Provost_ Ohio State Should Be ...in â€˜the Room Where It Happensâ€™

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SPEAKERS
Janet Box-Steffensmeier, David Staley, Bruce McPheron, Eva Dale

Eva Dale 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics, and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

David Staley 00:32
Bruce McPherson has served since 2016 as the Executive Vice President and Provost of the Ohio State University. He came to Ohio State in 2012, where he served as the Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Dean of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences. He had previously served as Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State University. He is also a Professor of Entomology, and I hope to talk about your research in entomology. Welcome to Voices, Dr. McPherson.

Bruce McPherson 01:02
Thanks, David, really appreciate the opportunity for this conversation.

David Staley 01:06
You recently delivered the annual State of Academic Affairs address to the University Senate, and I was wondering if you might summarize the main point of your address.
Bruce McPheron  01:15
A couple of highlights that I'd pull out of that, you know, I use these venues as an opportunity to really anchor to the university's strategic plan, you can go on the website and see the Time and Change strategic plan. A lot of work went into this, and the thing that I like to remind our colleagues is, what our aspirations were in creating the strategic plan. So the plan itself, it looks like meat and potatoes; in some ways, it talks about teaching, it talks about access to the university, talks about research. This time, this cycle, for the first time ever, we actually included academic health care, which is a major part of the Ohio State University as part of the university's strategic plan. And then, underpinning all of this meat and potatoes, if you will, is just being an effective and efficient university, and paying attention to how we operate. For me, the really interesting component, and I highlighted this when I spoke to the Senate about this, before we actually created the plan, we talked about what the plan would help us achieve.

There are a lot of significant conversations taking place in higher education, and we want Ohio State to be at the table for every one of them. A lot of us here in central Ohio had the chance to see Hamilton up close and personal when it came touring through Columbus a while back, and there's a song in there where Aaron Burr talks about being in the room where it happens. And you know, our aspiration is that Ohio State is in the room where it happens in higher education. So, whether it's a discussion about the student experience, or athletics, or you know, teaching and learning, we want people to stop and say, well, what's Ohio State doing in this? Why aren't they here to be part of talking about this? The reputation of the university will follow being in those conversations. And so this is really, I think, a critical component of why we built the strategic plan and why we need to deliver on the strategic plan. When we actually do these innovative things, the rest of higher education, the rest of the world, will take notice and we can be part of that. So that was really the framing for my address. You know, I'll cut to the chase and say, the bulk really focused on celebrating the comprehensive nature of Ohio State.

David Staley  03:44
Comprehensive meaning...?

Bruce McPheron  03:45
Well, so we have 15 academic colleges, not paralleled by many other peers in the U.S. or around the world, to have all of this intellectual firepower in all of these different disciplines consolidated in one campus. And that is a real strength for us if in fact, we take advantage of it. And so a lot of the work that we've been doing now for well past the time that I've been back here at Ohio State, so going back a decade or more, really has been intentionally trying to connect the dots across our academic units, to bring people together to say, we're at our best when we're putting our intellectual thinking together and putting it to work with people from other disciplines. So the notion of interdisciplinarity, the notion of solving problems, you know, we've got incredible faculty all around this university, who are changing the fundamental nature of their discipline every single day. And some of the most interesting problems in society actually require a bunch of those people to come together to actually think about how to solve that problem, this is something we do really well. And so thinking about that, not just from a research aspect, but also from how we do our teaching. You know, students want to be prepared to connect the dots as well. An employer of one of our recent grads doesn't say, you
know, it's ten o'clock, why don't you work for an hour on something involving math and spreadsheets, then we'll take a little break, and you come back another hour, and we'll write; we know that's not the way it works. And so, how do we help students learn to multitask as part of what we're doing? We are a university that is so well prepared to accomplish that, and that was one of the messages I was trying to extend to that audience.

**David Staley 05:43**

What does interdisciplinarity in teaching look like? How does that sort of work on the ground?

