

Ep.3.47 - James Smith

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, James Smith

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development discussion series featuring candid conversations with business leaders and innovators across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts on 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 talented workforces in the nation. And now, your host, Ed Clemente.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. We're fortunate today to have President James M. Smith. He's the president of Eastern Michigan University. And welcome to the show. Do you go by Jim or James?
- J** James Smith 00:40
Jim's fine, Ed, and thank you. Thank you for having me.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:43
Well, thank you. I know you're pretty well-known already here in the state. And I know, Eastern Michigan is always, I have a lot of relatives that went to the school there. And you know, they've all got great careers from there. So why don't you tell us a little bit about whatever you want, you can either talk about what a president does, or what you think some of the highlights of Eastern are, or both?
- J** James Smith 01:05

Well, let me just do a little background, I came to the presidency in somewhat of an unusual way. I was a public school teacher, public school administrator, fell in love with college teaching when I was working on my doctorate and changed my whole trajectory of career planning, and went through the various ranks. Was assistant, associate and full professor. And then I had a chance to be a dean. From there, I went to a vice president, and then I served as a president for seven years out west for coming back to the Midwest, I'm native of the state of Ohio. And this was a great opportunity to get back to an area I knew well, I went to a MAC institution as an undergraduate. So it was great to come back to another Mid American Conference institution and the presidency is exactly as the lilt in your voice indicated, it's a complex endeavor, in a sense, you're running a small city that's dedicated to scholarship and research and community engagement and outreach. Every day is a bit different than the day before.

E

Ed Clemente 02:14

Yeah, and I would imagine we should put a plug in for your I think you said you went to Ohio University, right? [I went to Miami University] Miami, is that Athens?

J

James Smith 02:24

That's Oxford.

E

Ed Clemente 02:27

Sorry, you know, it's amazing how many small colleges are in Ohio, it's like something like 50 or something crazy.

J

James Smith 02:35

Will Rogers once said you're truly lost in Ohio if you're in a town without a college. I think there's some truth to that.

E

Ed Clemente 02:45

And then you also did a stint with Bowling Green, too.

J

James Smith 02:48

I did. I was there for almost nine years as Vice President for Economic Development, which obviously makes my interest in the work MEDC does, just puts a pinpoint on it. It's incredibly important. And, again, part of the university outreach, the work we do impacts the community around us, impacts the state. And I'm certainly aware of that and think about it a great deal.

E**Ed Clemente 03:13**

Yeah, and so let's get a little bit more into some of the unique programs of Eastern. My niece, one of my relatives that went there, she's an occupational therapist, and she's had great careers, she makes more money than I do. And she's really enjoyed her program there. She was a commuter, though. But I've had other relatives who stayed in the dorms there too.

J**James Smith 03:39**

Well, our programming is broad, many people would know us as a traditional teachers college. One time, this was many years ago, we were the largest producer of teachers in America, we still produce a lot of teachers, but we're not that size anymore. And we're much more complex than we were at that time. Some of our unique programs, you identified one that your niece was as a student in occupational therapy, that's not a program that's everywhere. Cybersecurity, obviously, is a hot and buzzing topic and major right now. We have an aviation program that many people don't know about. But we prepare not only pilots, but we prepare ground professionals also in the aviation field. And then we have a long standing history of producing business professionals, strong accounting program. Many, many of our graduates hold the MBA and are out managing complex elements of their entity and we're proud of that, that were able to be that engine for leadership and change.

E**Ed Clemente 04:54**

Eastern, I actually have a couple uncles that went there and they went on to become Board of Regents for other universities around the country. And I know it's always had that great history. And so Eastern, what is roughly the student body? I can't remember how many.

J**James Smith 05:15**

Depending on the year and the semester, we're between 15 and 17,000 students. We were larger obviously, at one time, you'll remember President John Porter, we were in the 20,000s when John was president, obviously, the high schools were larger then, producing more high school graduates than they are today. But, but we've stayed pretty consistent in the last few years in that 15,000-plus range.

E**Ed Clemente 05:39**

And so, as any university, I'm sure you have private sector and public sector partners, are there any of them that you'd like to highlight?

