

## Case Vignette: EdPlus @ Arizona State University

### Design Problem:

Growing demand for quality, supportive and scalable post-secondary learning opportunities for diverse learners around the world.

### University Design Pillars:

- University Mission
- Leaders and Cultures
- Teaching and Learning
- Resource Diversification
- Knowledge Generation and Discovery
- Digital Solutions

### Designer:

#### Arizona State University (ASU)

In 2020, ASU was ranked the #1 most innovative university by U.S. News and World Report, a distinction it earned for the sixth consecutive year.



*"It is up to us – leaders in higher education – to push for and foster new ideas, new tools and to continually evolve how we provide access to education."*

Phil Regier, Inaugural Dean of EdPlus@ASU

### Design Outcome:

EdPlus emerged as a central service hub for Arizona State University (ASU) focused on the design and scalable delivery of digital teaching and learning models to increase student success and reduce barriers to achievement in higher education. EdPlus advances the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the local, national and international communities served by ASU through:

- 260 fully-online degree **programs** now benefitting 60,000+ undergraduate and graduate students from Arizona, nationally, and internationally, students who are place-bound and those who will benefit from a personalized style of learning;
- Direct **partnership** with universities, public and private corporations of all sizes to create customized digital learning education benefit programs;
- Instructional design experts who work closely with faculty to aid in creating **tailored courses** that maximize student outcomes and persistence, for ASU students, as well as for partners in industry, academic, and the non-profit arena.
- Personalized wraparound **student service and support** coordinated via a Success Center with 75 dedicated coaches
- A single, consistent **learning management system** serving tens of thousands of ASU Online students as well as the vast numbers of learners of ASU partners
- Deep **learning analytics** conducted by an in-house Action Lab resulting in continuous program improvement and greater student achievement.

Since 2010, ASU's online student population has grown from 400 to more than 60,000.

### About the University Design Institute

The University Design Institute (UDI) is a catalyst for transformation in higher education. Our guiding belief is that universities must become engines of social transformation and economic success. The work we do is centered around 6 design pillars: University Mission, Leaders and Cultures, Teaching and Learning, Resource Diversification, Knowledge Generation and Discovery, and Digital Solutions. At the core of these pillars is a **relentless commitment to reimagining and innovating higher education models**. We bring rich expertise in design, a global network of experts, and partner organizations to support transformation efforts in higher education. Our approach is three-fold: re-imagining, co-designing, and transforming. We rethink the future, solve problems, and move from ideas to implementation. We co-design solutions with partners. And we advance innovative, scalable, and sustainable solutions.

For other UDI learning products, contact [udi@asu.edu](mailto:udi@asu.edu)

Blueprints for University Design (BUDs)

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# Case Study: EdPlus@ Arizona State University

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## Case Study: EdPlus@Arizona State University (ASU)

### Introduction

In 2020, Arizona State University (ASU) was ranked the #1 most innovative university by U.S. News and World Report, a distinction it earned for the sixth consecutive year. Since 2000, ASU has been perfecting the seamless integration of the learning experiences of the university and a range of partners to deliver online solutions for all aspects of the learner's digital journeys in higher education. To that end, ASU established EdPlus, a central service hub for scaling university learning and technology. EdPlus advances the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the local, national and international communities served by ASU through:

- 260 fully-online degree **programs** now benefitting 60,000+ undergraduate and graduate students from Arizona, nationally, and internationally, students who are place-bound and those who will benefit from a personalized style of learning;
- Direct **partnership** with universities, public and private corporations of all sizes to create customized digital learning education benefit programs;
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Signature EdPlus programs range from software engineering and biological sciences to political science and business and along the EdPlus journey thus far, programs have included both credit and non-credit bearing course offerings for wide ranges of learners around the world. Overall, ASU was ranked 6<sup>th</sup> out of the 353 best U.S. online bachelor's programs by US News and World Report, and by ASU Online (ASUO) enrollment figures in Fall 2020, was larger than the programs of the top five schools combined. Continuously improving all of the EdPlus programs is its Action Lab that engages in deep learning analytics leading to process improvements resulting in greater student success. EdPlus also develops customized programs to meet the workforce higher education goals of its strategic partners including [Starbucks](#), [Mayo Clinic](#), [Uber](#), [PLuS Alliance](#) and [Adidas](#), among others.

### Background

In the early 2000s, ASU had ambitious goals for its online school including quantity of students and degrees offered, capability, and partnerships. Phil Regier was brought on board from his role as Executive Dean at the WP Carey School of Business to serve as Dean for Educational Initiatives in 2009 to restructure and manage ASU's online and extended campuses. At that time, only 965 students were enrolled in just five programs through ASU Online. Charged with growing the online student population to a now published goal of 100,000 by 2025, Dean Regier and his team began the transformation of ASU's digital learning arm. As the digital immersion student population grew, so did ASU's partnerships, capacity, capability, and commitment to its mission for academic inclusion. In 2015, ASU Online became the anchor digital teaching and learning mechanism under the EdPlus umbrella, of which Dean Regier was named CEO and University Dean. As of 2020, ASU Online has over 60,000 enrolled degree seeking students, offers more than 260 managed programs and has worked with roughly 300 partner organizations.

