

Cheryl Broom [00:00:02]:

Hi, I'm Cheryl Broom, CEO of GradComm and host of Higher Ed Conversations sponsored by EdTech Connect. And speaking of EdTechConnect, today, I have the pleasure of welcoming their CEO and founder, Jeff Dillon, to the podcast. He's going to explain how their platform solves a major problem that most colleges and universities encounter at least once every year. And that is how in the world to hire a vendor that's been vetted and is trusted by other higher education experts. We have a great conversation around how to use EdTechConnect, but also around some really cool technology trends that Jeff has seen as he works with hundreds and hundreds of technology companies across the world. It's a great conversation. I think you are going to take away another great tool for your toolbox. Enjoy.

Cheryl Broom [00:00:55]:

All right, Jeff, well, welcome to the podcast. I'm so happy to have you here.

Jeff Dillan [00:01:00]:

Hey, Cheryl. I'm really happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Cheryl Broom [00:01:03]:

So you and I have sat next to each other at many conferences.

Jeff Dillan [00:01:09]:

Yes, we have.

Cheryl Broom [00:01:10]:

And what I learned, because us agencies and vendors that are in the vendor hall while everybody else is off learning end up talking to one another. And what I've learned is that you have a really fascinating company that really helps colleges solve technology needs and find partners when they need them the most. So tell me a little bit about your business and how you got it started.

Jeff Dillan [00:01:34]:

Thank you, Cheryl. I will. I'd love to. So right before the pandemic, a little bit about me. First, I did spend about 21 years in higher ed, so I was a web and mobile director at two large public institutions. The last one was Sacramento State, so in California. And what happened right before the pandemic kind of was the impetus. The final thing that I realized that made me kind of start building.

Jeff Dillan [00:01:59]:

What I've been thinking about was I was tasked with finding a cloud workflow solution for our campus. We have a legacy old on prem workflow solution, kind of a digital imaging system and workflow. And so I'm like, oh, no big deal. I've been doing this forever. I'm the perfect person for this. I'll get us a short list and we'll find our solution. And I couldn't believe how hard it was to. To sift through all.

Jeff Dillan [00:02:22]:

All the solutions out there. I'm plugged into some community groups. You know, I have access to software ratings and review platforms, and I have, you know, little. Even the CSU that I was in has. Has good collaboration, but it was still really hard to find that that shortlist because so many vendors sell to outside of higher ed and they're kind of trying to kind of get into higher ed and say like, oh yeah, we, we do do for, for universities too. But I was, I couldn't believe it if I'm having trouble. What about all the people that aren't as plugged in and they're new to their jobs? And maybe you get tasked with finding software and you're not really, you're not really the right person for it. So that's what prompted EdTech Connect is it's a crowdsourced technology database.

Jeff Dillan [00:03:04]:

So we have a model right now, right? We have institutions, we have organizations that support higher ed for technology. And they're great, they're community based. There's annual data that's reported, but it takes quite a lift to get that data. So I thought why don't we just go right to the end users and not have the institution be a bottleneck where they have to pay their membership fees to these organizations and they have to delegate access to the community. Not everyone gets access. But what if everyone with the Edu email address could log in, submit the software they're using in their role, submit their skill set, give us a little information about their role, and then rate and review software. There's rating and review platforms out there. But this is.

Jeff Dillan [00:03:47]:

What if it's just for higher ed? Verified with your Edu email address. So I started building it right before the pandemic and then it became very relevant in the world. That's the short story.

Cheryl Broom [00:03:58]:

Well, you found a problem, right? And I had the same problem when I was marketing director at Miracosta College. We were using a web platform, it was like an Adobe product and all of a sudden they discontinued it. And we were like, oh, we have a discontinued CMS system. And I didn't know where to look at all. I just went to Google and started googling companies. So I had the exact same problem. And then we had all these vendors do capability proposals and it was literally the most boring thing I've ever sat through. Now and I know that was your old role, Jeff, so no offense.

Cheryl Broom [00:04:33]:

No, but I wish I had had a tool like that because. Oh, then I went on the listserv and I was asking like other people, what are you using? What are you doing? Who is your vendor? And then you get a million responses that way. And so what a great idea. You found a problem and, and you solved it. So you started this during the pandemic and what does it look like today?

