

EXECUTIVE Q&A | J. Dennis Cradit, San Diego State University

J. Dennis Cradit joined San Diego State University on July 1 as dean of the College of Business Administration. He previously was dean of the College of Business at Southern Illinois University and also deputy to the chancellor for innovation and economic development.

SDSU is ranked by U.S. News & World Report as among the 50 best public business schools in the U.S. Among its assets are the Charles W. Lamden School of Accountancy, the Lavin Entrepreneurship Center, the Wells Fargo Financial Markets Laboratory and the Corky McMillin Center for Real Estate.

Cradit recently answered questions for the San Diego Business Journal. Here are some excerpts:

Will you strive to take SDSU's College of Business Administration in a new direction?

The faculty and staff are outstanding. They have built an excellent institution and, if my interactions with alumni and local business are any indication, they have also built a proud tradition in the San Diego community. We so want to continue to be, in the faculty's own words, the "educational backbone of the San Diego business community." But there is so much more we can do. SDSU deserves a business school of outstanding stature to match the aspirations of the area. We will be working together to explore what we are currently doing, what we can grow and expand to excellence, and become



Photo courtesy of San Diego State University
J. Dennis Cradit is not one to take the easy path – he has run numerous half marathons, and he and his wife claim home renovations as a hobby.

a business school with cutting-edge program that other schools try to emulate on a global basis.

Do you believe colleges will eventually have to question the "brick-and-mortar" model?

All too frequently, questions about changes in educational format and delivery are simplified into a false choice between online versus face-to-face. It's much more complicated than that. Some things can be delivered completely online, some things are best delivered face-to-face, and some things will demand creative incorporation of technology in ways we can't quite predict today.

Are business schools keeping up with the technology challenges?

The best schools are keeping up with the challenges, yes. The biggest obstacle we face is that we are preparing students to be business leaders in a world that, frankly, will evolve technologically in ways we cannot predict, and for industries and job settings that don't currently exist. The best schools are the ones that actively scan the future for technological trends and, perhaps more importantly, build a culture of teaching and instructional innovation – openly encouraging faculty and staff and students to experiment in new technologies, new delivery formats, new ways of teaching and learning.

How do you see the school changing to keep up with technology?

Two immediate areas come to mind. First, we must create experiential teaching spaces for students and empower faculty to find technologies to deliver that dynamic student experience. We may be a bit behind other business schools nationally, but this is an excellent start, and I predict great growth in this initiative. Second, we need to expand online and blended learning opportunities, particularly for students who desire a SDSU degree but are unable to attend residential classes. I have considerable experience in helping faculty design effective digital-based programs, and I know that this institution can produce a prestigious, coveted online degree program that will deliver genuine value to students.

What kinds of partnerships do you feel are necessary between the college and the business community?

Less than 20 percent of our funding at SDSU comes from the state, and that number continues to shrink. So we increasingly turn to private funding for the resources that our students, faculty and staff need to pursue excellence.

This means we must have a partnership between the college and the business community. They ask us to mold and educate the future workforce that can adapt to the demands of the work environment and we rely on them to help us with the market demands and a portion of the resources to meet those demands.

Some of those resources - in addition to funding specific initiatives, of course - include mentoring our students, serving as a board member to either the college or one of our departments, becoming as a guest lecturer, offering up a real-world business problem that challenges our students to create a solution, or just providing us constant feedback on the demands of the market.

Are there particular stumbling blocks that prevent a closer relationship between businesses and business education?

There is always a tension between the corporate culture in which alumni and business people work and the academic culture in which business school faculty operate. Businesses always pay attention to the bottom line and can

pay such attention without a lot of the constraints that we face in the university. They can move faster. Universities seem to be very slow. I don't think that is necessarily because we are less accepting of change. It's more because we have a particular form of interaction – shared governance – that business doesn't have. Faculty own the curriculum, administration is responsible for strategic intent and operational and fiduciary accountability. The two must collaborate to be successful. I try to explain to business people that public higher education is also an industry, but perhaps a highly regulated industry – with a number of important constraints that must be satisfied and internal and external constituencies that must be heard.

We openly debate and contest in academia, something that isn't as prominent in business. But that's our strength. This is an American university – the one place in today's society where ideas are supposed to be hotly debated, defended and revised. Of course, we have to be cautious that we ultimately reach a decision and act – something that can be maddeningly slow in the academy.

What services does a business school need to provide – beyond education – to assist its students in their goals?

Building citizens is as important as preparing leaders for the commercial world. We must do both. And we must prepare individuals to participate in a highly interconnected world that must come to grips with a set of pressing societal problems (poverty, health and social welfare, scarce resources, sustainability) that can only be approached through trans-disciplinary collaboration and a fundamental sense of humanity. It's much more than ledgers and management techniques.

Do you see the need to upgrade the school's facilities?

Sure. The environment in which we learn profoundly affects how we learn. Today's student and tomorrow's business leader must focus on interaction and collaboration and that requires that we create a learning space that promotes interaction and collaboration.

I'm proud that my college that has begun the process of upgrading its facilities in just these ways. By the end of this semester, we will have produced a 4,900 square-foot renovation of the heart of the college's central facility. Underwritten by alumni and supporters, this is an important collaboration between the university and friends of the university. It's a terribly important start, and I'm grateful to our friends and those administrators before me who got us started.

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