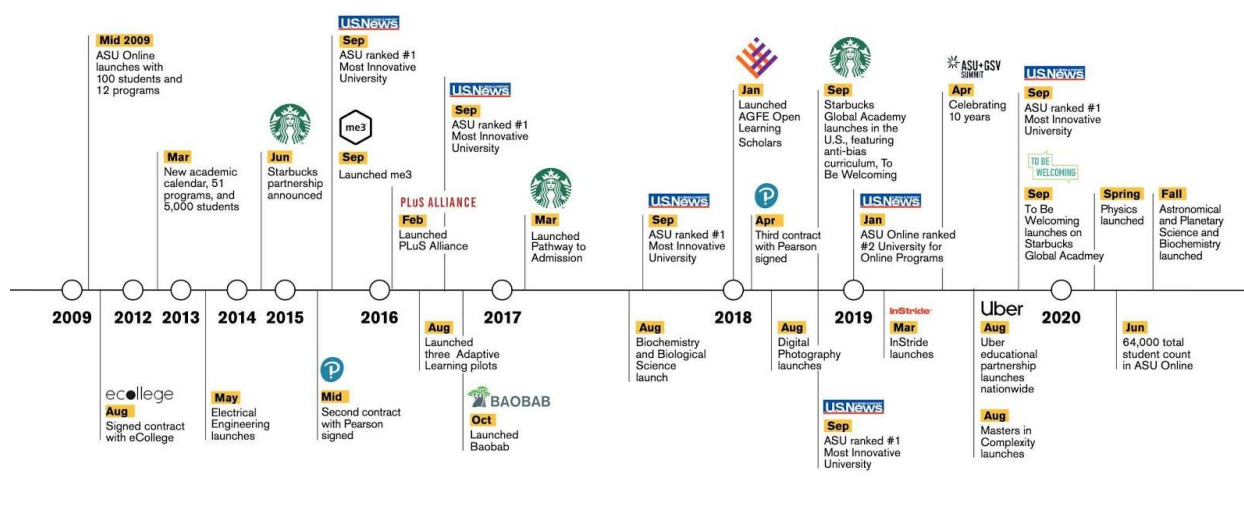


Figure 1. EdPlus Timeline. (Image courtesy of EdPlus)

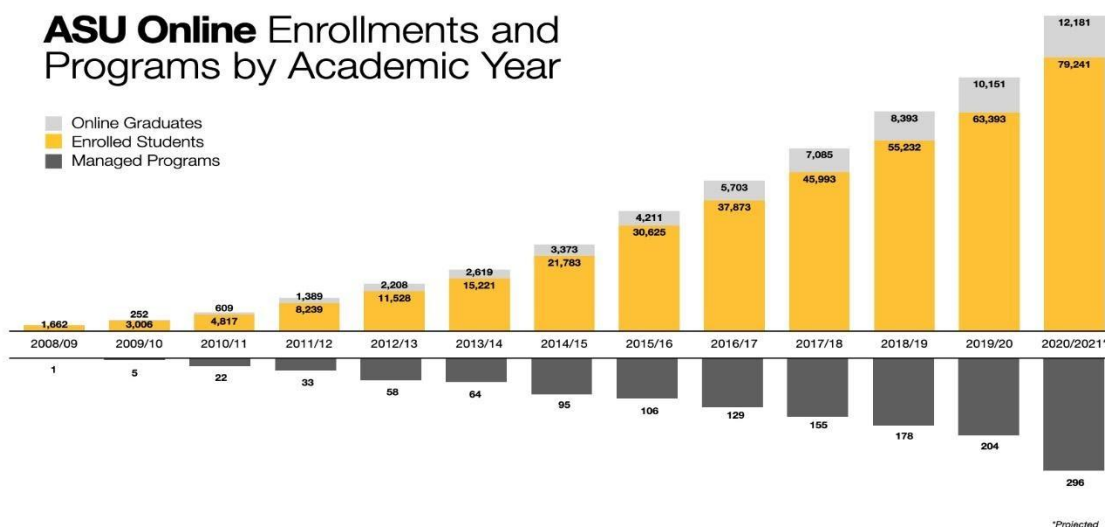


Figure 2. EdPlus Online Enrollments and Programs. (Image courtesy of EdPlus)

Over the course of its development, EdPlus has recognized an additional set of responsibilities in the digital teaching and learning realm including direct partnership with universities, public and private corporations of all sizes to create customized, digital learning education benefit programs; centralized learning platforms to minimize digital distractions; deep learning analytics conducted by the EdPlus in-house Action Lab resulting in continuous program improvement and greater student achievement; open scale courses for aspiring college students anywhere to improve and demonstrate university readiness; and online continuing education for lifelong learners seeking non-credit growth in their fields. These activities have facilitated adaptive and affordable, digital higher education focused on global challenges facing society and higher education. Through innovative programs and services, EdPlus is broadening access to education as a conduit to ASU, aspiring to create master learners who will possess the knowledge to adapt and learn new skills throughout their lives.

