Episode 13: Brad Zdenek

# KL: Katie LinderBZ: Brad ZdenekKL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode thirteen.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

# On this episode, I am joined by Brad Zdenek, the Innovation Strategist for the Center for Online Innovation in Learning at Penn State University, where he is responsible for initiating, directing, conducting, analyzing and reporting on the Center’s projects, research, and evaluation activities. Brad earned his B.A. in Secondary Education at Flagler College in Florida and taught middle school Social Studies in North Carolina prior to joining Penn State. While at Penn State, Brad worked with the Regional Educational Laboratory program leading a team in developing and delivering professional development opportunities throughout the Mid-Atlantic region focused on bridging scientifically valid research, policy, and practice. Brad is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at Penn State. His research interests include professional development and adult learning, educational ethics, and the integration and diffusion of educational technology.

Thank you so much for joining me Brad.

**BZ**: Thank you for having me.

**KL**: So Brad you and I met recently in person because we co-presented a session together at the online learning consortium conference, that innovate conference in New Orleans recently and we were talking about creating an institutional research agenda or initiative around distance education research. And I’ve been familiar with your work at the center for online innovation and learning or COIL at Penn state. I’m wondering if you can start off just by telling us a little bit more about COIL.

**BZ**: Certainly, COIL is somewhat at least at Penn state and in our experience working with other institute at higher education, COIL is somewhat a unique center in that we are a cross discipline research and development center that serves Penn state as a whole. That includes our primary campus here at the University Park as well as the twenty three other campuses, plus our world campus. Really what we are charged with and what we are focus on is creating and sustaining a culture of innovation, collaboration and invention. A laser focused on improving learning at the university and we’re very intentional with the selection of our name. You’ll notice that we are the center for online innovation and learning rather than the center for innovation and online learning and that was purposeful in bringing ourselves together (so I’m pushing four years ago now) where we saw that the demarcation between online and residential instruction and pedagogy and learning is really become less meaningful as time goes on. So we created ourselves, we focused our mission statement on developing online innovations and learning that can be applied in the online context but can also be applied in the traditional residential, in hybrid, in various mixed methodologies. And so basically this idea that even in those residential settings, what will you learn? What we gain? What we can grasp from that research, is also going to be applied eventually in the online world, it’s not immediately an online world. So, COIL does that sort of work in a number of different ways. One avenue being researched as we’ll talk about in a second but we do a number of other traditional activities as well in pursuit of that goal. One of them being putting together events where we bring in leading thinkers, thought leaders from around the world to the university, to inject and infuse new ideas and perhaps excitement at the university. We do COIL conversations where we highlight innovative ideas from around our university, faculty, staffs, students that are doing new and innovative things and the research they may be engaged in related to those things. We give them a platform and highlight what they are doing. As well as running a research initiation grant process where we provide feed funding for research and development project related to online leadership and learning. And we also run a leadership development institute and some workshops and a smattering of other things that we’re involved in. We focus on leveraging the capacity that’s already here at Pen state. The research that’s already being done, the development projects are already happening, the great work that’s being done by faculty, staff and students across the university and seeing what we can do to try to bring those two together into some sort of cohesive research plan or research track or at least focus so that we can translate those research findings into actionable steps that we can have for our world campus as well as residential instruction.

**KL**: I love that focus on kind of the practical of the research and what do you do with it when you have these outcomes? I think that’s something that is so important, particularly for research and education. It sounds like a lot of the work that you’re doing at COIL is really about community building within your research community around the topic of innovation. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that and maybe get into a little bit about how the research endeavor is really developing as your starting to build these communities.

