

# Ep.38 - Bill Pink\_mixdown

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Dr. Pink

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- A** Announcer 00:01  
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29  
Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today. And we're very fortunate to have Dr. Bill Pink President, Grand Rapids Community College. Welcome to the show, Bill, Dr. Pink sorry.
- D** Dr. Pink 00:41  
Bill or Dr. Pink, either one, I'll answer to both. No problem. I'm happy to be here today, this is fun.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:47  
Yeah. And, you know, I know that you and I had a pre-conversation a little bit. But, you know, community colleges to me, are really the bread and butter. I know they didn't, and maybe you could give a history even, first of all about, tell people what you do. But then, I don't think people always don't know that community colleges haven't been around super long. I think people think they've been here forever. And it was kind of something that came later. So let's talk a little bit first, tell us about what you do. What Grand Rapids Junior College or Community College does.
- D** Dr. Pink 01:18  
Yeah, you know what you say in junior college, there are more people in this in this community that know  
other CC. That's how they refer to us today. So my role is president here at GRCC GRCC makes the oldest

ju than CC. That's how they refer to us today. So my role is president here at GRCC GRCC, we're the oldest community college actually in the state of Michigan, and one of the oldest actually one of the oldest in the country. We are about 105 years old. And we've been in this community doing work for, obviously, over a century. And so with that, I say that, because with that, there's a lot of pride that comes. But for me there that means is a lot of a lot of responsibility that comes along with trying to continue to help a institution be as relevant and responsive to this community as we are. And to me, when people say tell us about community college, I always use those two words, relevant and responsive. And that idea of relevance is if we're not relevant to our community, to our business leaders, to our community to each other, if we're not relevant, and if we're not responsive to those things I don't know why we're here. So that to me, means a lot. And if we're not standing strong in that space, we need to rethink what we're doing.

E

Ed Clemente 02:35

Yeah. And I think, you know, and I think I mentioned that, that I was a trustee for college as well, but over in Detroit area, and Wayne County Community College District, better plug it, and so Dr. Ivey might listen to this. So we, but I do know that it was one of the most rewarding jobs that I had as a trustee, it was really the graduations. Because at Wayne County Community College, for example, I would say 70% of our graduates were not traditional, like young people, they were mid career, single moms, you know, and, and that, to me meant more to me about how in life people get second chances and community colleges, it's a first chance as well as a second chance sometimes I guess.

D

Dr. Pink 03:21

Well, I love you talking about graduation, because because what you just said there Ed is something I tell a lot of people in our community, I tell them, if you really want to know the impact of community college, you can look at data, you can talk to companies, you can talk to people, but come to a graduation, because when you come to a graduation, it is unlike any other graduation you attend, because the whole family wants to be there. And in some cases, the students who are walking across the stage, they've been at the grind for years getting this done. And it takes years because most many of our students, they have families, they have multiple jobs, they have all of these things they're holding down and holding down school. And so people will say, Well, then why is it taking folks five and six and seven years to finish an associate degree at GRCC? What are you guys doing? I tell him look, the reason is because our students are so involved in that thing called life, that they only can they can only take one or two classes with us at a time in many cases, and that's going to slow them down. But they're going to finish, that's the key. So what you get there are and I we I tell people at our commencement I say you know what, the pomp and circumstance deals with the dresses that we're wearing that as far as pomp and circumstance should go with those big long dresses and the funny hats. I say this is a celebration. So you want to yell and scream and you got a blow horn you want to blow when your loved one comes across the stage. Go right ahead and do it because it's a celebration and for many folks they have endured many, many obstacles that have tried to slow them down or stop them all together. And when you hear their stories, you sit there and it sometimes brings tears to your eyes and sometimes causes you to think, man, if that were my situation, would I have the resilience and endurance to finish, and that's what our students do. And so, you know, I say that our students are come to us, they have 4.0 or 0.4 GPA and everything in between when they come to us. And it doesn't matter, because we have to educate, we have to prepare them for their next and so that's the work of the community college. I love it.