## Why ASU Engaged in this Effort

While ASU is a leader in developing innovative models of higher education, higher education remains an underperforming sector, in which success is largely based on family income, notes ASU President Michael M. Crow. This social issue has not been resolved; it's why ASU has an imperative of innovation to create a university where full immersion and digital immersion are possible, costs are contained and scale means all scales from individual learner to massive groups of learners all operating at the same time. It's how ASU will address the half of the population that has not surpassed a 15 percent college attainment rate (a central indicator of social mobility and economic well-being).

As a central service unit for ASU focused on the design and delivery of digital teaching and learning models to increase student success and reduce barriers to achievement in higher education, EdPlus is on the front lines for ASU. It is not that people do not want to be educated, nor is there a lack of demand for education. Rather, the barriers to entry for a traditional college education for many are simply too high. Attaining a college education is no small undertaking. Not only is it expensive, it is extraordinarily demanding of one's time, often requiring an open and available schedule to accommodate inflexible class scheduling. That does not even take into account the time necessary to complete class assignments and research; time that often interferes with opportunities for work. Though many college students offset the costs of school and missed work opportunities by taking out student loans, there are a growing number of individuals who may not have the same ability. In addition to financial barriers, lifestyle barriers can also interfere with enrolling in college. Take, for example, the single working mother who was not able to attend college after high school but now has the means to physically do so if only she had someone to look after her children.

EdPlus recognizes that students are not all created equal, and thus learning *should not* fit in a predetermined mold – even if (especially if) that mold has existed since the dawn of institutionalized education. Powered by ASU, the mission of EdPlus is to offer education at scale and speed to everyone everywhere by breaking down walls to not only make education more accessible, but more effective, engaging and meaningful.

*"At ASU, we are committed to providing pathways to quality higher education and supporting student access regardless of socioeconomic circumstance or geographic location. Through EdPlus, ASU continues to use technology to transform the educational landscape and scale access to higher education for students across the globe."*(Michael M. Crow, President, ASU)

## EdPlus Builds Strategic Partnerships

EdPlus thrives because of the strategic partnerships it has formed and nurtured along the way. In its formative years, Dean Regier knew EdPlus needed a foundational partner in education curriculum, assessment development and publishing. Pearson responded with great enthusiasm. From Requests for Information (RFI) to customer acquisition, Pearson wanted a hand in everything. Pearson has helped with enrollment, success, content and technology and now focuses much of its attention on marketing and enrollment.

In 2011, EdPlus entered into a partnership with Knewton, a startup company providing adaptive learning technology for test prep and mathematics. What was unique about this partnership was EdPlus' ability to be a design partner, connector and convener for ASU to help address student success and retention for first-time full-time freshmen in math courses. Knewton's software was not just offered to online students, but to all ASU on-campus math students as well. As a result of this and subsequent adaptive learning software, overall failure rates of freshmen decreased from 35 percent to just 10 percent and the University has already completed the process of scaling adaptive/active learning courses to many of the popular first year courses including Biology, Psychology, Economics, Mathematics, History, and Chemistry.

As of 2020, EdPlus has either partnered with or used over 290 companies for their learning platform. With every new partnership and discovery, EdPlus' capacity and capability grow, opening up more doors and opportunities to accelerate ASU Online to meet its goal of 100,000 enrolled degree-seeking students by 2025. Already, ASU

through EdPlus is working with Mayo Clinic, Starbucks, EdX, Coursera, Uber, Asia Society, Al Ghurair Foundation for Education, Pearson and Adidas, among others.

The groundbreaking partnership, managed by EdPlus, between ASU and Starbucks is one example of how EdPlus will achieve its 2025 goal. The **Starbucks College Achievement Plan (SCAP)**, is a testament to ASU's and EdPlus' capacity to execute ambitious initiatives on a national scale. In 2013, ASU President Michael Crow and Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz embarked on a shared mission to confront the nation's challenge of equalizing access to higher education. Together, ASU and Starbucks have developed a first-of-its-kind partnership that raises the bar for the role a public company can play in supporting its employees' goals. Schultz wanted to make attaining a college degree easier for his employees at Starbucks. At the time, with more than 70 percent of U.S. Starbucks employees (referred to as partners) pursuing a college education or aspiring to, Schultz saw firsthand the growing burden that the cost of a college education put on his employees. This, coupled with the company's program research, suggested that free bachelor's tuition would be highly compelling to more than a third of Starbucks' partners. The synergistic relationship with ASU served as a bold move that not only provided an opportunity to Starbucks partners, but also elevated the mega-coffee giant's brand with consumers. Ultimately, Schultz's objective for the Starbucks College Achievement Plan was to create not only an employee benefit, but a culture of transformation and a new operating model.