J**James Smith 05:47**

Well, the one that most people will know that have been following us, the last few years is the GameAbove group, they're a giving circle. There are alums that came together and realize that if they pooled their resources, they could do more for the university than if each of them individually tried to do something. So our College of Engineering and Technology holds their

name, the GameAbove College of Engineering and Technology. They are also co-named along with George Gervin. It's the George Gervin GameAbove Center at Eastern Michigan University. And they made a really great step forward for us, in endowing a large sculpture of George. George is a big man. But imagine it's one and a half times his size out in bronze, in front of that center. So that's one that everyone I think, recently has been talking about. But Jack Roush has been very good to us. And in the mechanical engineering side that has an automotive flair. And then Woods Construction has been very good as they have our construction management lab. And those are a few. Ford has been a wonderful partner. And what we've been able to do in some of the high tech areas, so it's constantly a process where we want to bring more and more collaborators on to campus, because it's good for our students, and it's good for our faculty and staff.

E

Ed Clemente 07:17

Yeah, in fact, I've met you a couple of times, but I've met you more recently. It's something you did. It wasn't a career day was like an employer day, I can't remember. [Correct.] Yeah. And that was interesting, because I'd never been to an employer day before. And I found that to be very intriguing, the variety and sort of the broad spectrum of different employers you brought in. I don't know if you want to mention that a little bit.

J

James Smith 07:41

Absolutely, Mary Jane Fallot, someone that you and I both know, Mary Jane does a lot of outreach with respect to our internship opportunities. And paid internships are incredibly important for young people that want experience, but also need to be able to pay the bills. And you can think back when you and I were undergraduates, Ed, that's been more than a year or two, that many of the internships were were not paid. And students couldn't really take that internship, because they had to give up their job, whatever it might be working in the evenings, or working the weekends. So it's nice to bring those employers back and thank them. And the event you were attending was really that purpose was to thank people and to make them aware of the number of students that are interested in doing that, having that paid opportunity. And you heard this on that day, but we talked about it a lot. We are truly an institution of opportunity. We have lots of students who come here that are first time in any college for their family, and we want to show them the opportunities that are available to them in the internship space into the practicum space, so they can get out and see that business and industry sector that they may not have seen otherwise.

E

Ed Clemente 08:56

And I would imagine, too, is the talent world is changing. The universities got to change like you said, your cybersecurity program. But I would imagine that a lot of your programs are affected by what's changing in your environment, your ecosystem of what employers want, right?

J

James Smith 09:16

Right. There are people that asked, but we have a fermentation science program and in chemistry and people will say, you know, are you just training people to make beer? And

chemistry, and people will say, you know, are you just training people to make beer? And there's a livelihood there, we're not doubting that. But we also teach them how to make kimchi and how to make sauerkraut and how ethanol is a process of fermentation. And all of that is something that 15 years ago you would not have seen in the discussion. It just it wouldn't have been a program. If it was it would be a very small one-off that maybe one university in a state would be doing and and now for us it's one that we have great pride in knowing that we can do that and do it well with students who have interests in bio and interests in studying chemistry.

E

Ed Clemente 10:02

Talking about probably when I went back to school way back, students really didn't have that much influence over the universities, it was sort of the other way around. And I have to compliment you on listening more, because it's to your benefit, and to the states and employers benefits that you listen to where they want to be.

J

James Smith 10:25

Preparing students for jobs that don't exist, or for career clusters that are just no longer powerful, is a disservice to our students. And it's a disservice to our employers. And as I said earlier, we really want to be engaged members of a larger community. And the way to do that is you listen to the various groups and you try to make the best decisions you can to prepare those students to move forward and do well in their respective career choices. Not all students come and finish with that same major, many don't. But we're proud of the fact that sometimes they do make a switch, and really find that area that they love, and then go out and attack that by getting that first job and second job in that career.

E

Ed Clemente 11:14

I would imagine, you probably are experiencing sort of cross disciplinary kind of programs where every person now has to know something about technology no matter what field they're in, for example, right?

J

James Smith 11:27

Well, computer science is a good example. We have a table when we do an Explore Eastern Day where students will talk to the computer science faculty about their interest in computer science. Right next to them is the math faculty table, because the two are literally conjoined as disciplines. You cannot be a successful person in computer science without a strong math background. And so you see those almost blending together, as you said, interdisciplinary and and how they present themselves as how you understand those various professions?

E

Ed Clemente 12:04

Yeah and I mean, you also hear a little bit more about like stackable certification. [Right.] I mean, I don't know if you guys are getting into that big but is that something you guys consider too?