E

Ed Clemente 05:38

Yeah, and I don't know about your college, but Wayne County, I would say the majority of our graduates

year, and I don't know about your college, but Wayne County, I would say the majority of our graduates were women. And back then, and on top of it. The one thing I always remember, it's kind of a weird thing to remember, but their hands were wet whenever it because we shake every graduate, because they were crying before they got up there and on the way up, because they'd be wiping their tears off. And and I felt like wow, this is it's not like my graduation. You know, I didn't cry at my graduation, but I just mean so much to these people to just change their lives like this.

**D** Dr. Pink 06:13

Oh, yeah, Ed I'd say and they will dance across the stage. They will, I've had, I mean, and honestly, because of just in on the course in the course of this job meeting so many of our students, many times, I'm grabbing a hug from some of them, because I'm looking at them going, man, you got this thing done. And they I've had I've had them want to do a selfie. I mean, it's, it's amazing because of what they've accomplished. And in many cases, keeping in mind, the tears flow in some cases, because they're the first one in their household to have a college degree. And that is it's moving for our students.

**E** Ed Clemente 06:54

Yeah, I'm going to come back to that a little bit more as we're going through the transition. But I want to talk a little bit about you. You're not a native of Michigan. And I know you're a proud Texan probably, Abilene, right? [Yes. Yeah.] Where is Abilene like geographically in the state?

**D** Dr. Pink 07:11

That's an awesome question Ed. So Abilene, Texas, is we call it West Central Texas. So if you look at a map, you would almost be able to plot it. And you would think as you look at it, oh, my goodness, that's almost right in the center of the state. So you're about three hours to the west of the Dallas Fort Worth Metro Area, straight shot, Interstate 20. And it's a it's about 100,000 people. When I grew up, there it was much less than that. And you're right, while I have not been resident of the state of Texas since graduating high school and then different places throughout the career. Texas still has that a place in my heart, for as far as home is concerned, still a big Dallas Cowboy fan, not a University of Texas fan because with that stint in Oklahoma for about 20 years and having a PhD from the University of Oklahoma. There's no way I could be a Texas fan University of Texas. So yes, I loved it when the when Longhorns got beat this year. Any Longhorns listening, sorry. But I am a proud Texan yet I'm also proud Sooner,

**E** Ed Clemente 08:23

Yeah, and you played sports yourself actually and coached. And, you know, I think I mentioned that I used to coach too. But to me, the best teachers, or people in the education system, are also coaches, literally and figuratively, because kind of that's what teaching is. I always used to tell people when I got my teaching degree that you know, your content is only about 10% of what you get to do. The other 90% there's a lot of things you didn't plan on. And you experience that.

**D** Dr. Pink 08:52

Ed, I think that's the fun part about what we do is, and when I think about my athletic career, and I think about not just from a standpoint of coaching but also just from being a student athlete and all the lessons

about not just from a standpoint of coaching but also just from being a student athlete and all the lessons you learn on the court and off the court. When you have a coach that has that long term vision, a coach that knows that the game tomorrow night is important and the practice today is important that knows that but also knows that the lessons learned are going to live through for a lifetime. Those are the coaches that are truly so impactful. Because they are some of the best teachers you're going to find. I was blessed to play for a college coach at two really good, great college coaches one in a junior college in Nebraska and then my the university I went to after that, Oklahoma Christian University a Hall fo Fame coach in that state. The basketball knowledge of those two men was phenomenal, but the life lessons were were unmatched and so I agree with you it's a it's an important role and players, we always say players go to an institution, but usually they're going to a coach. They're not really going to. Obviously it's good, you know, University of North Carolina, you know, great basketball programs. Yes, there's something to it. But they're going to play for that coach, and they, they're going to be devoted to the coach. And that's who they that's who they learn to love.

E

Ed Clemente 10:28

You ever read John Wooden's book?

D

Dr. Pink 10:30

Oh gosh, all the all the lessons and all the presentations through the years coaching clinics and everything. It's so funny, I was watching a TV show the other day and on the it was a coach's office on this show. And on the wall was the pyramid. And I told my wife I said, Okay, see that pyramid? That used to be in every coach's office when I was in college.

