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Building the Stanford of Denver at the speed of an entrepreneur

J.B. Holston, DU's new computer school dean, speeds up innovation plan to kickstart Denver as tech hub

By Tamara Chuang

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Within eight months of becoming the dean of the University of Denver's computer school, entrepreneur J.B. Holston started something that could change the institution forever. Together with the deans of the law and business schools, Holston created a program infused with entrepreneurship. But this isn't just about curriculum. It's about connecting to local businesses and the community and creating an ecosystem that becomes so sustainable, it merits its own nickname.

"This is all part of my sneaky vision to turn DU into the Stanford of Denver," Holston said after hiring Erik Mitisek, CEO of the Colorado Technology Association, this month to lead the effort called Project X-ITE. "Just as Silicon Valley needed a Stanford, Denver needs DU to make this happen."

And just as Silicon Valley wasn't built in a decade, Holston says DU has time to define the details of how to turn a 152-year academic institution into an entrepreneurial mecca. He credits local industry momentum and DU Chancellor Rebecca Chopp, who in turn said it began well before she arrived two years ago from Swarthmore College.

"When I was interviewing, it was really clear the faculty wanted to get out of the silos, do a lot more problem-solving and be more engaged with Denver," Chopp said. "The law school wanted to work with the social work school. There were all these pilots starting to develop.

The board, faculty and staff wanted to treat students much more holistically, and were really interested in experiential learning and really interested in what employers say they needed."

Many tech companies are happy to help.

"Technology moves so fast, it's actually a really good plan for any university to embrace it and go out and talk to the industry about what's important," said Todd Vernon, CEO of VictorOps, an IT problem-solving company in Boulder. "It moves so fast that if you don't pay attention to it every year, your graduates aren't as valuable as they could be."

J.B. Holston, dean of the University of Denver's engineering school, right, and Shaun Senesac, project engineer, check out the roof of the engineering building under construction on campus last week in Denver. (*Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*)

And just saying "Stanford" seems to trigger momentum.

"(Holston) is painting a vision for them. Even making the statement, 'I want to make DU the Stanford of Denver,' that's an audacious statement. But that statement makes people feel differently," said Andre Durand, founder and CEO of Ping Identity, a Denver firm that builds Internet security tools. "To have a conscious effort to put it here can have a profound long-term impact in Denver and the state of business in Denver."

Needing a Stanford

Denver is ranked among the top five cities nationwide for young entrepreneurs by Inc Magazine, Forbes and NerdWallet. It has one of the largest Startup Weeks. And it is home to co-working spaces such as Galvanize, which has tech-developer boot camps taught with an entrepreneurial mind-set.

But an important piece is missing.

"No, Denver doesn't have anything close to Stanford," said Dan Caruso, who co-founded Zayo Group, a Boulder telecom, in 2007.

A concern among those who have long waited for the Denver technology ecosystem to blossom is that successful startups often get acquired by large, out-of-state companies. Just in 2014, at least three Silicon Valley companies went shopping here: Twitter bought Boulder data analysis firm Gnip; Google's Nest acquired smart-home developer Revolv; and Oracle snapped up Westminster's Datalogix, a data tracking firm. All three still have significant local operations.

In Holston's old job as executive founder for the Blackstone Entrepreneurs Network, he helped identify dozens of fast-growing firms that could become the next big thing. He still sits on BEN's steering committee. But rare are the companies that stick around to grow their local headquarters into billion-dollar firms.

Zayo happens to be one of them. The company went public in 2014 and last traded at $23.57 a share, valuing the company at about $5.8 billion.

Although he is heavily involved with the nearby University of Colorado, where he co-teaches an entrepreneurship course and Zayo recruits heavily from the campus, Caruso feels the school stumbles because of minimal collaboration between its deans and administration. It moves slowly and hasn't reached its potential.

"Well-established companies and institutions sometimes have trouble changing at the pace they need to change," Caruso said. "CU has a lot of advantages. They're a bigger university, well-established and tucked right into Boulder. CU, far and away, has a leading opportunity to define itself as entrepreneurial. But DU, what they're doing right now has the potential to leapfrog past CU Boulder and become the most innovative space in Denver."

Stanford of Silicon Valley

In 1951, Stanford engineering school dean Fred Terman helped create what is today known as the Stanford Research Park and leased land to high-tech firms, including Hewlett-Packard. Twenty years later, a tech publication dubbed the area Silicon Valley.

