

Donna Johnson - 2021-04-28 transcript

Gavin Kelly

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Gavin Kelly

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Gabrielle Crockett

Hello everyone! My name is Gabrielle Crockett with the Office of University Communications here at Louisiana Tech University and you are listening to Beyond 1894. Today, I will be speaking with Dr. Donna Johnson, who currently serves as the Assistant Vice President for Academic Advancement and Partnerships for Louisiana Tech University. She oversees the Louisiana Tech Academic Success Center in Bossier City, the Tech Barksdale Program, and the Tech Shreveport Center. She also formerly served as the Executive Director of Caddo Bossier Partnerships and military outreach for Northwestern State University. She actively serves Louisiana Tech University and her Community, as well as her devotion to academic success to all learners. All right. Well, welcome to Beyond 1894 Donna, we're so glad to have you here!

Donna Johnson

Thank you for having me.

Gabrielle Crockett

So today, we're going to talk a little bit more about our academic partnerships along the I-20 corridor, some exciting initiatives happening over there, as well as some of our non-traditional educational opportunities that really cater to adult learners. You've mentioned that you have managed multiple University expansion and development initiatives, bolstered educational advancement in support of the Department of Defense, and have previously assumed teaching roles with Louisiana Tech, Northwestern State, Bossier Parish Community College, and Ashford University. That sounds like a lot. That's a lot of experience bringing in teaching and service. How has this prior experience prepared you for your role in overseeing the Louisiana Tech Academic Success Center in Bossier City?

Donna Johnson

So, I do have multiple experiences in the educational setting that have led me to where I am with Louisiana Tech right now, managing that academic success center in the classroom as an instructor

and as a student, but also as a Community leader over in Bossier. And so, with the Academic Success Center there in Bossier, what we're able to do is bring in educational opportunities as well as partnerships with industry partners, like GDIT, and we have a strong partner in the CIC where LTRI, Louisiana Technical Research Institute, operates. Bossier Parish Community College, and of course, the City of Bossier. All great partners to create this space in Bossier where we can have educational offerings and be a hub for the Community members and our partners to come in and host events, have meeting spaces, and kind of be, I guess, the hub of our Westward Expansion for Louisiana Tech.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow, that is incredible. So, some of those academic opportunities and offerings for the Community. What opportunities and resources do we have available to our Tech students, specifically at the ASC Tech Barksdale and another initiative. Is it Tech Shreveport Center?

Donna Johnson

Yeah, the Shreveport Center. So, I'll start at the Shreveport Center and, like you mentioned, there are three facilities there in the Shreveport-Bossier area where we operate fairly heavily. That Shreveport Center is the longest-standing physical building that is ours, and it's in Shreveport next to the airport. And in 2019, we created a CEA, entered into a cooperative endeavor agreement, it's like a partnership,

Gabrielle Crockett

A very long time ago.

Donna Johnson

Yeah, with Caddo Parish Schools, and one of the pieces of that CEA is the usage of that facility for Caddo Virtual Academy.

Gabrielle Crockett

Oh, okay.

Donna Johnson

And so, Caddo Virtual Academy is Caddo Parish's, it's their online high school. And what we didn't know, when we entered into that CEA and began letting Caddo Virtual take occupancy of that facility, was that COVID was coming. And so, we were there and ready and were already supporting the virtual education experience for Caddo Parish students. And so, that's what we've done in the Shreveport Center, and we're glad to still be partnering with Caddo Parish in that capacity. But like you asked about Tech Barksdale, Tech Barksdale is an operation on Barksdale Air Force Base. That's been there since the 60's.

Gabrielle Crockett

Oh, my goodness.

Donna Johnson

Yeah, a lot of people don't know that.

Gabrielle Crockett

It's a long legacy.

Donna Johnson

It is, it is. But the face of Tech Barks has changed over the decades. You know, if you look back at the 1960's, the face to face educational offerings was very important, especially for service members to make rank as they transferred base to base they needed a place to come and go to school. So, at Barksdale we were one of, there were several, but we were one of the privileged schools to have space there on the base. We operate under what's known as an "MOU", a Memorandum of understanding. It's like a contract with the base.

Gabrielle Crockett

Sure, okay.

Donna Johnson

With that MOU, that tells us what we can and can't offer to those individuals. It's almost like the rules of play, if you will, and that that's reviewed every five years, and that's actually coming up for review soon. But what we offer out there right now is the Associate of General Studies and Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies. And those are very unique degrees in that they're flexible.