*"The last few years in America, we certainly have seen a fracturing of what I would loosely describe as the American Dream or the American Promise. There's no doubt the inequality within the country has created a situation where many, many Americans are being left behind. And the question I think for all of us is should we accept that or should we try and do something about it?"*(Howard Schultz, Executive Chairman, Starbucks)

Driven to combat this inequality of circumstance, Schultz worked in collaboration with ASU to offer part-time and full-time benefits-eligible U.S. Starbucks partners full tuition coverage for every year of college earning a bachelor's degree through ASU Online. The adherence to values and the mission of increasing student access sets SCAP apart. Since the launch of SCAP in 2014, nearly 6,000 Starbucks partners have graduated from Arizona State University. As of Fall 2020, more than 17,000 partners are participating in undergraduate degree programs and Pathway to Admission, a program that allows academically ineligible learners the opportunity to take a series of university courses to qualify for admission to ASU. More than 1,000 partners have earned admission to ASU through the Pathway to Admission program. In addition to partners who are advancing in their degree attainment through the Starbucks College Achievement Plan, partners who are participating in this college program are promoted at three times the rate of their peers and retain at twice the rate of non-participating partners.

Equally dynamic as the Starbucks' employee education benefit developed by Starbucks and ASU through EdPlus was the collaboration between edX and EdPlus on the **Global Freshman Academy (GFA)**. GFA reimagined what the freshman year of college looks like and how and where it can be accessed. Through the edX platform, ASU offered nearly two dozen online courses such as college algebra, introduction to solar systems astronomy, English composition, and introduction to engineering, making up a full freshman year course load. Modeled after MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), GFA allowed students to take and pass a course before ever paying for the class. If, upon completion, the student passed and would have liked to receive transcribed college credit, they were able to purchase it at a price much lower than ASU Online course tuition. For some students, this approach helped students get a jumpstart on their college education. For others, it expanded access to education by attracting more financially vulnerable students, anywhere in the world, who may not have had the opportunity to attend college otherwise. By 2017, over 200,000 students from every corner of the world had enrolled in GFA courses. Students who had been denied admission to ASU were also afforded the opportunity to choose to take a certain number of GFA courses and earn guaranteed admission to the university. EdPlus called this track Earned Admissions. As demand for more tailored courses and specialized partnerships grew, EdPlus shifted focus from GFA to develop and build an even more specialized initiative for ASU curricula now called Universal Learner Courses (ULC). ULC courses represent a part of ASU offerings supporting that lifelong, universal journey to access education and personal growth.

In 2018, ASU and Uber launched a partnership to connect eligible drivers to a high-quality, fully funded education

through ASU online. While similar to ASU's partnership with Starbucks, this expands on that successful relationship by allowing drivers to pass tuition coverage on to someone else. Through this collaboration, Uber drivers who've completed a qualifying number of eligible rides have the opportunity to obtain a fully-funded education at Arizona State University for themselves or a member of their family. They are able to do so in two ways: online undergraduate degree programs through ASU Online for those who are admitted into ASU and non-degree certificate courses through ASU's Continuing and Professional Education program. A driver or their family member will also have access to Universal Learner Courses, through which they can begin to earn university credit before starting a degree program. The ASU and Uber education partnership began with a pilot program for drivers in eight U.S. locales: Chicago, Denver, New Jersey, New Orleans, Orlando, Phoenix, Seattle and Tampa. In 2019, it became available nationwide to all eligible drivers and expanded to Uber Eats delivery earners. More than 1,600 earners or a family member are enrolled in degree seeking programs at ASU, with Information Technology and Software Engineering among the top programs. In addition, nearly 9,000 learners have enrolled in upskilling courses and more than 150 learners have completed their Earned Admission pathway and enrolled at ASU.

EdPlus also powers ASU's partnership with King's College London and the University of New South Wales Sydney (UNSW) in the **PLuS Alliance**, a multi-university effort working to expand access to world-class higher education in high-need areas and help find research-led solutions to global challenges. The Alliance focuses on solving global challenges around health, social justice, sustainability, technology and innovation through a suite of educational programs offered in-person and online. Opportunities include taking individual online courses through one of the partner institutions as well as engaging in study abroad and research collaborations. In addition, the PLuS Alliance moves beyond a traditional academic partnership by also providing students with cross-institutional degrees accessible around the world via innovative online education offerings. For ASU, this partnership is made possible through EdPlus' unique and innovative online learning opportunities.