The school became pivotal in collaborating with the local tech community and attracting entrepreneurial-minded students. Graduates went on to start the biggest brands in tech today, including Google, Instagram, PayPal, LinkedIn, Netflix and YouTube.

Creating another Silicon Valley is an aspiration for many, although with regional adjustments — plus a tweak on the moniker. Denver is known as Silicon Mountain.

But, Holston said, "we're not Stanford. And Stanford 2.0 would be Stanford as it is now."

Holston's vision stems from the idea of what Stanford has become to its community.

"If you look at the history of DU, it almost went bankrupt. It spent a chunk of time getting on stable ground and getting to the point of where it had resources to get to a position of growing from strength instead of reacting to what felt like a lot of financial threats." Now, Holston said, "it's ready to pitch in and help."

Project X-ITE, which started as a strategic pitch by Holston, became official in November, a mere five months after he became dean of the Daniel Felix Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science. It's moving at a pace much faster than is typical for academia, and he credits the school's changing attitude to supporting real-life experience plus the rising importance of the local technology community.

"For every place, there is a time, and I think this is the time. We're the only private liberal arts school associated with Denver. We have more agility and more nimbleness to react to the market," said Holston, who went to Stanford twice — for a bachelor's degree and a master's. "This is the first time a university has said that its focus on entrepreneurship will be universitywide."

J.D. Edwards co-founder Bob Newman, who has served on DU's board of trustees, has pushed for experiential learning at the business school for the past decade. He has seen a rise in internships and project creation.

"It's been moving along, but very slowly. J.B. has been able to do a real kickstart to it and get it going much more rapidly," said Newman, who now manages Greenwood Gulch Ventures in Greenwood Village. "Experiential learning is more important than it was in the past. There is a lot to gain outside the classroom."

Building up DU

Construction on DU's new engineering school began a year before Holston joined. But it fits right in to the new plan.

University architect Mark Rodgers likes to say students can't ignore the building. It spans once-vacant space between Olin Hall, where the biology department resides, and Trevorrow Hall and the Newman Center for Performing Arts.

Inside, lab space is designed for a variety of studies. A large open area will mimic today's trendy co-working spaces, such as downtown's Galvanize, where chance meetings between startups occur all the time. It also will house a cafe to encourage students from any discipline to at least visit.

The Sturm College of Law and Daniels College of Business already have adopted changes. The law school pushes students to get job experience with its Experiential Advantage Curriculum, where students can work at a local law firm for a year.

The business school rejiggered some of its programs into five-week chunks instead of the traditional 10-week quarter.

One thing's for sure, said law school dean Martin Katz.

"Our chancellor, provost and board of trustees are 100 percent committed to this," he said. "If they were not, there is no way we could make this happen."

Holston said the engineering school is also moving into shorter, team-based projects and working with private companies. A new master's degree in cybersecurity takes just one year to complete.

"The industry is moving toward a more project-oriented design. It's what industry wants, what employers want. It's what Galvanize wants. It's how folks get things done," Holston said. "We're working hard to make sure curriculum looks like that."

And also with the cross-disciplinary opportunity, engineering students will mingle with law-school students and business students.

"I'm supportive of that because that's how the entrepreneurial system works. You start with four people and no two people are doing the same thing," said Vernon, of VictorOps.

The first X-ITE event April 19 focuses on growing a cybersecurity ecosystem and includes speakers from Israel's leading security companies, Colorado security firms, the White House and Gov. John Hickenlooper.

Such events have some of Denver's senior companies, such as Douglas County's Dish Network, excited.

"You'll have a lot of big companies there and a really good cross section of people that don't really get together," said Dish executive vice president of operations John Swieringa, a DU

grad. "When you look at the benefits of X-ITE, it gives organizations large and small the opportunity to work with one DU, as opposed to navigating through the various schools to create engagement. That could be very powerful if executed well."

Chancellor Chopp doesn't mind the comparison to Stanford so much because of the attention it has brought the school from local industry and the community.

"I think it's great," Chopp said. "I can't wait until Stanford says they need a University of Denver in Palo Alto."

Tamara Chuang: tchuang@denverpost.com or visit dpo.st/tamara

DU architect Mark Rodgers, right, with Holston and Senesac, shows off what will be a presentation or event space on the fifth floor of the new building. Holston is leading an effort to connect DU's business, law and engineering schools with local tech businesses. (*Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*)