Episode 39: Jill Buban

**KL:** Katie Linder

**JB:** Jill Buban

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode 39.

[*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’m joined by Dr. Jill Buban, who serves as senior director of research and innovation for the Online Learning Consortium. In this role, she works with institutions across the country to disperse online and blended learning research. Prior to joining the Online Learning Consortium, Dr. Buban was the Assistant Provost for Research and Innovation at Post University. Prior to joining Post University, Buban worked in Academic Affairs at SUNY Empire State College. Dr. Buban continues to study and present on topics surrounding effective technology use for adult learners and online environments. She holds a Ph.D. in adult learning and continues to teach in the areas of adult and online learning.

Thanks so much for joining me today, Jill!

**JB:** Hi, Katie. It’s great to be here.

**KL:** So, Jill, I’m fascinated—we actually had an earlier episode with someone who’d kind of shifted from academia to industry, when we talked with Nina Huntemann, who’s at edX—but I’m also really fascinated about your story, because you’ve also shifted from academia to industry with your work with the Online Learning Consortium. And so I thought we could just start a little bit by talking about what led you to start thinking about moving from academia to industry, what were the kinds of things that might have intrigued you about making that shift.

**JB:** Sure. So, I don’t think my story is a very unique one. I was an assistant provost at a fairly large online university, and I was very fortunate to be in that role, but also balancing life and really thinking about what is meaningful work to me and what is my career trajectory at this point.... For me, it was very important that I was doing something meaningful and that I had an impact, and the—going up the ladder wasn’t as important to me as looking for something that I felt that I was making an impact, still within higher education. So, in looking, I was very selective at what I was looking for because there was nothing that was forcing me to make a move. I had been fortunate enough to do some work with OLC when it was the Sloan Consortium about five or six years ago, and I’d always followed the organization, always attended conferences and thought that that would be a way that I could continue my work within higher education and also have that impact on the field of online learning. So, when this position, for the Senior Director of Research and Innovation, was posted, it just seemed like a really good fit to me, where I was professionally, to expand moreso into that field of research, and also the innovation side—I’m a big thinker, I love to think big and then have someone tether me back down to the ground. So I think it was really the skill set that I was looking at. It was a switch from higher education to industry, but being a non-profit, I really felt that we are making that impact and moving this mission forward, and I really still feel in my position that I’m in the higher education field, so.... I don’t think I specifically made this jump to industry looking for jobs in industry but looking for something that really matched my skillset and matched what was important to me, when I really looked and reflected inwardly as to what my goals were and how I want to grow, both as a person professionally and personally. And this was a great fit for me.

**KL:** I love that story. I think it’s so important that—sometimes we focus, maybe, too much on position titles and not enough on just, “What are we looking for?” or “What is something that’s interesting to us?” And I know in my most recent switch, when I came to Oregon State, I was just looking for a job where I could write more during my day job, and I wasn’t sure what that would be, or what the position title would be, or what I would even be writing about. And I certainly found it! I sure write a lot now, in terms of grants and articles and books and all kinds of things. But I think that that openness is a really important point when you’re starting to think about these career shifts, whether it be within academia or moving out to something like industry. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about differences that you’ve found, in the time that you’ve worked in industry, between academia and industry. Are there major differences or even similarities, maybe, that surprised you?

**JB:** Sure, Katie. And I think that’s a great bridge, because I think when looking at those qualities within yourself and how they match to a position—something I know about myself is that in any environment, I’m probably going to overwork and [*both laugh*] try to produce too much, so—

**KL:** —That’s a good thing to know about yourself.

**JB:** Yeah, so I think when looking at—and I actually think it’s false, about academic work, and that it’s just nine months and then you take this luxurious summer off, and at any rate—so I think that’s actually a falsehood about academic work, but I would say that no matter where I am, knowing that those are my qualities, I’m going to be working a lot and [...] that I’m really focused on moving, whether it was the institution or the organization, forward, and wanting to be involved in projects. So, I see, probably, a lot more similarities than I do differences. That could be because I did work at a for-profit before coming to OLC, so perhaps used to a bit more of the business side. Being in my role there, I worked across the university, so just as I do now, really working with all arms of the organization, whether it’s marketing, finance, or within the thought leadership area of the organization. I would say that I think for most, the difference in shifting from academia to industry would be this larger picture. Of course if you’re higher up in the administration at an institution, you do have to look from that 3000-foot view, but I think being in a small non-profit or an organization, you’re asked to look from all different areas of the organization and how those impact each other. So, you’re not simply working with faculty, let’s say, or working on your own research or even just working on marketing, you’re really looking at how all of those—this cross-functional and cross-cultural viewpoint through the industry lens.

