



iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Samantha Dewalt on Entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley

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- STEPHANIE VETO:
00:14 Welcome to iLLUminate, the podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. I'm your host, Stephanie Veto. Our guest today is Samantha Dewalt, Managing Director of Lehigh West. She's here to discuss the Lehigh West program and the importance of preparing business leaders of tomorrow through authentic experiences in Silicon Valley. Hi, Sam. Welcome to the show.
- SAMANTHA DEWALT:
00:38 Hi, Stephanie. Thanks so much for having me back.
- VETO: 00:41 Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you came to work with Lehigh?
- DEWALT: 00:45 Yeah. So I've had a very entrepreneurial career. I started in industry. I spent six years helping build companies right out of undergrad. I was a partner and vice president for a marketing agency, where I was given a lot of autonomy and freedom to just create. And so the question was, how can I create value for my customers and make money for the company? And that really fueled my entrepreneurial spirit and helped me develop an entrepreneurial mindset, which we can talk more about later, why that's important. But I joined higher education in 2012, and I was in a newly created role at the University of Oklahoma focused on corporate engagement. So building strategic partnerships with companies in the tech sector, so Microsoft, Dell, IBM, to really innovate in education. My roles in industry and education have always spanned marketing, strategy, business development, and partnership. So I really took what I was doing in industry and applied that to higher ed. And then fast forward in 2015, I joined Lehigh to help build out, at the time, the newly created Office of Economic Engagement and led the industry engagement function for the university, where we were building institutional-level strategic partnerships to advance education, innovation, research. And that led to the opportunity to serve as the managing director of Lehigh at NASDAQ Center, which was an education industry partnership. Moved from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to San Francisco, and I've been here since 2017, helping Lehigh really build out our West Coast presence and programs.
- VETO: 02:30 And why is it important that Lehigh has a presence in Silicon Valley?
- DEWALT: 02:34 Yeah, Lehigh, actually, has had a presence in the Bay Area officially since 2016 with the launch of the Western Regional Office. Although prior to that, we had run Lehigh Silicon Valley, which is a program of the Baker Institute, still running strong today as a flagship program offered in the West. But it was really to extend the university's reach and impact on the West Coast and, in particular, in key innovation hubs. So connecting students and faculty to key innovation hubs across the West Coast, where they can engage in real-world learning, applied research, innovation, and it also creates opportunities for the West Coast communities and here in Northern California to connect with Lehigh, Lehigh talent, Lehigh faculty. And it's also, we've been able to recruit the next generation of Lehigh students to the university since being out here. So it's really an integrated platform. Lehigh West is an integrated platform across student recruitment and engagement, academic programs, industry partnerships,



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alumni engagement, and career pathways. So since being out here, we've actually seen a 250% increase in enrollment from Northern California and an 87% increase in applications from West Coast states. We've had more than 1,800 students participate in programs across 84 disciplines. More than 200 industry partners engage, and more than 1,300 students placed in internships and full-time roles. So I think it's working.

VETO: 04:03

I'd say. Well, I had the pleasure of actually being out there early on when the program began and students were meeting up with well-established entrepreneurs, people in the early stages of their startups, huge companies, small companies. It was a whirlwind week. I think I was there almost 10 days with the students doing a video story for them. And I mean, I was inspired just being there alone. We were at Google. We stopped at a winery. We went up to Napa Valley. You name it, it was done. And it provided so much inspiration and insight. And then also that hands-on experience. It was unlike anything else. And then just to have these kids like helicopter in to San Francisco, experience everything and then fly out. It has to be life-changing for so many of them.