## Redesigning the Student Experience

It is not just external partnerships that have made EdPlus thrive, it is the internal ones as well. To ensure success, students are regarded as partners rather than customers. The partnership mentality pushes EdPlus to prioritize consistent, **timely and individualized support of its students**. This starts from day one – as soon as a student applies to study. Typical (and often lengthy) administration processes are sped up to accommodate the unique needs of ASU Online students. Typically, when a student applies at a traditional on-ground university, it may be months until they receive a response regarding their acceptance and then another few months' time until they actually begin taking their courses. In the interim, soon-to-be students are usually preoccupied submitting an array of paperwork and health records, attending orientations, signing up for classes, issuing tuition payments, etc. This model simply would not work for ASU Online and EdPlus. After all, the purpose of digital education is to break down the barriers that complicate college, not reinforce them. Consequently, a major challenge for EdPlus was to take a process that normally takes months to complete and compress it into just a couple short weeks. This required a fair amount of innovative thinking within EdPlus itself as well as collaboration with other departments at ASU. What is more, to accommodate the rapid pace of learning online, EdPlus had to work with the university to completely change the academic calendar to accommodate six start dates throughout the year and find ways to provide all of the support services and experiences a student might receive if they came to campus.

Not only did EdPlus innovate the business processes supporting ASU Online, but it innovated on the way in which it delivers education altogether. The faculty role is clearly defined in the traditional 4-year university and the expectations are fairly standard – they prepare content, teach, advise students, grade assignments, and so on, all pertaining to their one subject matter area. The role of faculty in the online realm has been redefined for greater efficiency. Faculty are trained and paired with an instructional designer to develop and deliver a course for the digital student, who is not bound by location or time. Online courses create great opportunities to scale, which ASU accomplishes through the Master Course Model.

In the EdPlus **Master Course** model, a 500-student class, for example, is divided into 20 cohorts of 25 students. Each cohort is assigned one instructor who might handle the grading of tests and answering of student questions. For every group of five cohorts, there is one lead instructor to supervise cohort instructors and handle any responsibilities or answer any questions the cohort instructors are not equipped to answer. For the whole class of



500 students, the master instructor would take the role of the main lecturer, teaching the complete content of the class through an innovative online platform.

EdPlus also supports faculty development through **Master Class**, a two-week, asynchronous workshop for teaching online. Master Class is designed to aid both seasoned online faculty and instructors who are new to online teaching, providing details on applying best practices for teaching online, developing comfort with educational technologies, and using existing and new tools to enhance instructional strategies. Workshop activities require approximately 5-8 hours per week to complete. While the EdPlus Master Class for teaching online is the pillar of the online faculty development effort, EdPlus also offers hundreds of topical workshops hosted on a specially designed accessible website. The goal is to provide curated resources, actionable steps, and an overall strategy to foster the rapid development of online course materials, activities, and assessments.

EdPlus has chosen to prioritize its student success center and the important relationship-building components of college to better enable its online students to succeed. To address this, EdPlus uses a two-pronged approach consisting of 1) pairing students with online coaches to help keep them on track academically, and 2) connecting students with one another through technology. Keeping in mind that EdPlus approaches its relationships with students with a partnership mentality, it should come as no surprise that the latter innovation came from an ASU Online student himself.

After completing his first semester of classes through ASU Online, then-student Drew Langhart sent an email to Dean Regier in an effort to provide some feedback to the unit. Though happy with the content and the way it was delivered, Langhart admitted that he did not feel that he had much opportunity to connect with other students or the university on a meaningful level. Little did Langhart know that his email would lead to his personal involvement with EdPlus as a beta-tester for a new app designed to connect students with one another, faculty, success coaches and university services in general. After his experience as a beta-tester, EdPlus asked Langhart to apply for a position that would oversee the development and operations of this app, that would become known as Pitch. Langhart's leadership as a voice for students helped engrain a commitment to student success and experience in EdPlus in a way that technology, no matter how state-of-the-art, cannot do. Pitch subsequently moved to the Slack platform to further personalize the student experience; Slack had been adopted university-wide as an all-in-one tool for academic success and ASU community connections. It is this commitment to student success and experience that many students, staff, and faculty feels separates EdPlus from other online learning institutions.

## Creating a Culture of Innovation

### *Workplace Culture and Staff Support*

EdPlus is committed to cultivating a great culture. The workplace culture matters because it impacts every metric, including enrollment, retention, student service, productivity, innovation, and revenue. From its inception, the EdPlus leadership team acknowledged that in order to sustain the rate of innovation the unit was expected to achieve, it would need to develop a strong workplace culture that honored EdPlus' values and contributed to high expectations in an environment of constant change. A great culture and happy employees are often equated with innovation and a risk-taking mentality. Dean Regier advocated a mindset of leading with purpose, understanding that "culture trumps strategy". To that end six guiding tenets were articulated that drive everyday actions: **Achieve Milestones** (we are accountable and do what we say we will do, we are closers); **Feel a Sense of Urgency** (as we work to transform education, speed and scale are our allies); **Strive for Excellence** (our standards are high and we seek to delight our stakeholders); **Be Bold** (we take measured, promising risks to meet our challenges); **Solve Problems** (we find opportunities and create pathways to shape master learners); and, **Serve learners** (we accelerate innovation at the university through the advancement of digital teaching and learning that serves all learners). Culture is a driver that increases alignment, increases positivity, and leads to progress being made every day.