Gabrielle Crockett

We love flexibility, especially in a post-pandemic climate with, with needing the flexibility of in classroom as well as online modalities. That's extremely important.

Donna Johnson

You're right. Modalities, but also the students we serve there. If you think of the military population, they're extremely transient. They come they go. And so them being able to come here, get what they need, bring with them what they already have, and leave and continue on with courses online with Tech Barksdale, it creates the opportunity for those service members, their dependents and, a little known fact, even Community members at Shreveport Bossier can attend Tech Barksdale.

Gabrielle Crockett

No way. Wow, I didn't realize that. That is such a shining star that is available to both our students, as well as the surrounding Community. That's, that's very incredible. You mentioned earlier about the Veterans Resource Center. Would you elaborate a little bit more about that?

Donna Johnson

Absolutely. So while we have Tech Barksdale that operates there on the Barksdale Air Force Base, that third facility, the Academic Success Center, is in close proximity to the base but it's housed there on the Bossier Parish Community College's campus. And, it's a facility born out of a partnership with many area partners, such as Bossier Parish Community College, General Dynamics, the CIC, are some of our biggest supporters, and of course the City of Bossier. And so, what we have done is we've come into that what's called the Cyber Research Park, right out there next to BPCC, close to the base, you can probably picture it, were I-220 and 20 intersect, that's right where we are.

Gabrielle Crockett

Okay, so truly in that hub of innovation and integrity. That's, that's incredible,

Donna Johnson

Right, and so in that spaces are where that Veterans Resource Center is housed. So that Veterans Resource Center is a space that's co occupied by a Bossier Parish Community College, VA certifying officer, as well as a Louisiana Tech Representative. And so, it's certainly the first in the state one of the first in the nation where a two-year school and a four-year research institution co occupy with the singular focus of serving those service members and their dependents, regardless of what type of program they may be interested in pursuing.

Gabrielle Crockett

That is, that is so incredible. I know I keep saying that word, but it's just so important, especially, you know, that these men and women go and serve on our behalf, you know, in our local communities, as well as abroad. And for us to be able just to give back in any way that we can to help them meet and accomplish their academic success in their educational goals, as well as building a career, whether in military or an industry that really just suits them best. So, Dr. Johnson, you actively serve Louisiana Tech University and your community through various steering committees and leadership roles. Just a couple to mention, you were 40, you achieved 40 under 40 in 2019, is that correct?

Donna Johnson

It is.

Gabrielle Crockett

Well congratulations. I also have here that you serve on the Louisiana Women in Higher Education, acronym LAWHE state steering committee. Can you touch a little bit about what you do with that initiative?

Donna Johnson

Yeah, so, LAWHE is a group of female educational administrators here within the state of Louisiana. And prior to Katrina, it was much more active than when Katrina hit, it was one of those initiatives that did not take top priority. I mean, we have to, you know, Crisis Response mode takes over and we do what we have to do. But there's been a recent initiative to revamp that. And so, Dr. Lisa Vosper has been leading that charge and I was lucky enough to be included with that. And so what we've attempted to do, again derailed by COVID, another crisis...

Gabrielle Crockett

Of course. Always. Always Derailed.

Donna Johnson

... was to start again with conferences, and almost encouragement, and a connection like networking for females in higher education.

Gabrielle Crockett

Prior to the pandemic, I had an opportunity in 2019 to actually attend the last or the, the last meeting that we had. And it was incredible just to be surrounded by our future leaders of just strong, independent women in higher education and the initiatives that they, that they are spearheading to bring growth, and diversity, and inclusion, and equity within higher education. So, I'm, I'm thankful to speak with someone who's also part of that same initiative. I also have here that you have served on various committees within the Shreveport and Bossier Chambers of Commerce, as well as touching a little bit back to our Barksdale conversation, you are an honorary Commander for Barksdale Air Force as of 2020, is that correct?

Donna Johnson

That is right. For the second maintenance group, yep.

Gabrielle Crockett

Okay, good deal. Well, with all of this community interaction, how has your dedication to service influenced your efforts to connect the Community to educational opportunities, academic partnerships, and just future growth?

Donna Johnson

I think my involvement with the Community lets me see the needs, the needs that exist, the populations that are being underserved, or, or need better service. And so, a lot of the initiatives that we do, you know, West of here, serve the population that's not the traditional campus student. These are not dorm dwellers. These are working adults, many times, or young adults who, for whatever reason, are not University campus-bound. And so, being able to reach them where they are, and seeing those needs by service on those committees and involvement in the community, it really helps me know how we should tailor some of our efforts and programs.