E

Ed Clemente 10:56

Yeah, that book is not about basketball. It's about everything that goes to it. So let's get a little bit. I think you touched on this a little bit. But I think just talking about the way that our graduates were and the age of our graduates and what they have to do and have this sort of gig economy were in, I don't think community colleges have been in a higher profile position than like, you know, with the recent years of the COVID, but then also technology and digitization of everything and, and sort of disruptions. And so why don't you, I think you could maybe build us a little path as to why community colleges are playing a bigger role in that area.

D

Dr. Pink 11:38

Yeah, I've, I've likened it to the movie, the movie Apollo 13. So if you look at that movie, and whether this part of the movie is true or not, really doesn't make a difference. I just love this line, because it makes so it's indicative of us today. So in that movie, you have the one scene where they're, it's perilous as to whether or not that the that the mission is going to at least be able to get back to Earth safely. And they're going to go through that three, two three minutes of silence of dead air, are they still alive. And in that scene, Ed Harris is playing the, the the gentleman who is the flight control, mission control guy. And two guys standing next to him say this is so bad, you know, they're never gonna make it, this is going to be the worst thing in the history of NASA. And Ed Harris, he says, 'Actually, gentlemen, I believe this is our finest hour.' And I think that is indicative of community colleges right now. I believe this, in all the things that we've done, this is our finest hour, and we've got to show strong in our finest hour. So, to all the things you

just mentioned, that to us, is where we need to be and even more. Because we have people right now who are in situations and in settings in their life where they're trying to dig out of a pandemic, they're trying to figure out what life is. And that's an 18 year old, as well as the 20 and 30 and 40 year old. We have people on our campus who have bachelor's, master's, and PhDs that come back to us because whatever they were doing, they decided, you know what, that's just not for me anymore, I need to redirect. And so they're coming back to us to be a nurse, to learn culinary arts, by the way, we have the best culinary school in the world. They're coming back to us for those kinds of things. And so we as the community's college, we've got to make sure that here in West Michigan, we are standing in that gap for all those individuals. And you're really pointing to what our employers are telling us as well. If we're not relevant to what those employers are telling us, which is the very same thing you just mentioned, automation, robotics, all these things that tell us it's not the same as it was two, five or ten years ago. We, on our end, are now in that space of just rethinking some of the programs that we've done for decades. What does that look like now? What does that automotive technology technician look like going forward with more Evie with all things coming down the pipe? Are we preparing them well enough, and that's the beauty of the community college, is that we turn on a dime when it comes to those things. You're listening to The Michigan Opportunity, featuring candid conversations with Michigan business leaders on what makes Michigan a leading state to live work and play. Listen to more episodes at [michiganbusiness.org/podcast](http://michiganbusiness.org/podcast).

E

Ed Clemente 14:37

I know there's been a lot of talk about combining certificate training into a degree and you know, I know there's a lot of paths but why don't you explain it in case whoever's listening or if they're, it's a company like a business listening, how that's gonna help them out to to get that kind of training.

D

Dr. Pink 14:52

Yeah. And I think it's the beauty of where community colleges, if they're not in this space, are going to this space. I think about us for example here just GRCC, just speaking on a panel yesterday, and I was sharing information about some of our certificates here on campus that we have developed. One is a partnership with Blue Cross Blue Shield, a certificate that helps some of their as far as some of their insurance workers in terms of training and and a certificate. Those folks leave and they're probably going to make anywhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000, just with that certificate. Now remember, I said just a certificate. So then you talk about some of the partnerships we have in preparing public, public works, public works technicians. Some of these things that those are certificates. Again, we're talking certificate programs that enable someone to go to work Ed with that certificate. And in some cases, you're making \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year with the certificate. The beauty of it, is that those are just what we say, stackable. So I stacked those certificates, they have a pathway into the associate degree. So you get that certificate, you're already making progress to the associate degree. The beauty of that Ed, is that so many of our students, they need as one of the best things about when you think about athletics, one of the best things about basketball, is when you have success at one thing, it spurs you to have success as far as the next thing is concerned. If I'm if I'm scoring real well in a game, I want to shoot more because it's working. With students, they if they succeed with that certificate, that lets them know, I can do this, I can do that because I've had success. So now let's build that into the associate degree, and you get that associate degree and now let's send you on and think about if you're ready, let's go on and think about what a bachelor's degree looks like. So that you can continue that path. And so the beauty of those certificates is that a, they allow you to go to work. And many times you go to work for an employer, that's not only going to pay you a decent wage, but also is going to say, let me help you finish that degree by tuition assistance. So now you're getting the degree paid for the rest of the way. And you're getting it done with a company and a job that is allowing you to be able to feed your family. And that's where we're trying to get to.