From day one, the idea was to create a culture that is often associated with startups, in which everyone is a hands-on contributor and feels comfortable sharing ideas and opinions. Rapid staff expansion at EdPlus led to a desire to stave off any feeling of disconnection amongst the staff and a strong need for new employees to understand

how EdPlus contributes to university strategies and how work gets done to meet the goals. Dean Regier quickly responded by creating a new position called 'Chief Culture Officer.' Patricia Feldman is the founding Chief Culture Officer and leads workplace planning initiatives and working environment attributes that promote problem solving and innovation at a global scale and pace, and that supports the ASU Charter. Having grown from a staff of 40 to a team of over 400, and with new members joining all the time, Feldman is constantly conceptualizing new ways to develop and instill the EdPlus culture in every team member. What it boils down to is keeping the staff energized, happy and healthy in every possible way, so that they are motivated to serve the EdPlus mission. "We want a thriving culture because we know that leads to great ideation, breakthrough strategy and ultimately success for EdPlus initiatives" (Patricia Feldman, Chief People and Culture Officer, EdPlus, personal communication, August 24, 2017).

In this culture, communication is key and there are a multitude of programs for employees to assist them in feeling like they have all the information necessary to excel at their job. EdPlus shows employees how they fit into the bigger picture and works to set clear, measurable and achievable organizational goals. The work culture is flexible yet demanding.

Some of the components in the toolkit for building a strong EdPlus culture include hiring smart – cultivating a staff with strong abilities and a good "fit"; increasing the demonstration of compassion amongst employees; encouraging development of master learners with emotional intelligence; and developing opportunities that increase employee happiness (happy employees are 85% more efficient at their work). From recognition programs to well-being; to leadership development and weekly feedback loops and more, an intentional, dedicated and focused effort toward establishing a strong, healthy culture is the foundation for how EdPlus works.

#### *EdPlus Philosophy*

EdPlus creates a safe space to think big, work hard and fail fast. Committed to operating on the leading edge, EdPlus expects its staff members to take risks and celebrate the outcome, regardless of what it may be. EdPlus recognizes that the lessons learned through failure are the same lessons that lead to groundbreaking discovery.

In return for its team members' adoption of the EdPlus culture tenets, leadership shows its own commitment to team members' personal and professional growth and well-being. This is demonstrated through giving team members an opportunity to leverage their own talents and not be pigeonholed in one specific role. "We exist in a matrixed organization at EdPlus. That means we are constantly crossing out of our functional roles, collaborating and finding new ways to succeed. In fact, none of us have offices because we've taken the concept of an open door policy and removed the door" (Leah Lommel, Chief Operating Officer, EdPlus, personal communications, August 18, 2017).

The matrixed organization utilized by EdPlus thrives on change and adaptability. By moving people around, pairing them in different teams, and focusing on different projects, EdPlus is able to keep energy fresh, helping prevent burnout and encouraging team members to continue to learn and grow. In hierarchical organizations, a model with such ever-changing lines of reporting could prove problematic, but it has served EdPlus well. The loyalty of reporting lines can often trump the work that needs to be done, but in the case of EdPlus and its flat hierarchy, loyalty to reporting lines is one less distraction, better enabling the organization to execute efficiently.

While this approach to team organization has enabled EdPlus to reinforce its culture of innovation, EdPlus has discovered that it takes a special kind of team member to thrive in such an environment, which means an effective hiring process is key. EdPlus utilizes a design approach in how it hires and organizes its team, seeking out individuals who are not only extremely talented in their respective fields but who are also flexible, who can thrive in ambiguity and who are intrinsically motivated by the mission of ASU. Chief Design Officer Sean Hobson specifically looks for those candidates who are highly emotionally intelligent.

*"We try to find people with a high ability of emotional intelligence. Being able to develop relationships and develop understanding about what are the needs from our partners, from our faculty and from our students to really take an ecosystem approach to how we develop our*

*solutions.”* (Sean Hobson, Chief Design Officer, EdPlus, personal communication, August 25, 2017)

### *Environment*

A unique facet of the EdPlus culture is their open workspace environment. The EdPlus space at SkySong resembles that of a Silicon Valley start-up, with rows of desks and computers and little separation between employees. This wasn't an outcome of circumstance, but an intentional decision made by EdPlus leadership. In an effort to achieve greater collaboration and a unique workplace culture, Dean Regier had much of the interior of EdPlus' current workspace blown out to make way for his open- concept vision. Now the whole staff works side by side, including directors and executive staff. Even Dean Regier chose to forego a private office in order to achieve a non-hierarchical, collaborative workspace. Closed-door meeting spaces still remain but they are contained within walls of glass so that even the most private of meetings can be seen, if not heard. The result of this effort has encouraged open communication, collaboration and camaraderie. Staff members find that such an organization exemplifies what EdPlus is all about.