**KL:** So, I think that that leads me into my next question, which is what are the things from your academic training that you feel like prepared you for this shift? And especially as a researcher, because I think that it’s interesting for researchers to think about moving outside of academia. I think, for a lot of researchers, academia feels like a natural fit. Certainly that depends on your discipline. But also I’m really curious in thinking about that training from academia that helped you shift, were there any things that you were just really trepidatious about and you thought, “I don’t know how this is going to go”?

**JB:** That’s a great question, Katie. I had done quite a bit of research in the area of leadership, as well as program planning and evaluation. I think at the time—this was in my doctoral studies—and at the time, I was interested in those areas but didn’t quite see the linkage yet to where I was going to be in my professional career. And that research and focus on leadership continued to evolve as I went from dean at my last institution to assistant provost and kind of had that combination of the research that I was looking at as well as the boots-on-the-ground learning. So, I’d actually say that it was a combination. I happened to be in this time and place of my academic training, and within that training, how do I look at things, what lens am I using to look at a project or how I’m collaborating with different people, combined with really that boots-on-the-ground training of moving through these different leadership positions. So I think the combination of those two really prepared me for the shift from academia to industry, being able to look through different lenses, being able to ask specifically, really, I’d say, for the research, I’m always asking, “Do we have data on that?” [*Laughs*.] “Has anything been done before to prove efficacy—are there efficacy studies on that?” And that’s been great in industry, because I work with people that want to learn about research or educational research, so sometimes it’s kind of an internal professional development within our organization, too. So, through that research lens, I have really brought different questions, I think, into industry or into the organization, and that’s helped me. But that boots-on-the-ground—being able to work with (in my previous position) a CFO, a CEO, looking at all their viewpoints and lenses really prepared me to work in industry and be working with all those different sectors.

**KL:** I love that. I love that, especially, you talk about the combination of things coming together. I feel like sometimes you learn particular skills in isolation and don’t really realize how they connect with each other until you get into a particular professional situation where you think, “Oh, that’s why I learned that, [*JB laughs*] that’s how it combines with this other thing in a new way.”

We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Jill about finding thinking partners. Back in a moment.

[*music*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Jill, one of the things that I’ve enjoyed talking with you about is this idea of *thinking partners*, and I love this term. I’m wondering if you can start just by defining what you mean by a thinking partner and how they’ve been helpful to you as a researcher.

**JB:** Sure, Katie. So, in my role with the Online Learning Consortium, I began working with thought leaders and researchers in the field immediately, I think the first week I came on board. I was introduced to some fabulous people in our field, and friends of OLC, and at the time I didn’t really realize the impact that that would have or the relationships that we’d be building. And then sometime within the first few months of work, I was helping to look for a keynote for our last conference and came across this woman Angie McArthur, and she actually talks about thinking partners, and I never heard the term before, and then again was very retrospectively thinking, all of these half a dozen people, that I now am meeting with every week that I met the first week in this position, are really—they’ve become thinking partners. And that was a real important point for me, I think, in my career, because I realized that I worked so much better in collaboration and not isolated, and then talking to these different people, that they gain so much from our weekly conversations as well. So, in terms of being helpful to me as a researcher, really working with these thought leaders in the field who have now become friends, and what I would term this thinking partner in which we sometimes have an agenda, sometimes don’t, talk about our projects, talk about joint projects or different projects, sometimes we even talk about vacations we’re taking.... [*Laughs*.] But this opportunity to talk through these ideas and bounce off— “Well, what are the positives, what are the negatives, what are the holes you see? Do you know any research in this field, do you know any articles surrounding this? Do you have connections in your network that are looking at these same areas of research?” So these are the conversations that I’m able to have with, again, these people that I met over a year ago at this point, and just very organically became these thinking partners in which we really refresh our thinking around different ideas and act as a catalyst to move projects forward and to keep each other going.

**KL:** So, I *love* this idea of thinking partners. I especially love it because it can be so intentional, and I feel like sometimes we get kind of mired in our projects [**JB:** “Yes.”], and we forget that there are other people who we can talk to and ask questions of, and also I think the way that you describe these thinking partners, I think about people who I’ve recently had filling this role for me, and it’s been very affirming, because it’s often people who are in a similar situation to me, but maybe in kind of a niche area, so we don’t feel alone. Like, we’re both writing a large research grant, and we’re both kind of dealing with budget situations and trying to think through those things together. You don’t feel so isolated. So I love this idea of going out and kind of finding these networks. I’d love to talk more about how do you go about finding these thinking partners. Have you found, in your professional life, that they kind of drop into your lap, or are you actively seeking them? How does that work for you?