Jeff Dillan [00:04:53]:

Ooh, it is growing more than I thought it would be to this point. So we started, it really was built for higher ed by higher ed, which was my goal. So a diverse group of my colleagues from all over the country started it with about 20 of us and we added about 180 software solutions we

knew were being used in higher ed. So that's where we started. And since then we've grown to have over 800 technology solutions in our database that are vetted by higher ed. But what I'm most proud of is it's from 461 unique institutions across the country. So I was a little concerned it would take off pretty deeply in my close network of schools. Schools, you know, a lot of people from each school would sign up, but it, it really took off.

Jeff Dillan [00:05:35]:

We have about 11% of the whole, you know, university footprint across the country. So that's what it looks like today. And we've gamified it because we're not paying our users for these reviews. Whereas some platforms you can get a gift card or you have to spend your whole lunch hour doing a review and you, you get paid for that. This is really just access to the data. You get access to the data if you just give us a profile and rate some software. And so that's really, we've incentivized that. And you get badges if you rate so many titles and if you promote on social media.

Jeff Dillan [00:06:06]:

So we're trying to make it fun. And then another thing that we've done recently, actually about a year ago, was we've created a periodic table of technology, which is the most popular part of the site. So right in the homepage, I can't describe it very well in the podcast, but imagine a periodic table of all the categories and topics of higher ed, which I think it's interactive so you can hover over a tile and find out what are the software vendors in higher ed for this particular topic. But it just shows the complexity that we're at now in higher ed, where maybe a decade ago you would think about what's my content management system, my learning management system, maybe your student information system. But all of these solutions have come and come out in the last decade or so. So it's really cool to see.

Cheryl Broom [00:06:52]:

Yeah, I've always said that college is like a city. I mean, anything that goes on in a city happens in a college. So, you know, you don't even like fathom how many technology solutions and how many vendors colleges have to work with to get their business done. It's incredible.

Jeff Dillan [00:07:12]:

I even love when you had, you recently had Alex from hootsuite. I listened to that podcast and what a great solution. And a lot of schools didn't know about hootsuite even, you know, your social media aggregator. But yeah, all these companies are being discovered on the platform, a lot of AI companies as well. And so it's fun because now we get to see they're coming to EdTech Connect and finding EdTech Connect and submitting profiles and higher ed gets to see what's, what's happening.

Cheryl Broom [00:07:36]:

So what type of technology are you seeing that's really popular on the site, that's being searched for a lot? Any, any trends, anything pop up that's really interesting.

Jeff Dillan [00:07:46]:

You know, recently, of course, now we're in the year of AI. There are so many AI companies that are, that are, that are out there and listed on the site. That's one big one. And the other one I'd like to talk about a little bit is digital experience platforms. So think of, think of content management back in the day where we were just creating content publish somewhere. Now we have all these transactions we want to conduct and integration. So that's been recognized by Gartner. Now this digital experience platform space is becoming very popular on the site.

Jeff Dillan [00:08:20]:

So those are two. I like to talk about that. A lot of people, they know about the AI, but when they hear dxp, they're not quite sure what that is.

Cheryl Broom [00:08:27]:

Yeah, I don't know what, I don't really. I haven't heard that term. Like how, what is it? Like what?

Jeff Dillan [00:08:31]:

Yeah, like I go back to. I really think it's like 15 plus years ago, all the school, you know, in the country were scrambling to create a process to publish content. Right. We had all these people and the bottleneck was the webmaster. So let's not have that bottleneck. Let's let everyone, all these subject matter experts on campus publish their content. And what's happened is we've become kind of the victims of our own success with these platforms because there's too much content out there now. So the DXP is really a CMS is one part of that platform where there's other parts, like an integration platform, a data store so you can personalize for your entire campus and deliver content across all these different endpoints, not just the website.

Jeff Dillan [00:09:13]:

You might have a mobile app, a portal, digital signage in addition to your website. So you can't. There's all these silos of content. And a CMS is often just one where you need a platform that really can push content out everywhere. So that's really what the DXP is. It's the evolution and the addition of other, other solutions into that platform.