DEWALT: 05:04

It's transformative. It changes lives and we see that year after year. So Lehigh Silicon Valley immerses students in the innovation ecosystem here. Like you said, they get to meet with founders, funders, established companies that were once built out of garages here. And they get inspired. It's real people with real stories. And the students start to really think about how to apply those lessons to their own lives. We see many of those students who might start in Lehigh Silicon Valley, come back and participate in our innovation internship or startup academy, where they're interning with startups and innovation-focused companies here in the Bay and continuing to further their entrepreneurial pathway. Whether that takes them to ultimately launching a venture or going into a variety of different fields, it's really about helping students develop their entrepreneurial mindsets and skills so that they can be impactful and successful in whatever field they may choose. And I think especially in the age of AI-- I don't know if anyone has heard of AI. We talk a lot about how to differentiate yourselves. And having those human skills that an entrepreneurial mindset teaches like critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation, even building self-efficacy. These experiences, we actually track and measure from a research perspective and see year after year students grow in these competencies that they then can take and apply forward in, again, whatever path they choose for their career.

VETO: 06:45

And you've had a partnership with the NASDAQ Center for several years that recently ended. What are some key takeaways from that experience?

DEWALT: 06:56

Yeah, that was really an incredible partnership. It helped us really lay the foundation for a lot of the programs that we've now sort of built and scaled. And it was truly an education industry partnership coming together for the mutual value of society. Some of the programs that we built that are still running strong today were built on the notion of serving the needs of the talent community, so our students and the entrepreneurial community, so our startups through these internship experiences. So students want access to real-world, hands-on learning in the innovation ecosystem. They want to learn what it takes to build and grow a company and what better way to do it than to sit beside a founder who's doing it in real time and to help them. In fact, the NASDAQ Center polled their founder community and said, "What's the number



one thing that keeps you up at night?" And they said, "Talent." And we said, "Well we have this perfect partnership where we can bring together the talent community with the startup community." And now we've placed hundreds of students with hundreds of startups in these internship experiences that really help accelerate businesses and also talent and skills for these students.

DEWALT: 08:21

And so we learned a lot and were able to do that with an industry partner where we sat at that intersection of theory and practice. And we're able to practice in real time. The partnership was really focused around sort of three pillars: inclusion and access in entrepreneurship, education, research, and thought leadership. So we even used our own programs as living labs for research, interviewing and surveying founders in real time to really understand their needs, pain points, opportunities, and we would then take the knowledge that we were generating and develop-- whether it was opinion pieces or research articles that have now appeared in Harvard Business Review, and Fast Company, and Fortune, and Startups Magazine, and University World News. Because we wanted to make sure that we were generating valuable insights in real time that supported current and aspiring entrepreneurs in real time. So that partnership gave us the vehicle to really get the insights out to the practitioner world in real time, and also benefit our students who are going through the learning journey. So lots of really key lessons learned through that partnership, how to work with industry, how to work with the startup community to really build and scale innovation in education, and also innovation in building the next generation of companies.

VETO: 09:47

You work in an industry with an ever-changing landscape, right? You have to be at the forefront of so many things. What is the program focusing on in terms of academics and keeping up with that? And so what do students have to look forward to in being prepared?

DEWALT: 10:09

Being situated here, in Silicon Valley-- which is one of the world's most innovative hubs, you've got startups, you have major corporations, you have the universities, you have the accelerators all coming together in this intellectual community where ideas are born and developed and furthered. So being on the ground here and a part of that is amazing because we lean into that community to help teach the next generation. And so all of the courses and programs that we teach are integrated with real-world experiences. And so students working beside founders-- founders, tech leaders coming into the classroom to talk about what they're seeing in Silicon Valley, how to differentiate yourself when you're applying for jobs in a world where AI is transforming all of our roles. And so we intentionally stay very timely and relevant to make sure that what we're teaching can be implemented in real time and practiced in real time by those students, and giving them the skills to be thinking ahead, "What's coming next, right?" So those critical thinking and problem-solving skills, you need to be thinking 10 steps ahead, always. Yeah, so we're constantly integrating topics that are timely and relevant into the classroom. So at the core, it's a lot of entrepreneurial mindset, skillset development, but it's also about emerging tech. It's about the human-centered skills, it's about what's happening across industries, from AI to energy to healthcare and biotech. So really see the span of industries and innovation happening. AI is changing every industry and every field. So of course, that's been a big part of a lot of our curriculum. And students are building real AI applications for



their companies in their jobs. So they're not just learning about it, they're doing it. They're building it.