## **Maintaining an Innovation Mindset**

If EdPlus is expected to continue achieving such strident success, it will have to continue navigating a trajectory of innovation. EdPlus understands that meeting the future demand of online learners will not be done through brick and mortar. It will be met through EdPlus' ability to adapt, innovate and take risks when necessary. Key to a mindset of innovation is a willingness to be flexible and a trust in the notion that innovation is a continuous process occurring in segments that when pieced together reveal groundbreaking discoveries.

*“You get something figured out and it evens out and it undoubtedly unearths another set of complexities that you have to work through and so on and so forth. Real innovation happens when you can work through each one, solving problem after subsequent problem; work with people across each team to solve (the) problem because in many respects you're charting new ground with each iteration. It takes consistent effort and a systems based approach to where you can eventually get to a point where you look back at the mountain you have climbed and can measure the impact of your work towards student success.”* (Sean Hobson, Chief Design Officer, EdPlus, personal communication, August 25, 2017)

One of the more distinctive challenges that EdPlus has learned to navigate is how to straddle the line between being a central service unit within a university while operating like a private sector start-up.

Though largely funded from the central university, EdPlus is laser-focused on generating new revenue models for ASU and strives to treat its products like small, passion-driven start-ups, an atypical approach by an academic unit.

In order to maintain a mindset of innovation, EdPlus launched the Action Lab - a dedicated digital teaching and learning research laboratory that engages in deep learning analytics to track long-term trends and provide continuous improvement, with the goal of increased student success. Studying digital learning efficacy, adaptive learning systems, and alternative design and delivery modalities, the Action Lab allows EdPlus to better understand learning outcomes at the individual, field, community and social scales so that technological interfaces for the success of students can be redesigned when necessary.

Throughout EdPlus' development, research and analytics have provided the impetus for innovation so that with each subsequent student, online learning methods and efficacy are improved. Such an approach encourages a nimbleness unfamiliar to education and helps bridge gaps to serve as many people as possible.

## **University-wide collaboration and coordination**

Unlike many other online arms at other Universities, EdPlus is deeply embedded within ASU. It was, after all,

originally set up as a service unit to the university. While EdPlus has no faculty, it operates as a conduit to the *enablement* of staff and faculty to reach more students through a digital modality. And while many of the strengths of EdPlus come from being so embedded in the university, many of its challenges come from this same condition.

Operating on a different time table than ASU's on-ground component, EdPlus has tested the limits of ASU operations. With ongoing enrollment, six start dates a year and an obligation to provide students with speed and accessibility, the EdPlus timeline can feel a bit accelerated for other departments throughout the university. The nature of online education requires a certain degree of speed that challenges the traditional university model that has been in place for years, including long lead times between applying and enrolling or certain time-intensive advising requirements. While *entirely* eliminating these institutionally mandated processes and requirements was out of the question, EdPlus sought to alter their particular intricacies. Through close coordination and a concerted effort between EdPlus and other units within ASU, longstanding business processes and rules have been reconsidered and change has accelerated throughout the university to accommodate EdPlus as a deeply embedded component.

Though the development of this type of relationship has come with its own set of growing pains, EdPlus' Chief Operating Officer Leah Lommel contends that it is one of Edplus' greatest strengths. "Our strength is our ability to work across a broader organization like ASU. We have great academic ties across all the different colleges, amazing collaboration among service and administrative offices so we can be in the field innovating and know that we have partners on the campuses and in other departments to help execute (Leah Lommel, Chief Operation Officer, EdPlus, personal communication, August 18, 2017). Other universities whose set ups are more segmented may not have the ability to reach across departments the same way EdPlus has been able to at ASU.

## Impact

In the years since its inception, ASU Online and EdPlus have made significant impact on the online learning community and higher education as a whole. The programs offered by EdPlus are growing in popularity and reach on the national scale. Since 2010, ASU's online student population has grown from 400 to more than 60,000. Of the total students utilizing ASU Online program offerings in the Fall of 2020, 69 percent were 25 years or older, compared to 19 percent on campus. ASU Online is also a significant source of advanced degree learners within the university. Of total students enrolled online, 24 percent are pursuing a graduate degree, compared to 16 percent on campus. Clearly, the flexible online programming capabilities offered by EdPlus are successfully affording students of all ages and learning stages the opportunity to return to higher education on their own time, at their own pace.

The gender distribution of EdPlus online is markedly different from on-campus enrollment as well. With 63 percent of online students being female, ASU Online is female dominant as opposed to ASU's onground campus, which is male dominant.