J James Smith 12:14

We do and one place where you see it a lot is our two plus two offerings with community colleges. We have the largest number of articulation agreements in the state. We have great outreach, Washtenaw Community College, if I didn't have a bad shoulder, Ed, I could throw a softball from our west campus over to the Washtenaw Community College. Many students start there, do their first two years, come seamlessly to us, finish that bachelor's degree and don't lose a single credit. Those are opportunities that again, 15-20 years ago, you'd hear horror stories of community college grads that would say, I lost 24 credit hours when I transferred to the university. Articulation agreements make sure that doesn't happen. They get an articulated plan. They take these courses at the community college, they take these courses at the four year university, and they end up with a bachelor's degree. It's really a progressive step forward from where we once were.

E Ed Clemente 13:13

Yeah, I kind of wish I had that when I went through. I was a trustee actually for a community college for quite a while too. And so I know that was always a challenge during the two plus two programs, as well as doing these articulation agreements all the time. And then you have, what is it, Northwest Central or whoever governs it all. [Right, right.]

J James Smith 13:35

North Central Accreditation Group is, is powerful, and its work with community colleges, as well as universities like us and Western, Central, Michigan State and the like.

A Announcer 13:46

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E Ed Clemente 14:08

How do you interact sort of more with high school kids? Because I can tell you a challenge. And I think it's still a challenge in high schools is counselors are overwhelmed with so many other challenges in a regular, you know, you taught in high school, and it's not the same where they can really tell kids, Oh, this is what you should major in or this kind of thing. It seems like kids either find it on their own, or they get overwhelmed with too many options.

J James Smith 14:34

Well, we try to do as much outreach as we can. We have admissions folks that go to high schools, it seems like every day, and that might be a little bit of a stretch, but they're in high schools a great deal. We also try to bring students to campus so we can answer some of those questions. We don't want students to find out on their own. We want them to have their interests and identify those interests, but then we want to combine it with a degree plan that says, Look, if you really love art, what do you want to do in art? Do you want to do sculpture? Do you want to do painting? Do you want to do art therapy? What kinds of things interests you in that subspecialty of your general interest? And you're right, I think a lot of people say, Boy, I spent a lot of time in this area, and it wasn't even close to what I want. We want to try not to do that as they come on board. And as they think about the next year, and the year after.

E

Ed Clemente 15:32

Yeah, and I don't know the science of it. But I don't know how much parents influence kids anymore. My mom and dad, I think I told you before, neither one went past eighth grade, they were immigrants. So I mean, they couldn't help me at all. And they couldn't help me with my homework. I just wish I would have had more tools. And the one advantage, I think today that didn't exist for at least a big chunk of people is, I hate to say this, but things like the social media, too. I mean, it's not that I want them to get all their information from social media. But also, that's a tool for you guys to find people who might be interested in unique programs and things like that, right? I'm guessing.

J

James Smith 16:15

You would be shocked at the number of students that tell me they picked a university because of TikTok, that they really liked the TikTok pieces for University of Alabama or LSU. And I just cringe as a former college professor, to say that's really not the way you want to pick where you go to college. But you're right, social media has a very large influence on students. And in some cases, it's good, because you see what the discipline is, I wouldn't use that as my sole way of going about picking a college or picking a profession. But there are little pieces on social media that say, you want to be a rock star, well, you better learn how to read music, you better learn how to play an instrument, do you sing the right music, those kinds of things that we can laugh about, but they really are informative to the student, as they're thinking about what their next step and in their career progression is?

E

Ed Clemente 17:10

Yeah, I have a nephew that was debating whether to go into a music career or be in a band kind of thing. And I said, you should really look at recording first, right? Because, you can still play in your band, but eventually, you might find better pay in that technology side of it, too. [Right.] So, as you see future trends, and you've had quite a few already, but is there any other future trends you think that students or Eastern might be on the compass heading for.

J

James Smith 17:44

I still think people underestimate the power of the liberal arts side of general education. How well do you write. how well do you speak? Can you formulate an argument? Can you support

the formulated argument that you've put into place? Those things students sometimes tell me, How does that have anything to do with me being an accountant? Well, you and I both know, and every one at MEDC knows that you can be a great accountant, if you can't articulate what makes you great, or what is your underlying assumption about why you think this is, or isn't going to work for a company, it's really not palatable to others, you have to be able to sell your thesis, you have to sell your ideas. And I think the general ed offerings often are about how do you think, how do you ask questions? How do you engage? Almost as a building block? How do you build from there to then the specialty of the discipline that you may like as a scientist, or as a person that's interested in fashion, retail, those kinds of things?