**BZ**: Absolutely, you know if you were to force me right now to have a word to help define COIL or how we define ourselves, its connector. We see ourselves as a connector here at the university because one of the things that’s unique about us is that we are not housed in our world campus. We are not housed in education, we are not housed in IST. We serve the university as a whole and I should say that we are a partnership, we came out of a partnership between our college of education, our college of IST, outreach in online education or our world campus as well as our world campus here at the university. And then eventually, we also brought on our teaching and learning with technology group. So we actually have six directors at the table and we have a very broad focus for who we are serving and what we are doing. Now what’s interesting in what you ask is that connection point between the research that we’re conducting or the research we are funding, I should say. What we do is we essentially take those research results that we have after we provide some seed funding and seed funding looks like $40,000 for a one year to 18 month project. Once that project is done after 18 months or more accurately after two years and we’ve seen some results, we gotten data analyzed and we know what’s going; then we take those results and we do that connecting piece. We look for the places where that information, that research that’s just been conducted or that thing that has been developed, where that could have the greatest impact here at the university. And that’s where that cross disciplinary team approach is really important. By having six directors at the table is important because each one has a different view of what’s going on and who could use this information and could use this capacity that we are building. Let me give you a concrete example, one of our earliest projects in the research initiation program was the development of a digital badging platform, this was three and a half years ago. When the proposal came in and what the proposal was, was to develop this digital badging or micro-credentialing platform for providing some sort of credentialing related to particularly soft skills around the university but also with the long-term intent of pulling away the competencies from credit units and being able to provide some sort of takeaway for students for those skills that they are not necessarily having recognized in their standard transcripts. So for instance, public speaking, or perhaps it is collaboration, or perhaps it is some sort of leadership aspect particularly in the non-formal learning spaces. Leadership is something that just isn’t recognized in a formal transcript. So the idea was to build this digital badging platform. We spent the money, had the project, 18 months later he have a minimally viable product. Now the question was, what do we do with that? So then that’s when COIL stepped in and said, you know who we need to link you to, our teaching and learning technology unit. And we’ve facilitated the connections between the research project that has just been finish and TLT. Once those discussions started to grow legs and started to progress, we pulled ourselves away from that discussion because now we’ve seen our job is done, we’ve facilitated that connection and now two years after the completion of that project, we now have badges.psu.edu, which is a digital badging platform available to all faculty staff and students here at the university. And we’re also exploring avenues for licensing that tool out to other universities. That’s an outcome of that initial research that we conducted and it was facilitated through these various means by us, not just throwing money at the problem but also looking at facilitating the connections down the line as well.

**KL**: That’s so exciting and I think one of the things that you’ve really pointed out is what it means to have internally within an institution, relationship building between units that as you say may not really know what’s going on in other parts of the university and particularly with a large institution but I’ve even seen this with smaller institutions. You know the left hand doesn’t quite know what the right hand is doing and so that’s really great that you can build those connections.

**BZ**: You know everyone talks about silos but it’s true and as you said, I’ve talked to individuals from all different sized universities and colleges and it seems like a vast majority of them are experiencing the same exact issue regardless of size.

**KL**: Well I think you’ve raised such an important point about what kinds of collaborations are needed to really broaden the impact of research efforts and also just to remind listeners, episode 6 of the podcasts, we’ve talked about research collaboration for those who want to hear a little bit more about that. But we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to talk a little bit about creating institutional research agendas, back at a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL**: So brad one of the things that you and I have in common in our roles; you working with COIL and then I’m directing our research unit here at Ecampus, is both of us are kind of focused on creating and nurturing institutional research agendas around distance education. Which I think is slightly different, well maybe different in some major ways to maybe personal research agendas that we might have. I think a lot of researchers when they start out they are really thinking about their career and the research pipeline in trajectory and maybe they are a part of a team or a lab or a unit but they may not be thinking about it from the intuitional level. I’d love to talk a little bit more about the institutional research that you’re shifting to with COIL and the benefits and challenges of that. Let’s start out by thinking about, when you’re shaping COIL and the research agendas is there, to what degree is tied to your institutional mission?