Cheryl Broom [00:09:34]:

It sounds like a technology that you don't know that you need until you have it right. And then you're like, how did we ever exist without this?

Jeff Dillan [00:09:42]:

Exactly.

Cheryl Broom [00:09:44]:

On your platform, do people give bad reviews or are you only seeing good reviews?

Jeff Dillan [00:09:49]:

There haven't been any that have been too bad, but there's honest reviews, you know, and, and the software vendors can respond to that just like any other platform. But the ratings and reviews is, is pretty popular. So there, there are some that are not as great as others say that.

Cheryl Broom [00:10:06]:

So when I go on, can I see, like, oh, I, I'm looking for an AI company and now I can see other colleges that have used exactly this platform. So if I really want to call or email someone and be like, hey, give me, give me the truth off the record.

Jeff Dillan [00:10:22]:

That's the whole idea. That's the whole idea Shirley nailed on the head is that I like to quote the founder of HubSpot, Brian Halligan. He said, when you're looking to buy software, you look to your peers, your network. So higher ed never wants to be on the bleeding edge, but they always want to be kind of right behind the, you know, the bleeding edge, on the leading edge. So, yeah, you want to find out what other schools have done it that are like you. So you can search by size of school and find out what text stack that school has based on size or geography or whatever. But that was the initial use case was to let's connect schools to each other based on the software they're using. Pretty basic.

Jeff Dillan [00:10:56]:

But what we're realizing is these large schools like Arizona State University and the UC system have both told me, they're like, wow, we didn't even know we had this. We didn't know we'd already purchased this. This is great because they're so big, so they don't have to go through those extra procurement processes because it's already been approved at some level at their school. So it's been nice to see.

Cheryl Broom [00:11:16]:

Oh, my gosh. I can't tell you how many clients I have that have purchased. And they just sit like they're like, we have a CRM. I'll be in a meeting. Oh, do you have a CRM? And somebody will say yes and someone else will say no. And then it turns out they've had one for years and it's just been sitting around.

Jeff Dillan [00:11:33]:

Right?

Cheryl Broom [00:11:34]:

Maybe that's Your next technology solution is helping colleges keep track of what they've already bought.

Jeff Dillan [00:11:39]:

We can do it. Oh, you know, I, I thought, I thought the CIOs weren't going to really like this model. I was really nervous because they kind of lose control, right? They have to. Anyone at the university can say what they're using and. But that's not the case. They're using it and they're saying, I'm going to have my staff pre profiled so I can find out what's being used on my school. Because this model handles the faculty member using free software in their classroom. Not just a procurement for a large enterprise system, but companies are getting so clever with

marketing right to faculty and staff with edu pricing and free trials that it handles those little things too.

Cheryl Broom [00:12:15]:

Yeah, they really are. Well, I was curious to ask you more about some of the AI solutions that you've seen come through. How are people responding to those and do you think colleges are using them?

Jeff Dillan [00:12:26]:

Oh gosh, there's so much out there it's hard to keep up. And that's really exciting to see. You know, we've been using AI for a long time in higher ed, but not really this flavor of generative AI. So now we have generative AI and it's in the hands of the masses and so we're seeing things like, you know, I work for a company now and we have a search engine. It's like the best research engine for higher ed, I think that's what I like to say. And you know, there's a lot of great things you can do with that that we're working on now too where, you know, sometimes descriptions and meta information isn't put into a page when it's published. But generative AI can do that for you. So there's some really basic things that can be done to help your content be findable, but on the other end it can be used for personalization as well.

Jeff Dillan [00:13:13]:

So a lot of companies are using AI for personalization. The trick is you can't just search for something and it's hard to find it based on like what do you search for? Everyone's calling their platform like a student engagement platform or AI driven personalization or something like that. So that's what EdTech Connect is great about, is that you can really read about, have software being used in kind of a curated format that they all have to follow. So.

Cheryl Broom [00:13:39]:

Well, that's great. I just did a video to people who subscribe to our newsletter of three ways that your college can use AI? Because that's a question that I'm getting a lot from clients is like, do you know other people are using AI or other of your clients using it for their ads or for their content? So everybody wants to kind of like peek under everybody else's skirt before they, before they commit to something themselves.