E

Ed Clemente 17:14

So is you kind of touched on this just right now in your answer. But what other additional sort of disruptors or kind of hate using the word pivot, but like what things do you think are on the horizon too and I say this with a bit of a parameters that I don't think we're holding you to be at forecaster, but I think it's important that people know, it's like chess, a variety of things that could potentially happen. We're just trying to diminish the worst paths and try to pick the better ones, right?

D

Dr. Pink 17:44

Yeah Ed, here's something that we've heard so much of in these last 18 months, because so many of us in higher ed, even in K-12. So many of us had to, and I'll use the word pivot, closer to online and virtual learning because of the pandemic. So March of 2020, our institution overnight, we had to flip a whole lot of classes to becoming virtual, here's what we've learned from that. I, you know, to kind of look into my crystal ball, our take for what we've learned and how that's going to go forward. So what we learned is that as we stood up more and more, even last school year, coming, you know, trying to dig out of what March 2020 looked like, last school year, we were about 75% virtual and about 25% in person classes. Okay? Now, what we know is that from doing that, what students have told us because people say, oh, shoot, you know, people are thinking, Boy, I know you guys are ready to get back in person, well, wait a minute, we have to now strike a sensible balance. Because what we have found out is that there are many students that we weren't serving, because they couldn't reach us. Now they can reach us. So we have students that tell us, I'm so happy you have this class, these three classes virtual because now I can go to school, because now I can still have my job, manage my family, and now I can go to school. Now you fit my schedule. So what I'm thinking as we go forward, we being higher ed, period, we have to make sure we rethink what we look like here post-pandemic I can I feel very confident and that our institution will never go back to what we were pre-pandemic, which was about 80% in person, but 20% online. I don't think we'll ever go back to that. And if we do, I think we've missed the mark. I see us now being more of about when we get back to, right, today we're about 35 40% in person, about 60 65% virtual. By the time this is over with, I think we'll probably be a little bit more about 60%, probably reverse that. Probably about 60% to 65% in-person. And I think we're going to be about 40% virtual and online learning because it now hits a demographic of student that we weren't hitting before. And now we know better about them. Hard to survey people that you don't know. And so now we've been able to reach those folks and say, let's make sure this is relevant to what you need.

E

Ed Clemente 20:18

You know, and you don't have to comment on this, but you're welcome to. But I think in a lot of our interviews we've done, it shows the real glaring divide of the digital divide, and how urban and rural [areas] are affected by it. So when you tell me 40% might be permanently sort of online learning, you better have, you know, you know, you can't have people going to the libraries, they got to be able to get access, you know, from their homes or their work or wherever, right?

D

Dr. Pink 20:48

Oh, so Ed yes I do have a comment on that. So I think several things with that, I think that it's really has, has exposed us as a country, but as a state, in terms of broadband and availability of broadband. It's hard

for us to say, yep, these online offerings are there if we're serving the outskirts of Kent County, where folks don't have access. So what we did, I'll tell you something we did for that. We partnered with our Kent District Library System, that library system has libraries all over Kent County, 20-something libraries all over the county. What we did is we partnered with them and said, let us work with you and let us help work with you in your locations, not only having the GRCC network available, but also if we need to help fund blasting that WiFi signal out into your parking lot, so that our students, if they are out there in rural Kent County, they need to drive to the library hop online and be able to access, but at the same time we made we made massive purchases Ed, of laptop computers and hotspots and just loan out to students no charge, you need the technology, here you go. So that if they are out there, they take that thing and they're going for us they're in the semester working remotely. And they have access because access in this regard, it does a bit of good if we're setting up all these online classes and programs and students can't access. But that broadband question, I'm glad you mentioned Ed, that broadband question for us, as a state and as a region, is vital to our to our people.