**BZ**: Tied very closely. The research that we’re involved in, the research that we fund is purposely closely tied with the various levels of definition of our institutional research here at the university. So being the size that we are, we are a 9,000 academic staff and 98,000 students, 24 campuses plus our world campus, we’re big and there are a lot of moving parts and a lot of people working on different things. But our president, president Barren has done an excellent job of laying out some key priorities for the university. Those were translated into some more actionable steps by our provost Tom, Nick, Jones and those have then been filtered down to specific colleges and units where we look at what the provost just providing in leadership and also looking at our particular context and using the combination of those two to help create a well-defined research agenda for our particular needs. Annually we sit down and essentially do environmental scanning. We do surveys, we do focus groups, we sit down with these individuals that are leading various efforts and initiatives across the university and say “What are your sailing needs? What’s going on?” Because we are a center for innovation as well, “What do you see coming up in the next five years? What do you see in the next ten years? What don’t you have enough information related to, to make good decisions? Where do we need to augment our research base?” And after we gather all of that information, we then take that to that directors table and we think through all of that. We do some basic analysis of the information that comes in and then we use that to distill down into essentially two or three, generally its three different research priorities for us as a unit, for COIL. Currently our two fanatic areas that we have built our current research around is personalization and student retention and that’s how we built our research. And you’re absolutely right, it is very different than the individual research agendas that any of us would have but honestly that’s one of the things that I love most about this position in our unit. It provides me with the opportunity to learn about new things on a regular basis and to be involved in some of the fast-moving and innovative work related to learning that if I was working on my own, I most likely would let it slip by, I wouldn’t have my finger on that pulse.

**KL**: Yeah absolutely, I completely agree with that. We have a fellows program here that works in a similar way were we fund research projects and it’s the same. I get to learn about all kinds of things from our fellows that I never would have been able to do by myself. It sounds like as your talking, I’m hearing two benefits come out of the way that you’re thinking about these research priorities and one of them is by having a bunch of different folks at the table, you’re able to have broader conversations at an institutional level about how to move some of these things forward and having people all be able to weigh in about where they think you are at any given point in terms of innovation or maybe a culture around innovation. But also a second benefit is that you’re able to tailor the research so that it’s really practically applicable to issues and problems that you’ve identified as an institution, from this range of stakeholders and that you know it’s going to have an immediate impact and I think that, that intentional planning for impact is huge. That’s such a great benefit of thinking through this at an institutional level.

**BZ**: Absolutely and particularly when you’re speaking of developing platforms or tools which is also part of what we do, there’s research related to those platforms and tools that are developed. But when you develop those tools, I have found that very often you can create a great tool but if you’ve done it in isolation and then you bring it to that broader body, individuals are surprised by a hesitancy to adopt, by a hesitancy to embrace and move forward. Rather than when your overcoming that tendency to silo, having a collaborative group, being open, having that inclusive mindset; When those stakeholders are at the table at the very beginning and they understand your mission and what you’re doing and the research your involved in and had a voice in helping to guide that or to find that, then it changes that proposition when you bring those ideas, some of those tools to the table. Suddenly they have ownership of it, at least partial ownership or a stake in it, where they see the connecting point between their input and what has come out two years later or a year and a half later. And it has really helped us in building a larger family and building a larger collaborative network and acceptance.

**KL**: That’s really exciting, the other thing I think is, as we think about all of these benefits and all these practical uses and collaborations that this can bring to an institution, of course there’s the flip side which is anytime you bring something to the institutional level, there are challenges that come with that. One of the challenges that we’ve faced and it sounds a little bit like you guys may have face this as well is when you you’re actually choosing your research priorities. There are a lot of things to choose from particularly in distance education research where were still building up a lot of the literature and the research on online teaching and learning. I’m kind of curious, have you had that challenge? Do you see other challenges when you’re trying to create this institutional research agenda and also to move it forward because it’s not just creating it like a one-time thing, it transitions and it changes over time.