**Bruce McPheron 05:47**

Well, a couple great examples that we've stood up very recently, I'll start with data analytics, you know, we actually highlighted that to the board of trustees a few meetings back because it represents a major where there's incredible student interest, but there's also incredible interest by employers. And so we had several colleges come together to actually say, based on what we're hearing from partners out in the real world who would hire our graduates, are we actually giving them the skill sets that they need to be prepared for those jobs? And so, the birth of the Data Analytics major came from those conversations. And it's something where multiple colleges say, I've got something to bring to this discussion, let's get together and talk about this and find a way to, you know... we build from the principles of a general education, that's the backbone of what we are, but it then lifts up and says, and here's where we're going to give you additional opportunities to learn in areas that... they may be technology, they may be problem solving, they may be the fundamentals of business, but we bring those things together across boundaries, so that we essentially bring the opportunity to connect to the students, rather than forcing them to hunt and peck, if you will, across campus to find it.

**David Staley 07:11**

You'd mentioned general education, we're going through the process right now rethinking general education.

**Bruce McPheron 07:18**

Well, you know, general education, actually, in my mind, tracks back to the origins of our land grant mission. You go back to the Moral Act in 1862, and it doesn't say, you become an engineering and agricultural university, it says, we want to provide access to education for the children of the working class. And what we want is the ability for young people to learn practical skills, but on the back of a liberal arts education. And so, you know, this has been who we are forever. We have a responsibility to the future to create a prepared citizenry, and that's what a general education curriculum does as the starting point for everything else we learn. It gives you a context, it gives you the historical context of where you've come from, what are the thoughts that we have had as humans over millennia, what is our history? What do we lift up that's inspirational in our lives, that changes the way we make decisions, the way we interact with one another? How do we problem solve when we're confronted with something that we just never anticipated? The word of the day, I would say it's probably been the word of the day.
for as long as we can remember, is change, is evolution. But it seems to come at such a pace now that, you know, if we're not individually and collectively prepared for problem solving around things that we haven't anticipated, we're not going to react well in real time. To me, that's the background that a general education provides, and it's applicable to every student in every discipline, and that's why we call it general.

David Staley 09:06
You'd mentioned Ohio State, or the aspiration that Ohio State be at the table for these conversations around higher education. I wonder if you could elaborate or list some of these, what are some of the conversations that are going on right now?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 09:18
I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of The Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at artsandsciences.osu.edu.

Bruce McPheron 09:18
Well, you know, there are a lot of really critical things that people are talking about, and some of them are not very helpful to us as an institution, you know. We, being on the inside, understand the value of an education to a student that comes to us. On the outside, there's a lot of people doubting what the value of a college education is all about. So there's a conversation in and of itself. Clearly, we're not communicating in the most effective way to really counter those arguments. But something that's been in the news quite a bit lately, and it actually is reflected in the dreaded U.S. News and World Report Ranking System, is the notion of being accessible to students of average, or less than average financial means. And so, social mobility is actually something that's been introduced into the ranking system as a new component. I actually think that emerges from a conversation that started with Ohio State and a few, very few, other institutions, and has now expanded to over 100. The American Talent Initiative has had a lot of national news about the ability to help students from families with Pell eligibility, so median income below, the Pell Grant eligibility. The shorthand is median family income in society and below, to help them succeed, to get into college, but more importantly, to complete college and to complete college without financial burden that tracks them; the loans that they've had to take out tend to follow students, and this has been a big conversation. So, Ohio State is very much in that national conversation and whether the ranking system actually, whether it's cause and effect, or just circumstance, happenstance - we are at the table, we're in that room talking about how to make college affordable, and how to make it accessible to students who have the potential to succeed, but don't necessarily have the means.

David Staley 11:53
This is a program about the arts and sciences, so I feel duty bound to ask you about the arts
This is a program about the arts and sciences, so I feel duty bound to ask you about the arts and sciences. Beyond being the largest college at Ohio State, I'm interested to hear what you see is the value of the arts and sciences.