E

Ed Clemente 22:29

Yeah, and you know, making people more user friendly with it is going to be a challenge too, just by itself. The other thing, too, and you're because we're down to the last couple questions, but I would say what one thing you would tell somebody, regardless of their age, if they could think about turning around their career, whether a high school, mid career, 20 year old, whatever, even someone in their 70s. You know, you say to him, What would you tell them?

D

Dr. Pink 22:57

It is the thing I tell him today, first of all, never be afraid to change course. So I was just had a young man in here earlier this week, one of our one of our Middle College students Middle College being for us, a Middle College student is someone who is at one of our partner high schools, who is working on that associate degree and high school diploma at the same time. When they finished our Middle College, they finished with their high school diploma and an associate degree and hadn't paid a dime as far as tuition is concerned. So he was in here, we were talking, I told him same thing. I said, I need to ask you, what's your five year plan? What's your 10 year plan? I said, you don't have to, the thing about it, I said, you don't have to tell me and feel like oh, no, I'm bound to it, no. But I want to know what you have in mind. What is that direction? And in terms of if you change your mind, don't be afraid to do that. One of the worst things I've seen some of my friends do is because of this degree path they're in and because I spent all this money and all this time and everything, but I hate this. I hate doing this. No, don't be afraid to change. Don't be afraid to shift to where you're going to be able to enjoy what you do. Because one of the worst things a person can do is to get up every morning and go to a job that they hate. So if you're gonna go to the job, you're gonna work on this thing called a degree. Let's see something and let's do something that's going to be in a space that you enjoy getting up every morning. And if it's not where you're at right now, come back to us. And let's figure out what that is. But I think it's so important Ed, that folks have that mindset, I can't be afraid to make a shift because that shift can make all the difference as far as their career and I never have found someone who's unhappy in their job that is all that pleasant to be around. When you're when you're not enjoying your job, you're probably not being not being friendly to a lot of other people that come in contact with. And so let's make sure we can do that for people.

E

Ed Clemente 25:05

And that transformational journey is rewarding unto itself sometimes just the act of going to classes and learning new things is I think rewarding sometimes by itself. Yeah, I see the last question even though

learning new things is I think rewarding sometimes by itself. Yeah, I so the last question even though you're from, you know, I don't know if you guys like to be called the Midwest down in Oklahoma, Nebraska. But what do you like best about, we consider ourselves Midwest, too. But what do you like best about living in Michigan? Now that you're here?

**D** Dr. Pink 25:33

Well, one of the, probably the main thing I love about living here is the fact that my wife, she grew up here. So when we moved here almost seven years ago, the idea was bringing her home. And so the thing I love about it the most is that she gets to be around her family again. My my mom and dad passed away years ago, and my siblings have spread out all over the country. Her siblings all still live here in Michigan, and her mom still lives about an hour 15, hour 20 minutes north of here. So she, from being in Oklahoma and other places around the world, she's retired military, for being around the world so far away from home. Now she's close to home. And so for me, that's, that's one of the beauties of being here. And the second thing I would say is this incredible college, that I get to be a part of. We have a really, a really good, good thing happening here right now, as far as this college is concerned. And the time period that we're in right now, we have to be that, that relevant institution, and to me, that's fun. Those are fun conversations. We're now right, now we're looking at working with our local partners in looking at standing up an incredible Public Safety Training Center here in West Michigan, that I think if we can get there with our partners, that facility is going to service the region in terms of preparation of police, fire, medical personnel, EMT, even public works, we're talking I mean, it's going to be an incredible facility. That's fun stuff it and we get to be in that space, we get to be the one that makes that difference in this community. And what better work can you do then, to do things and enhance and build people up in your community, give them jobs, give them opportunities to get a job. I mean, this is fun stuff. I'm having a good time.

**E** Ed Clemente 27:23

Well it sounds like you're having your own transformational journey and enjoying it while you should be enjoying it. So congratulations on that. And I want to thank you again, Dr. Bill Pink. He's the President of Grand Rapids Community College. And Bill, thanks a lot for taking time to talk to us today, I appreciate it.

**D** Dr. Pink 27:40

Ed, thank you for taking time to talk to me. I appreciate it. This is fun. Counting on it.

**E** Ed Clemente 27:44

Yeah well, thank you again, and we'll hopefully cross paths in the future.

**A** Announcer 27:50

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