Reasons for this are left to speculation but it is theorized that the flexibility of ASU Online is garnering attention from women returning to school who at one time stepped back to take care of competing priorities such as family and children.

In addition to the diversity in student enrollment of online offerings, EdPlus is engaging with students all across the country. While 89 percent of enrolled on-campus students come from the Mountain South region which includes New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and, of course, Arizona, online enrollment from the same region in Fall 2020 was just 27 percent.

EdPlus is also engaging more individuals in a variety of disciplines. In reaching a broader and more diverse group of students, EdPlus is better able to expand offerings. At any given time, EdPlus is onboarding between 10 and 15 programs. From 2018 to 2019 alone, EdPlus successfully grew their program offerings from 178 to 204 programs. EdPlus has successfully built a powerful and respected reputation, regularly hosting visitors from external universities, local and global, to learn more about its structure and operations, evidence of how highly it is regarded by the higher education community.

## Next Steps for EdPlus

Though EdPlus has grown extensively over its adolescence, one thing has become glaringly obvious to the organization's leaders: there will always be another group of students to serve. When ASU Online was first created, it sought to serve a segment of largely adult learners who had taken time off from higher education and were best served by a flexible digital format. In serving this constituency, the needs of another constituency were soon unveiled. What about those who have an appetite for learning but never thought higher education was a viable path for them? The Global Freshman Academy, offering low-cost, low-risk education emerged in response to this gap. This innovation was then followed by another innovation and indeed yet another. EdPlus continues to tackle some of society's largest challenges to provide education at scale and speed to everyone everywhere.

Having already built a proven platform and infrastructure around the delivery of education at scale, EdPlus continually explores how to take those assets and point them towards new communities and populations in need of education. One such population that EdPlus worked to address is that of refugees and internationally displaced persons whose educational journey has been disrupted. The Education for Humanity initiative is an effort inspired by ASU President Crow's vision for what a university could do to make a significant impact in communities abroad who experience disruption. In 2017, EdPlus and ASU Online began working closely with Education for Humanity to equip some of the most disenfranchised communities across the world with an education that will help them rise above life's circumstances and thrive.

In addition to serving new populations and developing new platforms, EdPlus is continuing to explore partnerships and launch new degree programs with a number of reputable, world-class organizations.

As ASU continues to redesign and transform its operational approach and organizational structure, a few signature programs that were nurtured and stood up inside EdPlus have been repositioned. Both Global Freshman Academy for aspiring college students (the name of which has now transitioned to Universal Learning Courses) and continuing professional education for lifelong learners seeking non-credit bearing growth in their fields, are now housed within another part of the evolving ASU enterprise system - the Learning Enterprise - tasked, in part, to focus on upskilling through non-credit learning opportunities.

While critics of online education may claim that digital learning compromises the authenticity of a classic college education, arguing that a lack of presence and "impersonal" interaction produces less effective learning and substandard learning outcomes, the EdPlus model defies these misperceptions. Evidenced by its ongoing pursuit to serve evermore students, launch more programs and collaborate with more partners, EdPlus constantly demonstrates that online learning can *and does* offer the same world-class education while breaking down barriers to entry for learners of all kinds.

The demand for education is growing, locally and abroad. Each year for the next 10 years, approximately 30 million people living in India alone will try to access online education. Globally, this number is estimated between 160 to 410 million people. With its track record of continual growth, adaptation and innovation, EdPlus is uniquely positioned to meet this need. In discussing how EdPlus could possibly manage to sustainably scale its operations to the necessary size to meet demand, Dean Regier sagely states, "Quality of adaptation is dependent on quality of stress. How organizations best adapt to change is contingent on the types of problems they face and how they respond" (personal communication, January 12, 2016). How to qualify "quality" may be up for debate, but regardless of the decided definition, the stresses of delivering education at scale and speed to everyone everywhere are likely to make the grade. If the past is any indication of how well EdPlus is expected to adapt, education for all is not outside of the realm of possibility.

For more information on EdPlus at Arizona State University, visit [edplus.asu.edu](http://edplus.asu.edu)

### **About the University Design Institute**

The University Design Institute (UDI) is a catalyst for transformation in higher education. Our guiding belief is that universities must become engines of social transformation and economic success. The work we do is centered around 6 design pillars: University Mission, Leaders and Cultures, Teaching and Learning, Resource Diversification, Knowledge Generation and Discovery, and Digital Solutions. At the core of these pillars is a **relentless commitment to reimagining and innovating higher education models**. We bring rich expertise in design, a global network of experts, and partner organizations to support transformation efforts in higher education. Our approach is three-fold: re-imagining, co-designing, and transforming. We rethink the future, solve problems, and move from ideas to implementation. We co-design solutions with partners. We advance innovative, scalable, and sustainable solutions.

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