kids at York because they're really excited about the ability to interact, to talk to an administrator, to understand what's going on. And I see you as York being able to extend that support for parents, and to get them involved in the learning process through YC Academy.

Shane Mountjoy:

I agree. I think you said it well.

Rob Reynolds:

I know as a parent, you've had one go through, you've got one in now, my two are out, and I've taught at multiple institutions. And it is something that we've gotten in the business of, we send our kids off to college and wash our hands and say, "Okay, higher ed is your babysitter now. They've got you."

Rob Reynolds:

And parents still have wisdom, they have questions, they have concerns. In many cases, they're paying a lot of money for this and I think there's a lot they can offer the student learning experience. And I think YC Academy is an interesting opportunity where you have students still living at home, be involved in that process. And I'm excited, working with you as we continue to design this to figure out how do we leverage that and make it meaningful for everybody, while still giving students their independence and allowing them to do have the college experience.

Rob Reynolds:

So wrapping up, Shane, I guess my last question is as you think about institutions, what people are going through higher ed institutions, other colleges and universities, they're all unique, you're certainly going through the COVID crisis in your own way and trying to take advantage of what your community offers you to do that.

Rob Reynolds:

What do you see as you look forward to the fall and next year, as the biggest or some of the bigger challenges that are facing institutions as they try to make it through the next four or five, six months?

Shane Mountjoy:

Well obviously, financially there are some significant challenges that most institutions are going through right now because of this and will continue. The question is when's it going to flatten out? When is there going to be some relief from this? It's pretty hard to move everyone into the dorms in the fall if the restrictions on group size have not been lifted. So, for an institution like York, we

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could probably start the year online, but I don't know what that does to enrollment. I would think a lot of your smaller private institutions, I think the enrollment challenges are very real.

Shane Mountjoy:

I've already had conversations with some families, related to whether or not they want their child to leave the state in which they live in because what if something like this happens again? So I think there's just a lot of fear motivating folks. There's some real genuine concern out there, that individuals and families are wrestling with. And those all pose significant challenges, I think to higher ed in general, but to smaller private liberal arts colleges such as York College in particular.

Shane Mountjoy:

And I think for me, this is where I think being transformed by Christ is so important. I think a lot about what Peter talked about in his first epistle, where he talks about this living hope within us. And I am a hopeful person. I'm not someone that wants to live in fear. I want to act in boldness and in faith, and I look at where things are with all of this, and I'm very optimistic and excited about August. I can't wait for everyone to be back together again.

Rob Reynolds:

I appreciate that. And I second your hopefulness. I think that there are two reactions in general to these types of moments. One is you pull your arms in and you become very conservative and cautious and fearful, and I understand that. That's a very natural human reaction, all the way back to our innate needs to survive. But at the same time, there's this opportunity to say, "Yes, things are going to change and we can take what's worked so well for us into the change, but we can also have new experiences and new opportunities for growth and community, et cetera."

Shane Mountjoy:

Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that because I wanted to say this earlier and I neglected to. I've already had several faculty mention to me things they've learned through the online experience that they will carry over and utilize this fall.

Rob Reynolds:

That's awesome. See that's exactly... So we find a blessing there and we just keep going and keep moving forward with. And I think that's terrific. I also think that this is such a powerful moment because it really shines a very bright light on what truly differentiates each institution and what makes it special, because in one sense, when it comes to the actual content itself, especially for the first two years of our general education courses, pretty much everybody's doing the same thing. We're teaching mostly the same content.

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Shane Mountjoy:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rob Reynolds:

And some schools differentiate themselves by having a good football team. Some have a great a sorority, fraternity experience. Some have other programs. But what's happened is we've all of a sudden separated out education to some degree in some of these institutions, just put it online and students don't have that social experience anymore. And it's created, I think a more level field across institutions, just positive for smaller institutions like York. But at the same time shone a light on the things that make you different.

Rob Reynolds:

So I think people are looking for different things in some ways than they have been traditionally. We've been moving along, doing the same old thing, same old thing, same old thing. And all of a sudden people say, "Well, what if it's not the same old thing? What do I value now?" And the things you're talking about, this community experience, this true relationship, this ability to grow and to become someone better and more meaningful in your life, I think that's what higher education was about from the beginning, why it was founded and what made it so great. I think it's a time that we can recover that across higher ed institutions across the nation and to rediscover that missing opponent in some institutions of what makes education great. And I think York is a fantastic example of that.

Shane Mountjoy:

Thank you.

Rob Reynolds:

Well I sure appreciate it, Shane. Our time is at a close. I think this was just a great conversation. I admire the attitude you have and the way that you and your faculty and other staff have been responding to this, the way you work with your students. And I also am so appreciative, but in great admiration of you as an institution, looking beyond the moment, launching something like YC Academy, thinking about people in prisons, continuing to find ways to extend your service for the greater population. And I commend you for that, as well as everyone else at York.

Shane Mountjoy:

Thank you so much for having me today.