BZ: Well no we don’t have any problems here. You’re absolutely right and that’s one of the problems with collaboration. Collaboration is not all sunshine and rainbows. There are significant challenges to bring your voices to the table and there are some legitimate concerns and some legitimate feedback that we receive that we have to struggle with. But the idea is in the end, what are our value? What are our value as an institution? What are our values as a center? One of the things that we hold as a core value is that openness and collaboration across a university and so when we’re faced with many of the challenges, it helps us to power through those. It helps us to think with a mindset of rather than this is an obstacle, to thinking of these challenges as how do we either prevent this challenge from coming up again or why is it coming to being in the first place. When we have had challenges it has often been because we have had a failure to include the correct voices at the table. One of the things that, this comes from my educational ethics work, I do a lot with critical theorists and looking at any situation as, what voice is missing? And I think going back to who COIL is and I mentioned a few times but I didn’t focus on it, is very often particularly within academic pursuit and pursuit of research and development, we can have a tendency to become faculty focused and leave out the voices of staff and students; particularly within the innovation space. Staff and students can be originators of some of the most innovative ideas and some of the potentially most impactful ideas. This has been demonstrated in our research initiation grants. Twenty three percent of our research initiation grant have gone to students. They compete on an equal playing field with senior faculty, junior faculty, with staff, and essentially anyone that is a student or employed by Penn State compete on equal fields; 23% for students 25% for staff and the remainder being faculty of all different levels.

**KL**: That’s such a great component of that program.

**BZ**: Yeah it’s something we’re very proud of and again it’s been intentional and it’s been that inclusive mindset to try to overcome the various challenges that we do face because as you said there are particularly at universities of this size, there are a lot of competing interests, there are a lot of things going on, there are a lot of research agendas and coming up with any sort of cohesive institutional research agenda can be challenging.

**KL**: Well those are some really great things to think about as we’re thinking about creating institutional research agendas. We’re going to take another brief break and then when we come back, we’re going to talk a little bit about Brad’s thoughts and the disconnect between needs and capacity for research and higher education, Back in a minute.

# Segment 3:

**KL**: Brad I know that something you are very passionate about is the disconnect between needs and capacity for research in higher education. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, what do you mean by needs and disconnect?

**BZ**: Sure and this has been a passion of mines for years now, even before I came to the center for online innovation and learning. As you would mention I worked for a regional education laboratory here at Penn State for a few years directing the professional development within that center. But when that contracts or that grant was up, I was still an accepting member within the college of education and I had a little bit of funding to kind of do what I wanted to do for years. It was a wonderful opportunity, I had no teaching duties but the residual from that grant still paid for my salaries for a year and so I was able to work on a project that is now defunct but it was a project called STEM scouts. It was a digital badging platform for K-12 STEM education: Science, technology, engineering and mathematics. And it was this passion project of mine that I worked on with a faculty member here at University Park by the name of Kyle Pack in the college of education. And Kyle and I worked on this project and we had this need, we needed to build this platform but it was he and I. But I can hack my way around some technology and I kind of know what I’m doing, I know enough to get myself in trouble. I didn’t have the skillsets necessary to bring this project where I needed to go. I had the ability to create a vision for it and to think it through but I couldn’t actually do it. So what I endeavored here at the university was to find that capacity, I knew it was here, I knew that there are individuals who could code a website for me. I knew there are individuals who were experts in relational databases, I knew there are individuals that could help me with the pedagogy and to think through how to build this digital badging platform and how to recognize competency. I knew that there were STEM experts here at the university, I knew they were here but I couldn’t find those individuals. I couldn’t find that capacity that latent capacity that was here whether it be faculty, staff or students. And so we once again fell back and relied upon serendipity. Who did I know? Who did Kyle know? We reached out to them, hoped that they be able to point us in the right direction and it was an effort in frustration. Now I have moved to COIL and particularly with these research initiation grants I have individuals coming to me on a regular basis with great ideas, innovative ideas. Each cycle we receive about thirty submissions, that’s fifty submissions a year and I probably have about an additional twenty or thirty ideas brought to me here. So we’re talking a hundred or plus ideas brought to me each year that most of them are relatively well thought through and could have great impacts on learning. Most of them die, one of the reasons why is because they cannot connect their needs within these projects to the latent capacity that’s here at the university. One of the things that I have been focused on is figuring out what kind of tools can we build? What can we do to facilitate the connection between the research needs here at the university and the interests here at the university and the capacity that is already in place whether it be faculty staff or students. This is a big thing for students as well where you’re coming into this large university and it’s difficult enough to navigate. You’re trying to figure where classes are. Being able to find a faculty member or a right faculty member that shares your interests and can give you entrance into that world whether it be virtual reality or augmented reality or haptic feedback or whatever you happen to be interested in. It relies on your personality and your connections and I would love to find a way to overcome that and we’ve got some ideas internally, we’ve got some development projects internally for building systems to do that but it is a common issue that I’m finding with everyone I talked to when I go to conferences. I just presented on this at OLC, online learning consortium, an innovate conference last month and person after person I talked to said “I’d love to be a part of this because I have the same challenge.”