VETO: 12:27

The program is open to all students, right? But it's rooted in entrepreneurship. Why is it important for students to develop an entrepreneurial mindset? And can you just start off by telling us what an entrepreneurial mindset is?

DEWALT: 12:42

Yeah. So this is something that Lehigh has done exceptionally well, and I would consider a leader in this way for many years prior to the existence of Lehigh West. And in large thanks to many of the programs and initiatives on campus like the Baker Institute and other academic programs that have been teaching students how to think and act like an entrepreneur, regardless of their pathway. When you look at the skills that companies are seeking in applicants, they're naming things that are core to an entrepreneurial mindset. So what's an entrepreneurial mindset? We actually conducted a research study in partnership with the NASDAQ Entrepreneurial Center to understand what is in a-- what is an entrepreneurial mindset, right?

DEWALT: 13:32

There's probably many different definitions of an entrepreneurial mindset. But we polled students, educators, founders, and really aggregated and identified sort of 11 core constructs of an entrepreneurial mindset. And it's some of those key characteristics that I've named already, like creativity and innovation and problem-solving and critical thinking. And you can imagine why those skills are important whether you launch a business or not. So being able to think and act in an entrepreneurial way, many companies are seeking that kind of talent.

DEWALT: 14:11

And especially, again, in the age of AI, where jobs are changing, AI is helping us do things faster and better and smarter. But we still have to be able to think critically. We have to still be able to problem solve. You have to know what to feed the AI, right, to even get the answers that you're looking for. And there's so many aspects of a business that you learn by working in a startup, especially because it's so small, it really is all hands-on deck. So you might learn everything from marketing to product development and engineering to operations to even understanding the people side. And it's really a fast track to learning all of these different areas and building your entrepreneurial self-efficacy in the process.

DEWALT: 15:05

And what we've seen is that historically, entrepreneurship is perceived as only for a certain group of people. Maybe you're in business, maybe you're in engineering. But it's not for me if I don't want to launch a company. And that's not true. And I think Lehigh has really changed the face of what entrepreneurship is and who it can serve. And that it's really for all students. In fact, I got an email from a professor today in arts and sciences and teaches in religion and talked about how he's integrating entrepreneurship into his coursework. And I think it's so important because really, it's about developing the whole individual, the whole student, and helping them to think critically and truly build out a meaningful path where they can create impact and achieve success, and whatever success means for that individual.

VETO: 15:57

Can you give an example of how AI is changing the landscape for startups and for graduates entering the job market?

DEWALT: 16:05

Yes. So interestingly, I just had a conversation the other day with one of our partners and a tech leader at a major tech company here. And for example, the field of



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computer science is changing. Software development, for example, is changing. You're not sitting behind a computer anymore and just developing code in the same way that you used to. You now have AI that can help you do it faster, smarter, but you still have to know how to think critically and how all the different pieces of the business fit together. You're bringing a new product to market. You have to understand go-to-market strategy and you have to understand the different pieces of the business.

DEWALT: 16:45

And so I think Lehigh is well-positioned, especially because historically, we've been very strong in our integrated and interdisciplinary programs like Computer Science and Business or Integrated Business and Engineering, because you now really have to understand kind of both sides of it, not that you need to have that deep level of technical expertise in all of the areas. But even if you're not technical, you need to know how to use AI in your jobs. And every company is really looking at how do we use AI to internally improve our operations and also to improve the customer experience. And so it's not AI for the sake of AI. If you're going to use it to improve the customer experience or as part of your product offering, and we see this a lot with startups as they're thinking about, what's our AI strategy? Well, you still start with the same fundamental principles is what value am I creating for my customer? And how does it help me create that value? And if it doesn't, you don't need it. So that's, I think, changing the way we work, certainly. But still, a lot of the same fundamental principles are true around human-centered design and value creation and really understanding your customer and your audience. And really, it's marketing 101.

VETO: 18:19

[laughter] I feel like graduates now, I mean, it's such a normal part of their lives, AI, AI integration, AI in the marketplace, in companies, you name it. How are you helping students think about this and prepare for it? And like you said, use it in a valuable way other than AI just for AI.