Gabrielle Crockett

Absolutely, and really feed into what is needed to be, to provide flexible opportunities and initiatives for our students, both traditional and non-traditional. So, now let's talk a little bit about your, some other educational opportunities, such as your educational opportunities. Now, Donna, correct me if I'm wrong, but are you a non-traditional student?

Donna Johnson

I was. First generation, non-traditional.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow. If you will elaborate a little bit more on that for me?

Donna Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. So, I came out of high school hailing C.E. Byrd, for those who are familiar with C.E. Byrd in Shreveport.

Gabrielle Crockett

Yeah, shout out to them!

Donna Johnsons

Yeah. From there I went to LSUS and, as it happens to some students, life got in the way. I actually had two kiddos and dropped out of college my senior year. You know, competing demands, for my efforts in time, I'm also, also was married to a service member. And so, it was time for us to move and I had two kiddos, and I had to drop out. It took a few years to be at home with the kiddos and catch my breath. And then, you know how they say the comeback is always stronger than the setback.

Gabrielle Crockett

Yes, they do. Absolutely.

Donna Johnson

I came back with a vengeance. So, I got back in the classroom as a student and finished that bachelor's degree while living in Texas and became a teacher, because I am passionate about helping others and about education. And, taught in the classrooms there in Texas for a few years, all the while continuing my own education, earning a Master's in Education from Wayland Baptist University. So, you know, just trying to be better at what I did. And then, following service, landed back at Barksdale Air Force Base.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow, that's coming full circle.

Donna Johnson

It's like a boomerang.

Gabrielle Crockett

It is! It really is like a boomerang.

Donna Johnson

Yeah, boomerang-ed back. And instead of going into the public schools in Louisiana, moved into higher education, beginning with Northwestern State University, and earning a second master's degree in English, because you know, if you can teach high school English, why not get another degree and teach college English?

Gabrielle Crockett

Right, of course.

Donna Johnson

So, I did that. And then, you know, as you make those ranks, and you feel those successes, and you're more and more driven, I used to say "I want more degrees than a thermometer".

Gabrielle Crockett

Hey, it sounds like you've definitely accomplished that goal.

Donna Johnson

Yeah. So, I had to, I had to top it off with one from Louisiana Tech.

Gabrielle Crockett

Of course. We may be a little bit biased, but we are, we're definitely thankful that you wanted to add us into your educational experience.

Donna Johnson

It's the perfect cherry on top. So that's where I earned my Doctor of Education is here at Tech. And what that did for me, again, that setback, that come back, that involvement, that passion to help others has really created a drive to provide opportunities. Education is the pathway to success, in my opinion. And, not to say that there aren't other ways to be successful, however, if I can help others be successful through education, then I'm going to do that.

Gabrielle Crockett

What is a piece of advice that, for someone who may be in the middle of their setback, what is a piece of advice that you could give them just of encouragement and of how they can accomplish their next steps, whatever those may be, both educational and career-based?

Donna Johnson

I would say be honest with yourself where you are. If you're in a setback, recognize it. And claim it and learn from it. Because even when we get setback, even when we fail, if we learn from that, then we've not lost. And after that, I would advise set goals, personal goals for yourself, achievable goals...

Gabrielle Crockett

So, your SMART goals, specific, measurable, achievable. Okay, good deal. Well, building off of that, and kind of feeding into the boomerang that you mentioned. How do you, how do you encourage someone to pursue that comeback, that no academic goal is unachievable? How can they tailor their needs to meet what is, what is best for them, what is specific to them? How can you encourage them to, to take that first step towards a comeback?

Donna Johnson

Well, I'll refer to my first step back as a starting point. So, when I moved to Texas, having not completed a degree, I was curious what opportunities were in that area. So, I sought information about schools where I was living. And, I will never forget the day I got a call from a lady working at one of the on base institutions, just like our Tech Barksdale office. It was a call back, kind of a cold call. She rang me as I was leaving the dentist office.

Gabrielle Crockett

Oh, we love that!