Bruce McPherson 12:04
Well, if you think about the arts and sciences as a large college, I would argue that I think about it as an extraordinarily diverse college; it really represents the fundamental heart of the disciplines that make any great university. Ohio State could not succeed without a vibrant, not just healthy, but vibrant College of Arts and Sciences. And, you know, that's our aspiration, to work our way to where we have that, both the shared aspiration and the shared delivery on that aspiration. The history of the college here at Ohio State is one of bringing together disciplines, and I think we're beginning to discover some of the synergies of actually having those disciplines talking to one another. It goes back to what I said to the Senate, and that is this notion of interdisciplinarity, and that can take a lot of different forms, you know, it's not just bringing a lawyer together with a doctor or bringing someone from business together with someone from agriculture. It's bringing someone in dance together with someone in history, for example, and thinking about the interplay of disciplines, so there are lots of nuances to that. The College of the Arts and Sciences here at Ohio State really represents the best possible outcome of doing that at an enormous comprehensive university. It actually gives a venue for those folks to come together, a reason for them to talk to one another and interact and make connections that they might not ever have the opportunity to do. We talked a little bit about the general education concept, this is the heart of the general education disciplines. Every undergraduate college is going to have something to say that is relevant to a general education, but the fundamental heart is in the College of Arts and Sciences.

David Staley 13:59
What research or what programs coming from the arts and sciences are you particularly drawn to?

Bruce McPherson 14:03
Well, you know, there are a lot of different highly regarded programs. You know, rankings are something that we love when they work well for us and despise when they don't show the outcome that we'd like to see. But the fact is, in the College of Arts and Sciences, we have a lot of programs that are ranked in top 25 and top 10 of their disciplines nationally, a real testament. It's so very hard to pick out individual programs.

David Staley 14:29
Now I realize I'm putting you on the spot too, by doing that.

Bruce McPherson 14:32
Well, but I'll tell you something that I'm drawn to, you know, we have a plan for capital
improvements, building improvements for theater and for music and the relatively new discipline of Moving Image Production is part of that whole conversation. And I have actually volunteered to be Fundraiser in Chief for that effort and engaging with potential donors on a regular basis, because that's the front door to the university, that 15th and High geographic location.

David Staley 15:02
This is where the arts buildings are going to be concentrated.

Bruce McPheron 15:05
We've focused on Sullivant Hall and Dance has a great space there. You know, we've worked on the visual arts, the Wexner Center for the Arts is there, and our new director, Johanna Burton is actually committed to being even more a part of the campus art scene, and you know, that's a great connector with the community and always has been, you know, we need to make sure that it's connecting into our university's life as well. But I think that sends a message, that having the front door to the university lifted up as something that really is committed to the things that make our hearts and souls sing.

David Staley 15:47
Is that why you volunteered to be Fundraiser in Chief, for that reason, or were there other motivations?

Bruce McPheron 15:52
That's the fundamental driver that, you know, I believe in this, and we have university commitment to doing that project, but we need the help of friends who will support us with this. You know, I was a band member as a child, I have fond memories of that, you know, I was gonna play the oboe until the gracious band director pointed out tactfully to my parents that we couldn't afford an oboe and that maybe a cornet would be better. And, you know, actually was in a marching band with a french horn, if those of you who don't know that instrument, just think about the fact that you've got this tiny little mouthpiece as you're marching along an uneven football field, was not a pretty picture. But, I have great memories of the impact of the arts, my wife is an artist, my daughter is an artist, my daughter-in-law is trained as an artist. So I've been surrounded with people who have made sure I understand the impact that the arts, visual and performing, have on our lives. And so as we think about things that I can tangibly do from my role, this seemed a very natural follow on from my own passions.