**JB:** I’m actually very fortunate that, I’d say at this point, they’ve dropped into my lap, but at the same time, I think that’s through networking and putting yourself out there at conferences, and being open to making these relationships. So, it’s opening your mind and being able to listen and take this feedback from others, know when you’re learning, and know when you need to learn. [*Laughs*.] So for me, like I said, they’ve happened very organically, and many have dropped into my lap in some way, but through this network, through that “Have you met so-and-so in this area?”, “Have you met so-and-so?”, or like I mentioned, at conferences, whether it’s an OLC conference or I’m presenting or attending another conference, I really—even though I leave exhausted at the end of the conference, I try to make every minute count in meeting different people and thinking about what could we do together either for the organization or for each other, how can we be partnering on something. I have an example: I was at OLC’s Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Learning a few weeks ago at Penn State, and there’s fifty fabulous people from around the country, and a few in particular where we’re still emailing three weeks later, and, alright, we need to find something we can work on, what can we work on. There’s so much energy here, we’re excited about the same topics. What are we going to do? So, even those initial conversations before having these maybe weekly, more intense calls, just keeping in touch and reaching out and saying, “I’m still thinking about some way that we can keep the momentum going and the conversation going” is a great way to start these thinking partner relationships.

**KL:** Mm-hmm. Well, and I think that’s something that you’re especially good at—I mean, Jill, you and I have kind of been having conversations off and on for the past several months about what OLC is doing and different research initiatives we’re doing here at Oregon State, and it’s actually been very helpful to me, even to have like a quick email check-in, saying, “Hey, I’m still thinking about this, even though we haven’t really landed on anything. Still processing it, still wanting to work with you.” And think that in a lot of networking, especially for researchers and grant-writers—like, I just talked with an institution a couple weeks ago, and we’re not quite ready to partner, but we will be in the future. And so, right now it’s not going to work, just because of our timing and what’s going on with both of our institutions, but I know that we would make a great partnership, maybe a couple years down the line, for a new grant proposal or something like that. So, we have to kind of build in those check-ins and maybe thinking conversations just to kind of keep that relationship going, and I feel like thinking partnerships are a really good way to do that, because it’s not a lot of pressure, it’s just “Let’s think through some things, bounce some ideas off, and really rely on each other for refreshing our ideas and making sure that we’re thinking about it from all angles.”

**JB:** Exactly.

**KL:** Yeah. So I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about how your thinking partners fit within a larger mentoring network that you might have for yourself, and do you think that you have other mentors that play different roles than your thinking partners? Do you think of your thinking partners as a kind of peer mentor? How does that work for you?

**JB:** That’s a great question, Katie. I think you know this, but a lot of my research is in the area of mentoring, so that’s a topic that’s near and dear to my heart, and I do feel very fortunate that I have a handful of people that I would call mentors. And I see them—some, I would say, do cross over into that thinking partner in certain aspects, depending on the conversation—but there are those—and interestingly enough—that have been with me, I’d say, since the start of my career. And actually at the start of my career, I *was* in industry, so it was like industry, academia, industry, I’m just bouncing around. But some of them I still talk to and value their opinion for different types of projects, different types of insights I’m working on, but in my larger mentoring network, I’d say I have a handful of people that really I know I can trust and value their opinion, I know that they know me very well, they know my personality, they know my interests, my passions in terms of my professional work. And they provide a little bit of grounding, so when I need that grounding, I feel that they’re there, I feel I can rely on their opinion. And over the years, some have become closer to, I’d say, a thinking partner, because I’ve grown as a professional as they’ve kind of grown along their role. So that’s exciting. I know of one that’s it been very exciting for her to see me grow, and it’s just a great relationship that we’ve continued to have together, even though I think of her as a great mentor and always will. So, I do see them as a being a little different than a thinking partner. I like the idea of a peer mentor that the thinking partner can play that role. I think it depends on that conversation you’re having. What is the topic? Are you mentoring through something? If the topic is really my area of expertise and I can mentor on that, that’s great, and that can kind of shift throughout our relationship, where the thinking partner—my definition is really that ability to bounce ideas off of each other in this safe place. So, I do think it can shift back and forth from the peer mentoring to the thinking partner depending on the need of the people at the time.

**KL:** Well, and I think you raise this really incredible point, which is, your relationships with your mentors change over time as you grow and as they change. And I think that’s not something we always think about with these relationships, so I’m really glad you raised that.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Jill. Back in a moment.