**KL**: This is such an important issue, I think that particularly related to, I know you’re talking about it in broader terms but when I think about this in relationship to research, I think of researchers who envision a project and they don’t have the research methodology background to complete it on their own. I think that we are moving into, we’re already there, it’s been some time where one researcher cannot contain all of the skills that is needed to do some of the complicated research that needs to happen in a range of disciplines. I think that this is a broad issue but I also think that it’s very hard. I think some researchers think they should have all this skills and so they have a hard time acknowledging to other people. You know, I don’t have this or I don’t know how to do this; we’re not use to saying that and putting that out there but I think we need to be more open about the fact that this will not happen. Certain questions won’t be answered unless we really say we need more than one person to tackle this issue or question in order to get results.

**BZ**: Absolutely, now imagine you have this idea. You’re a graduate student, you have this great research idea but it’s that. Perhaps the best research methodology is quantitative and you’ve worked in qualitative your whole life and you’re not comfortable there, you need some help. Maybe there are some support units that you could walk into at your university. Here at Penn State, we have a few. Some cost, so you have no funding, your cut out right there, some are there for free. But imagine if you have this great idea, right now the best you could do is you could try to reach out and find someone to help you support and help you navigate the system. But what if there was a tool, what if there was a combination of Facebook, or Reedit, and a Kickstarter? Where you can go in and you can create a post on your idea, what your research questions are and also listing out: what you need, what do you think you need, what’s the capacity that you need brought to the table, do you need a quantitative methodologists, do you need someone in education who can speak to pedagogy, do you need a faculty member with a large enrollment course that would be willing to pilot or would be willing to allow you to collect data, what do you need. You post that up in a board that’s shared by all faculty staff and students at your institution. That idea can be voted up and the best ideas start to rise to the surface and what you can do within that is you can essentially say, “Yes I want to be a part of this.” You can click on a button to say “I’m willing to commit some of my time to talk to you about this idea.” And it reasons the visibility of those ideas and allows them to compete on a mere idea rather than the established networks that are already in place. It takes it out of that social aspect of who do you know and who do you interact with, which is a key concern for online learners, who don’t necessarily have that opportunity for serendipity that students walk in through the halls in a building may have. And that tool allows them to overcome those challenges and to find a network and then within that you can have profiles where I put in what are my areas of expertise, where are my areas of interest and you can click on another screen that shows you a radar screen of who’s most closely aligned with you within the system. “Oh I didn’t know Bob Johnson over there but he shares all of my interests and happens to be in IST rather than the college of education, maybe I should have lunch with that person”; facilitating connections, bringing needs and capacity together at an institution particularly of our size at Penn State. But again, I’ve heard that this is an issue everywhere. This seems like the kind of tool that should be in place already but it isn’t.

**KL**: Yeah absolutely, I think that what a great idea to move people out of isolation in terms of their research and also it hasn’t been mentioned but seems like a natural fit here is mentorship. What a great way to connect people with potential peer-mentors or groups that could be mentoring each other about how to do certain kinds of research methods or even talking more about the kinds of questions that are of mutual interest to them. I hope that you develop this tool, it sounds great I would love a tool like that.