David Staley 17:02
Especially because we're searching for a new Executive Dean, I'm interested in your vision of the future for the Arts and Sciences at Ohio State.
Bruce McPheron  17:09
Well, as I've talked to candidates for Executive Dean, which I'll point out is also a Vice Provost in my academic leadership here at the university, so it's a unique position, it's the only college level position that actually sits at that Vice Provost level within Academic Affairs. We can talk a bit about what those responsibilities entail, but the things that I've talked to candidates about are really being able to articulate a vision. They need to believe as strongly as I believe that the future of Ohio State is tied to the vibrancy, I'll go back to that word, of the College of Arts and Sciences, that absent just that, enthusiasm and the aspiration to be the best in the world, we're not going to have a university that achieves its true potential. And so, I need a leader that's going to talk about that. This is an incredibly diverse college from intellectual perspectives as well, and so no individual leader will ever embody all of the different disciplines that make up a college, 38 departments and schools. And so, you know, I'm looking for someone who's a great listener, who really wants to understand, who is incredibly curious about what's going on in different places within that college and can see the connections and see the dots. The ability of a leader to actually train their eyes on the horizon, or occasionally climb up the first rung of the ladder and look over the horizon, is something that sometimes our faculty don't have the opportunity to do. And so to have their leader actually thinking about what's next, what haven't we accomplished yet, where could we go, is exactly the kind of perspective that I want these folks to bring. It's also important for all of our Deans to see themselves as citizens of the university, because the colleges don't, in fact, exist alone. It's a constant balancing act in so many different ways; it's the budget questions, it's shared faculty, its students in majors needing courses from other places. You know, with our new aspirations for general education, one of the sidebars is trying to open up more electives for our students so that they can explore a little bit more, you know, maybe have a minor, another minor or a second major. The majority of the second majors, as I see students across campus that they want to take are in the College of Arts and Sciences, the majority of our minors that are available are in the College of Arts and Sciences, the majority of courses that students might take as electives are in the College of Arts and Sciences. And so this Dean needs to be in conversation with fellow Deans to say, here's the array of resources we have to really lead to student outcomes. And one could make the same argument about research, so much of the research and creative inquiry that we do is tied into working together. The Dean's job is really to be on the lookout constantly for opportunity to make those connections.

David Staley  20:24
You mentioned that the Executive Dean of Arts and Sciences is also Vice Provost. What explains that relationship and what are the responsibilities that that entails?

Bruce McPheron  20:32
I don't know that I can give you a great explanation, it's something that I inherited, and I celebrate it. And so the notion here is, you know, we need someone representing diverse academic programs to actually sit at the table, and when our Vice Provost responsible for graduate education is talking about potential changes, there's a voice that's actually engaged in delivering graduate education that can say, and let's think about this. When our Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion talks about programs that might actually serve to increase the inclusivity on campus, a Vice Provost who is a Dean of a college can actually say, well, here are
some ways that that could actually be implemented in a college that really would help drive us forward. And so, you know, we sit as academic affairs with, you know, me, the Provost and my team of Vice Provosts, really thinking about how best to steer the academic trajectory of the university to benefit our faculty, and through them to benefit students success. And we need that voice of someone who's practicing in academics at the current time to really kind of counterbalance and say, and have you thought about this?

David Staley  21:57
So you had mentioned before that you came back to Ohio State, and I should hasten to add that you were an undergraduate, you have a bachelor's degree from Ohio State, and you are a Professor of Entomology, that's bugs if I'm correct?

Bruce McPheron  22:08
It is, there are those who say I'm a Buckeye and a bug guy.

David Staley  22:13
So, well, I'm interested in your research, tell us about your research and, and why we should care about bugs or why we should care about entomology?