[*music*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Jill, one of the most fascinating things about your work, aside from your research, is the fact that your work from home, and this is something that I am always really interested in hearing, how do people do this, how do they juggle it. Especially if you’re like a telecommuter full-time, how does this work. So, I would love to talk with you more about what have you found to really effective for working from home and being really productive, since this is something that you do for a significant amount of your work life, and also if there are particular things that you’ve come to avoid because you know it’s going to derail your productivity. So, let’s start with, first, are there things that you know that have just been really effective for you?
**JB:** Sure, Katie. Actually, just a little sidebar: I worked from home for a while (we’re going back almost ten years ago when I first went into higher education), and I think I learned there—I was home three days and at the office two days, and thought, “Well, I can just work anywhere in the house and put my feet up and do whatever,” and that works for some people, but I don’t think there’s as much of a focus. And now that I do work from home full-time, I think—as trivial as it may sound—to have a dedicated workspace, and that’s your office, that’s where you do your work, maybe it’s only 80% of the time, if you have to be on a call in the car, something like that—but I think that dedicated workspace is really important, because I think one of the potential pitfalls of working at home is working around the clock, because you’re always here, you can always grab your laptop, you can always really be working on something. So I know for a lot of people that I’ve talked to as well, having that dedicated workspace means you can walk away. Of course you can grab your laptop around the house, but I think just having that space where everything is, it’s set up like an office that you might have at work, is so important, and having the right tools. We still need—even for this interview, we need to have our headset and know when we’re going to be using video call versus just a chat call. So, all of these things—really understanding what tools you’re using—and the headset’s crucial—but are you going to pop up on video and be in your workout clothes [*laughs*], so really thinking through that professional aspect, how to continue to be professional, how to have good phone calls, how to understand all of your technology tools, and having that dedicated workspace.

**KL:** I’m so glad you brought up the dedicated workspace. I mean, I think this idea of having it contained, like having the work—because it is in your home, it is in your private space—and you reminded me of when I was working in Boston a couple of years ago, when we had a pretty horrible winter. It was the one that everyone was hearing about, because we just kept getting snow and snow and snow, and the trains kept getting canceled and school kept getting canceled, because we were located right downtown. And for a while, I was just kind of limping along, and finally, after like the third or fourth snow day, I was like, “I need a dedicated space. Like, I can’t do this. I can’t not a contained area for this work, because it’s just taking over.” And I think that that is such a crucial thing, like, I’m so glad you raised it, that if you don’t have the right tools and space and kind of this area to contain what is going on with this work that you’re doing with your brain, it will kind of bleed out into all these other areas of your life. So, you kind of have raised a little bit about some things to avoid, just in terms of letting things take over too much, but are there other things you’ve found that really don’t work for you working from home, or that are especially distracting, or just things that you try to avoid to make sure you’re maintaining your productivity?

**JB:** Sure. I think having set hours that you’re going to be working—it brings me back to when I was a full-time doctoral student, and saying, “I’m going to work X amount of hours a day, whether it’s reading or writing or researching.” You need that set time. I think there’s this misconception of working from home that you float in and float out and you can just work your schedule around. No, working a full-time job working from home, you need that dedicated time, and to be honest with yourself that it’s not going to be this “go out to lunch with girlfriends and then go shopping” [*laugh*] or whatever it might be. But really being cognizant that you’re working as much or more as if you’re in an office space. So I think that pitfall kind of breeds from what I just mentioned, this misconception I think that is out there, that working from home isn’t real, is really kind of a fake idea that hasn’t been accepted, it hasn’t really been the norm yet. So, yeah, that pitfall. And I think if you live with other people, have a family, whatever your situation is, if you’re not living alone, being realistic with them so they recognize that you work these set hours and that you are working and that you need that space, that you’re not running interference with different personal items that you have to attend to.

**KL:** Mm-hmm. I think that’s an incredible point. Well, and also it sounds like just really having a good sense of yourself, [**JB:** Yeah.] and what works for you in terms of productivity, and even when you’re setting your own hours, I mean, obviously you need to think about who else you’re engaging with during those hours and if you need to be working the typical workday hours in order to be making those connections. But also just really knowing what does work for you in terms of setting your own schedule. I think that sometimes we don’t even think about this when we work outside the home. Like, should you be doing meetings in the morning versus the afternoon? When is your most productive writing time? I mean, we don’t always kind of think about these things in a strategic way. Have you found that there are helpful things for you in terms of just blocking out your schedule for particular kinds of tasks, that there are certain times of day that work better for you?