**BZ**: I continue to present on it at conferences as I worked through the ideation process and as we start to do a development of this but it’s a tool that I see, its time has come and I’m starting to see elements of this. I’m working with a few different groups right now on students and our dashboards and what that looks like for bringing the entire student formal and informal learning environment together for them at one dashboard and this is coming up again and again of, how do we find people like us, how do we form study groups, how do we form interest groups. Again finding some way of systematizing that (without being too ridged) at a university so that it steps over those limitations of place, of personality, of established networks and allows everyone to be on equal field.

**KL**: Well I love that idea, I would also love to hear from our podcasts listeners about, “Are there tools that you’re using already to help you make these connections with other researchers and what is your interest in having a tool like the one that Brad is describing because I think it sounds great,” I want to thank you so much Brad for taking the time to come on and share some of your experience with COIL and also your ideas for creating institutional research agendas and connecting needs and capacity for researchers, thanks so much.

**BZ**: Thank you and thank you for your leadership in this space its much appreciated.

**KL**: Thank you that’s so kind and thank you also to our listeners joining us for this week’s episode of research in action, I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in each episode, as well as the transcript for each episode, can be found at the *Research in Action* website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL**: In this bonus clip for episode 13 of research in action, Brad Zdenek talks about collaboration between COIL and external partners, take a listen.

I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about where you see COIL in terms of more external outreach from the institution to the broader distance education research community. What kind of relationship building are you working on there?

**BZ**: This is actually something we’ll probably talk about a little bit further into this conversation, is one of the greatest challenges that we face is systematizing any sort of way that development of both internal but particularly for your question external networks and collaborative groups for which we can get the biggest bangs for our buck for the projects that were involved in. And unfortunately in the past, it has been so dependent upon serendipity. It has been so dependent upon, who’s that person you talked to at that last conference, who’s this person that use to work here but has now moved to another university. What is that personal network that you have and it’s so dependent on the individuals at the table. Again, one of the benefits of having this collaborative group: education, IST, TLT, outreach and online education, as well as other groups that we invite into our leadership team; one of the benefits of that is that we have a very broad and vast external collaborative network and professional network and academic network. Of the six on our board of directors, three are faculty members and three are staff members here at the university. What that allows us to do is it allows us to leverage those different connections that they have. Then we also have the traditional marketing and outreach and our events are open to all whether they are here at the university or not. Anyone can come to one of our workshops; anyone can view these COIL conversations. We’ve live stream everything that we do, were as transparent as possible. For our research initiation grants, we actually, in our criteria for evaluating the proposals we actually provide extra points for teams that come with collaborative groups, particularly those that are across a university. If you are a principle investigator on a project from here at Penn State you can receive additional points by reaching out to other groups whether it be nearby with Carnegie Mellon or with Drexel or you reach out across the world or across the country. And we’ve had a number of different projects that have been funded with international teams and again that helps us build that network that we then bring into the fold and they become part of COIL. We call them our COIL family whether they address themselves as that or not I don’t know but we include them as much as we could. It’s that inclusive mindset that has really helped us to grow as we have grown and our impact as we look and we look at the projects that we have funded and where they are being used; at what universities they are being used. Our digital badging tool alone has been used at more than half dozen different universities right now; colleges and universities. And it’s less than two years old, its less than one year from completion and we have other projects that are being used as well. Particularly some of our VR work. We been doing a fair amount of work in virtual reality and oculus rift and some of that is being leveraged by other colleges and universities. But again it’s been based on that idea of serendipity. Who we know, who we can reach out to and who’s already within our established network. And that’s something that we’re continuing to work on, is figuring out a way how we can facilitate more interactions between ourselves and external groups, external universities and internal groups.

**KL**: You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 13 of research in action with Brad Zdenek talking about collaborations with COIL and external partners. Thanks for listening.

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