Bruce McPheron  22:20
I started as an entomologist at the age of eleven, and it was Ohio State that was responsible for that through our outreach program, Ohio 4-H. I actually was introduced insects and discovered a love of that and never deviated from that pathway. I was an undergraduate here, actually lived in the stadium dorm when there was in fact a dormitory in the Ohio Stadium. In fact, only four rooms had windows and I can still see my window, so I was one of the unique individuals that had a room with a window, the rest were in hallways between the ramps. So when I go back to a football game, or even just walk past, it's sort of a throwback. And, you know, I spent my days in Botany and Zoology, now Jennings Hall, when the program was housed there. What I discovered, as an entomologist, I had the great good fortune to get really excellent training in insect ecology, and then to combine that with the time that biology was discovering how to use molecular methods to do so many things. Now you go to your doctor's office, and without even thinking, you get all kinds of tests, and they're really fast, you swab your cheek and send your DNA off to some private vendor and get all kinds of information about who you are and where you came from. And none of that was true, none of that was true when I was an undergraduate here at Ohio State, and so I've had the good fortune to actually grow up as an academic with the evolution of tools that allowed me to ask questions that my predecessors never could ask. Now, I'll hasten to say that my former students and postdocs are now asking questions that I never dreamed we would be able to ask and answer, so the the process continues. But it's just been this sweet spot in time, when we've had the convergence of the long standing questions and the new ways of addressing those and I'll illustrate it this way, David - you know, people know Charles Darwin. They know one of his signature Books, On the Origin of Species. My graduate work actually was on a little fly, it's a fruit fly. It's not the fruit fly you know, from high
school biology, it's a pest of various fruits. My particular species is a pest of apples, and actually is something that orchardists have to worry about in some parts of the country. But we use that as system to actually ask about the origin of species, because there had been a long history through evolutionary biology that suggested that new species arose only over long periods where populations of a critter were separated by some geographic barriers, so you had to be completely isolated and given enough time, if you brought them back together, they'd be different organisms, insects, plants, whatever. There was a body of thinking that thought, you know, perhaps, that process occurs in other ways. And so, we studied the effect of the insects ecology, what host it was choosing, would that be sufficient to actually isolate it from other critters related to it that were choosing a different host?

David Staley 25:49
And by host you mean the apple?

Bruce McPherson 25:50
So the apple, so the fly lays an egg into the apple and the apple maggot, the name of the fly, actually grows up in that apple, and makes it less desirable as a food product.

David Staley 26:00
Sounds very unpalatable.

Bruce McPherson 26:02
Well, you've ate a few, once upon a time, cider is a repository of a lot of different things, I'll just tell our listeners. But the notion here is that we actually were able to use genetic tools to analyze that kind of problem. For me, the perfect symmetry is this: the fly that I worked on, every organism has a scientific name, and the scientific name is assigned by a scientist who's actually first discovered this insect, in my case, and given it that name, described it, as we call it. The person who actually identified the apple maggot for the very first time was an entomologist here in the United States, who was a correspondent of Charles Darwin, and actually was one of the principal advocates for Darwin's theories about natural selection in North America. And so, as we worked on the origin of species, using new genetic tools to look at how these insects might actually diversify, I was working on a system that actually is tied to the author of The Origin of Species. And it's all happenstance, but what a great set of connections, it just reminds you... we often talk about the world being small, I would say it's small, not only in space, but in time, the connections are just so amazing. The other line of inquiry that we took was to use similar tools, but to basically develop what, you know, our listeners would recognize as a CSI kind of approach. So the crime scene investigation things, you know, you watch series on TV, and you know that within an hour, they can identify who the perpetrator was - not really. Yeah, but you know, those tools didn't exist. And we actually built a set of tools that allowed people who were involved in crop protection to figure out the origin of certain invasive insect pests, because it's easier to prevent pests from coming to a new
place than it is to eradicate them once they get there. And so those tools are still being modified by my successors in the business, but it's something that's actively used around the world as a mechanism for trying to track the movement of these important agricultural pasts.

David Staley 28:36
Bruce McPheron. Thank you.

Bruce McPheron 28:39
It's a pleasure.

Eva Dale 28:40
Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.