Donna Johnson

And I answered, and Angie was her name, and Angie was very encouraging, and said that she was looking over my transcripts I had, had sent, and told me she really thought I should come sit with her and look at what opportunities Wayland would have for me to finish that degree that I had started. And so, what that gave me at that moment was an inspiration that I wasn't looking for, and hope that that goal might really be possible. And so what we do, try to do, with the initiatives and programs that I help support, is to provide that inspiration, that hope, and that capacity to reach those goals. We do that with Tech Barksdale. The courses we have there and the way that we try to be non-traditional student friendly. They just come, non-traditional students, speaking from experience both as one and as in service to those who are, the needs that they come with are very different from one student to the other, much less from a traditional college student. And not only have I recognized that, but our state as a whole has begun to recognize that. And I'm grateful to be a part of the state task force for adult learners.

Gabrielle Crockett

That's fantastic work.

Donna Johnson

Yeah, it's a great group. And it's a heavy lift because the intent as Dr. Jim Henderson, our system president, says he hopes to inspire and promote the most educated population in Louisiana in the state's history with this initiative to serve the adult learners. And it's called Compete LA.

Gabrielle Crockett

That sounds incredibly inspirational. And I just want to touch on the fact that it all started with one interaction, with one conversation, of someone who with you sees your potential and sees your opportunities, and just wants to help you succeed and move forward in whatever, what your goals can be, and helping you thrive in your future careers. I mean, that is just so impactful in the fact that both here at Louisiana Tech and in conjunction with the University of Louisiana system that we have an initiative that feeds into that need, that feeds into the very necessary opportunity for non-traditional students and adult learners to accomplish any goal that they set out to do. Now you mentioned Compete LA. A little bit of background information, Compete LA is an educational opportunity, partnered with the University of Louisiana system, where students who did not complete their degree initially, can come back to their university and complete their unfinished degree. Dr. Johnson, would you elaborate more about this non-traditional educational route that is available for adult learners and about Tech's affiliation with that opportunity?

Donna Johnson

Absolutely Gabrielle. So, Compete LA, I don't want to say was the brainchild of our system office, but is certainly the push from the system office. And rightfully so. There are 650,000 adults in our state with some college credit and no degree. And I say 650,000 as a round number, but we can take two off of that, because I know for sure we at Louisiana Tech have reengaged two of those who were our former students to come back and finish and graduate.

Gabrielle Crockett

Okay, that's wonderful. That's so, that is such great news.

Donna Johnson

Yeah. And we're not finished. And so, with Compete LA, our system institutions, all of us work together to create a unified push. We've got marketing, we've got websites. What our system office in Baton Rouge has also done is they've hired coaches, we can call it concierge service, for those returning adult learners, who may be confused. So, if these adult learners were in college 15-20 years ago, the whole landscape has changed,

Gabrielle Crockett

Of course.

Donna Johnson

And so how do you navigate that? So, these coaches are there to help. So, an adult learner who's interested in maybe getting back in there and finishing a degree they had started long ago or seeing what other degrees they may be interested in. They can engage with us directly or with the system office first, with one of the coaches there, and the coach would direct that student down the right paths to getting, you know, the right veins to return to the institution either A, that they formerly attended, or find another institution that fits their needs. And so through Compete LA, we're gaining students that are new to Louisiana Tech, as well as former Louisiana Tech students who had not completed.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow, that is so interesting and enlightening that we are encouraging people to finish what they already started. The goals that they already had set out to do never went away but, just, had another spark, had another light that can ignite them to, to finish those and to be an inspiration to, to future generations to do what's best for them and be leaders in their community and in other capacities. With Compete LA, what are some of the degrees that we provide through Louisiana Tech University?

Donna Johnson

So, any degree of course is open for an eligible student to return to. But, what our system institutions have done is, we've created a portfolio of programs that all of our institutions agree meet some of those diverse needs of adult learners with flexibility, online availability, and the way the courses are offered. The ones that we have in that portfolio are the Associative General Studies. That's a bite size degree with large flexibility and online courses. The Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies, which is a larger, you know, four-year degree, but with the same idea of flexibility. A student can bring in transfer credit and or use previously earned credit in much more flexible ways in that program than they can in other degrees. And then, of course, the online classes that are part of that. Lastly, is the Health Information Management (HIM). That one's more prescriptive in it's curricula, but it is such a wonderful degree for the healthcare field, and it's completely online. So regardless of location...

Gabrielle Crockett

So complete flexibility.

Donna Johnson

Yeah absolutely, with time and place. So those are the degrees we have. And kind of along those lines, a nice little bit to know, is the price point.

Gabrielle Crockett

Sure. Yes, please, we all want to know how much does it take to take that next step?