DEWALT: 18:42

Well, I really appreciate that Lehigh has been very intentional about developing an AI policy and AI initiatives. For example, the Career Center has rolled out LinkedIn learning around AI topics to help students really learn and develop those skills, and I know more faculty and more courses are actually integrating AI. Some of the specific ways that we're doing it, so one, we bring in guest speakers from Silicon Valley to talk about topics like AI. You can imagine AI has actually been a topic of conversation in most of our sessions this semester. But in a couple of weeks, we have an HR executive from a tech company out here coming in and talking about what she's seeing in terms of AI on the hiring front and how to really stand out when you're applying for jobs. They're using AI to screen candidates, but also, what they're looking for is different. And so one, I think it's just education and awareness and being dialed into what's actually happening in industry, what's hype, what's real. And so we have those conversations. We have founders who have been building AI since-- I mean, for years, right? It was machine learning before, right? It's been around for a very long time. And really talking about-- and that's part of how to spot the trends and how to be 10 steps ahead and thinking what's coming next. And then we give them the opportunity to practice it in real time. Many of the students who are working, again, with startups, whether it's innovation internship or Startup Academy programs, they're using AI in their jobs, and they're also helping their companies think about AI strategies and AI adoption. So it's learning, understanding, gaining sort of real-world perspectives, but also getting to apply it in real time. And let's be honest, the students probably know



more about AI than we do. In fact, for our Startup Academy interviews this year, we did a case study simulation where we had the students come up with an idea and pitch an idea for how we could integrate AI into the academic experience and curriculum. And the ideas they were coming up with were incredible. I wish we could adopt all of them. So the students really are thinking ahead already, exposing themselves to opportunities to get that hands-on experience with it and using it in coursework and curriculum. We take our guest lectures and we put it through NotebookLM and you can generate a podcast, as you know, out of it. You can generate a summary of a report. So we're also helping where we're using AI on the curriculum front to help students really absorb the content and the knowledge that is being discussed and shared in the classroom.

VETO: 21:48

I love that even younger children, my daughter's 10 and she looks at things with a more critical eye than most adults who are-- she'll be like, "Is that AI?" And I'm like, "I don't know." So it's just, like I said, it's integrated into their lives now. And hopefully there's an advantage to that to help future of the changing landscape of jobs. So it's an interesting time.

DEWALT: 22:15

Yeah, and I will say one theme that has been consistent across the guest lectures that we've had and also I've attended events here in Silicon Valley, the founder and CEO of Perplexity was giving a talk. It doesn't replace human skills. That's the key is it does not replace human skills. I appreciated President Helble, I think when he was doing his interview with Steve Wozniak, said, "AI, use it as your intellectual sparring partner." And that's so true. But it doesn't replace the human element and the human skills. So I think that's a really important message for us to all keep in mind.

VETO: 22:59

And before I let you go, I just want to ask, what excites you the most about the future of Lehigh West?

DEWALT: 23:06

Oh, great question. The opportunity to reach more learners at different levels. I mean, we're engaging with high school students now, which is so inspiring, but all the way through lifelong learners. So really thinking about how we bring a Lehigh education to more people at different stages and how that looks very different today. So the opportunity to really be innovative in our approach to education and our ability to partner with industry and really think about what are the roles of the future and how are we educating for that. And to do that here in Silicon Valley, day after day, is a true inspiration because you just meet ambitious, creative, hungry people. I love to tell the story, you get on the elevator at a WeWork and you turn next to the person, you're like, "What are you building?" And then you have a conversation about the new startup that they're building. It's really inspirational. So yeah, just the opportunity to create more of those experiences for our students at different levels and to connect East Coast and West Coast because there's amazing things happening in both places. Lehigh is truly a national and global university. So I think it's a really, really exciting time. So just to be here and to be a part of it is really an honor.

VETO: 24:38

Sam, thank you so much for being on the show today.

DEWALT: 24:41

Thank you for having me. It's always a pleasure.

VETO: 24:45

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