Jeff Dillan [00:14:06]:

Yeah, I think personalization really is the next big, big thing for, for higher ed. I have a quick story about personalization which is it's been around for a long time. You know, I, in 2003, dating myself a little bit here, I was a webmaster at school and we tried to implement the latest cutting ed technology, which was personalized websites. Basically you'd ask us, you'd ask a student what they were interested in a bunch of majors. And once we knew they were interested in chemistry or biology, they would come back to have chemistry and biology photos displaying all over the website for them. But you know why it didn't work is because the manual process of backing that up with all that content, it was, it was manual. We couldn't keep up and we're like, oh, we'll just find some chemistry in biophotos and put them up there. But then the chemistry and biodepartment said those aren't correct photos.

Jeff Dillan [00:14:55]:

That's not what we use. And so they couldn't manage it. But they, we couldn't manage it either. Now it's all automated. Now this can be much more seamless because there's less manual, manual intervention to be able to pull it off.

Cheryl Broom [00:15:07]:

Yeah. Well, I have a story I want to tell you about personalization and a technology tool I was really impressed with. But before we go there, I'm going to take a quick break. How do higher education decision makers find.

Unknown [00:15:20]:

The right solution when technology evolves at light speed? Well, we usually start with our network. EdTechConnect is the network that's democratizing the higher ed technology conversation. EdTech Connect is free free. So anyone with a edu email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school.

Cheryl Broom [00:15:43]:

Once you're in, you can find out.

Unknown [00:15:44]:

What solutions similar schools are doing all over the country. Whether you're looking to find a hot new AI tool or maybe learn options, you have to upgrade your campus search.

Cheryl Broom [00:15:54]:

Engine or even get to your short.

Unknown [00:15:56]:

List of marketing solution vendors. EdTechConnect is the place to go. So visit EdTechConnect.com and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology.

Cheryl Broom [00:16:08]:

Today. Okay. And we're back. So we were talking about personalization technology, and maybe you have the answer. This is something you can find on EdTech Connect. So we did a secret shopper project. We were hired by a region who wanted to secret shop colleges and universities who have really been excelling in outreach and admissions. So they wanted us to find examples of other colleges who are doing it right, because these colleges were.

Cheryl Broom [00:16:38]:

Are kind of struggling with onboarding. And so one of the colleges that we looked at had a personalized portal that was just basically a URL. So if I submitted an inquiry form, I got connected with a counselor, and then the counselor gave me. It was like, college name Cheryl Broome. And then I go to that webpage, and it would have all the things I needed to do, like, oh,

you need to submit your application. You need to talk to this. And as I would do them, then they would go away. They would get checked off.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:09]:

I was like, this is so cool. Such a cool tool and such a way to really personalize a website and an experience for each student.

Jeff Dillan [00:17:20]:

Yeah. So as far as schools that are, they're doing a great job. One thing I found really interesting and part of the reason I left my career in higher ed to jump to the other side, to the vendor side, is a lot of companies are outside the US that are doing personalization really well. I'm shocked in Australia how many schools, even though they only have about 40 institutions, compared to our 4,000 here, they are doing some incredible things in Australia with personalization and with their whole infrastructure. So I do talk about that a little bit and to pivot a little bit on this, because I can't quite give away some of the secret sauce of the universities that actually we work with. One other symptom that we see to. To maybe get started in kind of revamping your. Your digital experience.

Jeff Dillan [00:18:05]:

Personalization is a core, but what we see is search. Search is kind of a symptom. If your search engine, you know, I like to say higher ed is the most complex environment you can deal with almost with all the Personas we have to satisfy. Students, prospective students, alumni, donors, athletes, community members. You know, that's just a sample. And then people, the internal people can't often agree that the homepage is maybe for internal versus external and that type of thing. But if your search engine isn't personalized, in a way, these go hand in hand. So one.

Jeff Dillan [00:18:38]:

One school I will point out right now that's doing it really well is Gonzaga. Gonzaga University up in Washington. And you need to not have your administrative search results mixed in with your academic search results. So personalization is great. Almost getting to individualization, but we need to take some steps here and say, like, at least do some basic things for your user where, you know, if you're sending your user to. Well, if you're searching the campus calendar, go over here. If you're searching the campus directory, go over here. If you're searching the campus website, go over here.