Donna Johnson

For Compete LA, what we have done for those programs that I just mentioned at Tech, we've created what's called a flat per credit hour rate guide is the most transparent pricing structure for higher-ed. And many institutions are looking at that for broader usage across campus. But for us, our Compete LA students are eligible to receive that flat rate of \$275 per credit hour, not per course, per credit hour, so long as they're in one of those programs and are Compete LA eligible. We're in the process of exploring whether or not we can extend that rate not only to those programs in our portfolio for Compete LA, but to all of our Louisiana Tech degrees for those returning adult learners.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow, that is a very an incredible opportunity to explore. But it also already provides that pathway for our adult learners to come right back and achieve success, whether that is in bite sized chunks or at their own pace. That's, that's really, that's incredible. So, Dr. Johnson, we currently live, as I mentioned earlier, in a post pandemic, climate. The needs of flexibility, everyone wears multiple hats, whether that's having zoom conversations while taking care of their children, and just trying to really navigate what life looks like now, going forward. What encouragement would you give to our listeners who are looking for those for their next steps in their academic journey?

Donna Johnson

In their academic journey, I would say, be flexible, because we've all had to be flexible. But also, do your homework before beginning. Be sure that the credential you're attempting to earn is the credential that will get you where you want to go. Understand what would be expected of you as you work toward that goal, that academic goal. And then be sure that you're honest with yourself about whether or not you're going to give that goal the attention it deserves. So, yeah, moving forward, who knows post pandemic, how the chips will fall. I think we've all gotten a taste of remote work, remote learning. Some of those things are here to stay, and certainly some are not. I just had a chapter published with Georgia Tech in one of their books, "Moving Horizontally", essentially talking about the lift the institutions had to do sure to survive during COVID, and then what that might mean later on. And so, what we've done here at Tech, and I give many, many kudos to all of the teams who worked to bring this about from the academics, to our IT personnel. So, but to take an institution completely remote...

Gabrielle Crockett

Was almost unheard of prior to the pandemic.

Donna Johnson

Yeah, but we've done it such that moving forward the infrastructure is there, the infrastructure to support multimodality learning, whether that's hyflex, online, or in-person. You know, if you think of it like Burger King, "Have it your way!", build your schedule your way! There are going to be opportunities

in the future that may become available to those who are seeking out new goals that were not there or were not achievable before, because of the advancements that we've been able to make.

Gabrielle Crockett

Wow, that is, that is definitely hopeful. As an MBA candidate myself, and someone who is an online learner, I'm thankful to be a part of an institution who seeks the needs of students and moving forward in what is necessary in meeting needs and moving targets in different people's lives, both academically and professionally. So how do we connect our friends who are choosing their next steps in their academic journey, and set them up for success to meet and accomplish their academic educational goals?

Donna Johnson

I would say the first step is reach out to someone. As the example I shared with you about my recall, if you will, leaving in the dentist office, that would not have happened had I not taken that step to seek out what opportunities were in that city and town that I was living in. Had I not taken that step to do my homework, then there would not have been a call to me to help me understand that it's achievable. So how we help is encouraged. Please reach out to the University, the Office of Admissions or Tech Barksdale. And, and let us know what you're looking for. And that's exactly where I would start.

Gabrielle Crockett

Okay, good deal, and we will definitely provide more information on where our listeners can, how they can connect with us to connect with our admission specialists and to the Academic Success Center and Tech Barksdale, and providing links and contact information for Compete LA in our show notes. What is one piece of advice that you would give to someone once they've taken that leap, and they've made the decision to accomplish their educational goals? What advice would you give them, following that phone call, following that interaction, maybe even as they are scheduling their first course as a non-traditional student, and the hope ahead of them going forward?

Donna Johnson

Hustle beats talent. That's exactly what I would tell them. And so, when you feel like maybe you can't, maybe you're not good enough, maybe you failed before, if you keep persevering, hustle. Hustle. And have a good reason to hustle, you know, whatever drives you. And when you're ready to give up, remember why you started in the first place.

Gabrielle Crockett

All right. Well, Dr. Johnson, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you for sharing your experience. I know I have learned so much and am encouraged and empowered not only to pursue my educational and career goals, but I hope that our listeners are empowered to take their next steps that are best for their educational goals and to boomerang them forward into their future career success.

Donna Johnson

Well, thank you for having me Gabby.

Gabrielle Crockett

Absolutely.

Gavin Kelly

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Gavin Kelly

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