E

Ed Clemente 19:00

Yeah, and obviously, it evolves with each new generation too, is what they find intriguing, and what their peers want to do. And so once again, our guest is President Jim Smith, at Eastern Michigan University. Last couple of questions are, maybe you've already answered this, but maybe you might have more to add. What would you go back and tell your 17 year old high school self in Ohio? What you would want to do for the future now that you can go back and sort of like, Back to the Future thing? Yeah and actually, I had an opportunity to tour the the clothing place too. [The Closing Closet, yeah.] Yes. Yeah, that was pretty interesting, too.

J

James Smith 19:33

I don't know that I would have done a lot differently, Ed, if I think back of my 17 year old self, I might have taken my freshman year of college a little more seriously. I might have thought a little bit more about geographically, I started teaching in Ohio. I was an administrator in Ohio. It really wasn't until I got into university life that I moved around the country. And I do think that's incredibly important. One opportunity I talk to our students a lot about is having the opportunity to be overseas. And is it study abroad? Is it a short term learning experience? Is it a travel group, that you get to see a different part of the world. So I think that's incredibly powerful. I didn't do that, as an undergraduate, I had some of those opportunities, a graduate and doctoral student, but my 17 year old self would have said, maybe do a little bit of that as you're 18, 19 and 20 years old, as opposed to being in your late 20s and early 30s. And then the final thing I would say is, Ed, probably as we get older and older, we appreciate this more and more, find things that you truly like to do day in and day out. There's nothing worse than having a job, and I was on an airplane with a gentleman once he told me he had like six years and 49 days and 13 hours left. And I thought, Oh my God, how horrible that would be to live your life on a countdown clock. I enjoy getting up every day and thinking about what we're going to do to help our students to give them new and different opportunities. One that we talk about a lot here is, we never thought of a food pantry for undergraduate and graduate students on a college campus. until probably the last seven or eight years, we have students that are food insecure, they have enough money maybe to make it three quarters of the way through the month. And then to have Swoop's Food Pantry like we have, is a great boost and a great opportunity. And I'm proud of what we do there. But I'm also always thinking about how do we get more opportunities like that to help students make it through to that senior year, finish their master's program so they can get on and do the work they want to do in life.

E

Ed Clemente 21:55

Your last question for a quick answer is what do you like best about living in Michigan, you lived around the United States. What do you like best about being here now?

J James Smith 21:55

For the listeners, we have new and barely worn clothing that are available to students. You can go in and say, Look, I got an interview tomorrow, I have no sport coat, and I have no dress shoes. We can set you up. You take those pieces and you don't bring them back. They're yours. We have students that come in and say look, I only need a tie. The one thing I don't have is a tie, then sometimes the challenge is we got to teach them how to tie the tie. So we have those available. Women's clothing, often it's dress shoes, and they may have a blouse that they really like but they don't have the skirt that they want. And that's all available in that Clothing Closet. Again, due to the generosity of people that live in the community. Some of our faculty and staff are helpful. And then we have clothing entrepreneurs in the area that want to make that part of their donation process. And I heard one of the entrepreneurs say, Look, I've got two or three sport coats that I'm not going to sell, they're purple houndstooth or something. Our students are all over it. They love the purple houndstooth. What I might not buy, they love at The Clothing Closet. So it's another great opportunity. I love the fall. I think I'm a fall guy. I love football. I love the changing of the leaves. I love taking a drive around the state. The splash of color that probably is most obvious a little north of here, can really give you a sense of boy, this is a great place. And I think it is you know we'll use a catch line. You know, it is Pure Michigan to see the beautiful colors of fall. And I don't dislike winter. I lived in South Dakota for seven years. I think winter is nice too. But fall is probably something that I think of as a favorite.

E Ed Clemente 23:57

Well, once again, our guest is President Jim Smith, of Eastern Michigan University. And obviously you can tell he's very charismatic and appreciate all the work you're doing for Eastern and keep up the good projects. And thanks again for doing the podcast today.

J James Smith 24:12

Ed, you're always welcome on campus. We'd love to show you new things we're doing and the beauty of campus is really something we all take a little extra measure of pride in. So thank you and thank you for having me today. I really appreciate it.

E Ed Clemente 24:26

My pleasure. Join us next week where we'll have a special edition of voices of Michigan, small businesses around the state, with an introduction from Quentin Messer.

A Announcer 24:36

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