Jeff Dillan [00:19:11]:

And you really should do that in one place on the homepage, in one search result, in one search box.

Cheryl Broom [00:19:17]:

I love that you brought up Gonzaga, because that's actually a podcast guest I'm having on after your podcast goes live is from Gonzaga. And he took advantage of some global search that was happening around basketball and his location and turned it into amazing content on the website

that drove so much traffic, it, like, crashed the site. So Zimbabwe, but really capitalizing on what people are looking for. Yeah, yeah.

Jeff Dillan [00:19:48]:

They do search really well.

Cheryl Broom [00:19:49]:

So. So great. Like, oh, yeah. I think the big reminder is, who's your end user? Keep your end user in mind, and then build your platforms and your technology solutions around what they need.

Jeff Dillan [00:20:03]:

I think that's good advice, Cheryl.

Cheryl Broom [00:20:04]:

Thank you. And your end user is not your faculty and staff. Most of the time, it's your students. I hate. I have to tell you, I hate websites. We don't work on them much here at Gradcom because, like you said, it's like the world of competing demands, and everybody wants their space, and it's hard. It's hard to make those decisions. It's great that there's technology out there that can help you do it.

Cheryl Broom [00:20:30]:

So you are involved a lot, obviously, on the front end of identifying technology solutions. Have you heard from any colleges of challenges they have, like, once they find a vendor that they like, maybe like, the RFP process slowing them down or what should they be prepared for? Yeah.

Jeff Dillan [00:20:48]:

Oh, this is a good direction to go here. Yeah, this is right up my alley. Part of what I built into EdTech Connect when I was building it is when a vendor signs up, we do ask them one question that's a little unique, which is how much of your revenue or customer count is higher ed? Just a percentage. Answer one of the questions. And so I. I really believe there's a sweet spot of, you know, you know, at least 20% of your business needs to be higher at, if not much more. Because if you're. I won't name the companies, but if you're one of these humongous companies, we all know and they were all kind of having to use, but we're such a small part of their business that our use cases aren't going to matter.

Jeff Dillan [00:21:29]:

So they may have more resources devoted to higher ed than any of these other small to mid sized companies, but that's only because they're gigantic and so the licensing doesn't really work. So I just would watch out for those gargantuan companies for doing any sort of niche solution they do, they do their thing well, you know, their, their enterprise, whatever they're doing. And again, I'm not going to name the names, but I think we know the few we're talking about. But as far as finding a vendor and the rfp process, number one, the RFP process. I read so many RFPs that I'll use that CMS example again where they have their old CMS and they

know they're ready to change because it's end of life. Or they know they need to change for a feature they need, so they'll take all the current features and they'll add some more because they know they need a better cms. But really like what you just said is we need to look at it from the lens of the user. Like we're building a digital experience.

Jeff Dillan [00:22:24]:

A digital experience platform is what you need. We're not trying to get a new content management system. Let's look at it from the lens of the, of the end user. And if you can take that into account when you're writing RFPs, I think that really, that really helps. Rather than a bunch of features, a feature list and there's a, like a check like, yeah, we have that feature.

Cheryl Broom [00:22:42]:

Oh my gosh, that's. I. So I just want to give a piece of advice on RFPs to all the people out there because I'm writing this monster one right now and it's just terrible. And the questions like clearly were written by purchasing and not by the marketing department. And all I'm like, all these questions are totally irrelevant to what you actually are hiring us for. Like, it's clearly that this particular college has had a bad experience in the past because they keep asking the same question over and over, over, over and over, over. I was like, don't you want to know more about like marketing capabilities and creativity? And so please get involved in writing the questions for the rfp. For all those marketing directors listening to this.

Jeff Dillan [00:23:26]:

Yes, please, please get a hold of that RFP early.

Cheryl Broom [00:23:29]:

Oh my gosh. And then they had their question and answers. The addendum came out yesterday and There was like 87 questions and the answers were so rude. I'm like, oh, I've worked in higher ed so I understand that this is a purchasing guy sitting there answering it and not like the potential client I'll be working with. But I was like, man, if this was my client, I wouldn't even, I wouldn't even answer this. Answers to the questions were so incredibly unhelpful.