**JB:** That’s a great question, Katie. It’s something I struggle with and that I know I have to be better with, I think. In this field where I cross academia and industry, I really need set hours that I do block so that I’m doing that thinking work, that writing, research, working on projects with others, and then there’s that dedicated meeting time. I think we all have the pressure of meetings, and they hold such an important place to move projects forward, institution forward or organization forward, but we also have to know ourselves and how we can get our work done. So, yes, for sure, blocking out time is really crucial and something I’m getting better at so that I’m not bleeding into the evening hours—I think we have that fine line, Katie, you and I have talked about, between what are these projects that we’re working on well into the night and how are they propelling us forward professionally, but are they work projects, are they personal projects, and where those two meet. But in terms of work projects, I think if we don’t block our calendars, we really run that risk of just working around the clock, which we know isn’t healthy. [*Laughs*.] Maybe it’s easier at home, but we all have laptops and Internet now anyhow, so....

**KL:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Well, and I think this idea at some point cutting yourself and saying, “I’ve done enough for the day,” and I think this is something I’ve just been reading about, some things around creativity and thinking about when you’re in a job that requires a lot of creativity, it can be really hard to know when to stop, and one of the books I’ve been reading recently that’s been really helpful about this is a book called *The Accidental Creative*, which I can link to in the show notes. It’s very interesting. But I love that idea of setting your boundaries, knowing when you need to kind of close things down, so that you can shift maybe into other projects that you have or family time. I would imagine that’s harder to do when you work from home, because everything’s right there. But you’re right. We all have email, we all have our work at our fingertips, now more than ever, and so I think many of us are probably struggling with those challenges.

**JB:** Yeah, with setting those boundaries. And I like that you bring up the creative side, Katie, and that thinking side, because it’s very hard to shut that brain off, and having some type of outlet to help shut that off I think is very important. And working from home, I would also say, a tip is let yourself do something. You might go for a walk with colleagues if you were at an institution or at an organization, so allowing yourself to take a half-hour lunch or a half-hour walk, doing something to clear your mind so you can be productive I think is really important.

**KL:** I love that tip. That’s a great way for us [*laugh*] to wrap up our episode [**JB:** [*Laughs*.] “Yeah.”]. Thank you, Jill, so much for taking the time to come on the show and share about your experience with shifting from academia to industry, but also with some of these things about working from home. Thank you!

**JB:** Thanks, Katie, it was great to be here.

**KL:** And thanks, also, to our listeners for 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.

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# Bonus Clip

[*intro music*]

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 39 of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Jill Buban shares about some considerations for shifting from academia to industry. Take a listen.

So, was there anything when you were making this shift that you were particularly nervous about in terms of thinking about shifting into this different professional realm?

**JB:** You know, I guess I would say yeah. So you know, I’m leaving, actually, one thing. Prior to coming to OLC, I had really worked at an institution with some flexibility in terms of my schedule, but I had an office at an institution. OLC is a completely virtual organization, so that was a big shift. And I think that’s where a lot of industry (from what I’m hearing) is going towards—or shared desk space. So, thinking about—it’s not only this kind of your work shift and how you’re working and what your focus of your work is in going from academia to industry, but also it’s like the simple things, like your environment. I work from home now, so that’s a big shift, and how do you handle that, and how do you structure your day, and how do you function within a different environment. I think that’s something important to think through, for anyone going through that shift. I enjoy it, I function well in this environment, but something I didn’t realize I should have thought of as much. And I also go back to looking at what are your long-term goals? If you’re shifting to industry, what does that look like for your academic career? Do you want to continue to publish, do you want to continue to teach? Are you going to miss those things? Because it definitely is different. I’m very fortunate that I actually get to continue teaching, and in my role I continue to work—I work with institutions really around the world and work with great people around the world, so I’m still really solidified in higher ed, but it was something I deeply thought about in how would I continue my professional goals and was I cutting off any of those previous long-term goals. Would my research still be acceptable, would presentations at external conferences be accepted? And the teaching—I love to teach. I love interacting and engaging with students, so the ability to continue to do that I think gave me really what I felt was the best of both worlds by really working for this organization that’s driven by a mission that I believe in. Working with so many different people that have fascinating ideas, and to be able to continue to teach. So, I was able to kind of mesh my own personal and professional goals when moving into industry, and I think that’s really important.

**KL:** Mm-hmm.

**JB:** So going back to the wish, what I wish I had known, as silly as it is, it’s really thinking about what’s your environment. Do you need to be—I still engage with people every day, but I could be in a very different position, where I’m at home, very isolated. So I think it’s looking at all those different factors and not just really the job description but how it might change your life in other areas.

**KL:** That’s such a valuable experience to share. Thank you for talking through that with us.

[*music*]

You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 39 of the *Research in Action* podcast, with Dr. Jill Buban sharing about some considerations for shifting from academia to industry. Thanks for listening!

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