Jeff Dillan [00:23:54]:

So you know, we'd have to have a whole conversation about RFPs.

Cheryl Broom [00:23:59]:

Oh yes, I should, I should have a purchasing director on just to try to change one person. Well, do you have any advice for colleges, like questions they should be asking. I know your tech solutions that are on EdTech Connect range from smaller to really large tech solutions solutions and some of them, you know, for like marketing directors for example, we don't know the technology, we just know what functions it has to have. So sometimes it's hard to come up with the questions that will help you get to what you really need.

Jeff Dillan [00:24:30]:

Yeah, some, some good questions to ask I think are get a gauge of how fast the project can go, what the project timeline and process looks like. You want to hear the word agile at some point in there that they're an agile shop and they're going to work in more an iterative mode rather than kind of an old fashioned way I think. But really getting to understand, you know, the support the project, what is their experience in the space. Like I was getting at before, these are all pretty standard I see in the RFPs. But yeah, just to reinforce that project, that project, part of it it takes, you know, some of what I do is a lot of it's infrastructure related and it takes some of our competition just takes so long to implement. And so I just don't think it's realistic in this day and age to have any project go longer than six months. So that's a gauge. Anything if it's bigger than that, you know, some things might be you got to phase it in at some level like maybe a branding.

Jeff Dillan [00:25:24]:

I've seen a branding campaign. It's six months and then you do something else. But I would always stay away from these year long projects in this world these days if you can too.

Cheryl Broom [00:25:32]:

Yeah, I know we just did a branding project but the key was that we had decision makers at the college that were willing to make decisions decisions. So this, I'm in my RFP writing mode because one of the questions was like what does the district need to do to make this a successful project? And I was like, you need to make decisions timely. Yeah, we can move fast. We just need you to make a decision.

Jeff Dillan [00:25:55]:

Exactly.

Cheryl Broom [00:25:56]:

Well, we're really excited because here at Gradcom, we're part of EdTech Connect. So, you know, we've been talking a lot of technology, but your platform also now has service providers as well. So before we wrap up our conversation, tell our listeners what else they can find on the site. What, what else is available to them.

Jeff Dillan [00:26:13]:

Yeah, so great. Point that out. So we have a list of over 800 solution providers that have been vetted by higher education experts. A very small section of that is service providers too. So they don't have software to sell, but they are higher education specific service providers. Just like, just like Gradcom. Then you can find use cases for how is the software being used at different schools. And the great thing that you won't see from the public view, you have to sign up with your Edu email address is you can see all the people who've signed up and connect with them.

Jeff Dillan [00:26:44]:

So not only can I see who signed up from whatever school, but like, who are they, what do they do? And then you can collaborate with those people. And that's something we keep very tightly controlled just, just between the community itself. So that's not, that's not accessible to the vendors and the solution providers. That's just the higher ed community. So we hope everyone

signs up, it's free. There's no, there's nothing. We don't sell your information. It's not, there's no ads either.

Jeff Dillan [00:27:08]:

So once you log in, all we want you to do is fill out a profile and then that information is aggregated to an institutional level so that we have an idea of what's happening at schools like yours all over the country.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:19]:

And if you're on there and you see Gradcon, leave us a good review. Of course, of course. Well, thank you so much. I really wish that I had known or your platform was around when I was searching for technology at my college, because I think it would have saved me probably a good two or three months of trying to figure out who to call in the first place. So I think it's going to be wildly successful. I know it already is successful and I just hope that our listeners go and check it out and use it and continue to use it.

Jeff Dillan [00:27:51]:

Thanks, Cheryl. Appreciate it.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:53]:

Yeah, always so much fun. And I'm sure I will see you at the next conference.

Jeff Dillan [00:27:57]:

Bye. Bye.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:59]:

And that wraps up this episode of the Higher Education Conversations podcast. I'm host and GradComm CEO Cheryl Broom. A big thank you to our sponsor, EdTechConnect. EdTechConnect is free, so anyone with a EDU email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. So visit edtechconnect.com and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today. And while you're online, take a few minutes to leave our podcast a five star review. It will help other colleges and universities find us and learn from the great experts we have on the show. That's it for now.

Cheryl Broom [00:28:39]:

Until next time.