

Transcript for Conversations @ KAFM CMUnow: November 6, 2020

Katlin Birdsall: Remarkable accomplishments are happening every day on the Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College campuses. From faculty instruction and research, to student projects and community involvement. CMUnow is a monthly segment on the KAFM Community Affairs hour, where we interview faculty, staff, athletic coaches, and students to keep you up to date on all things CMU and WCCC. I'm Katlin Birdsall, along with my co-host David Ludlam. We'll have two guests on the show today, and they are our Safe Together Strong Together co-chairs, Vice President John Marshall and Physician's Assistant Program Director Dr. Amy Bronson. Welcome to the show!

David Ludlam: Thanks for coming on.

Amy Bronson: Thanks for having us.

John Marshall: Appreciate it.

Katlin Birdsall: How are you both doing today?

John Marshall: Good, solid, average, Katlin. Thanks for having us.

Katlin Birdsall: Good. Alright, so John, I'm gonna start with you, so it's kind of hard to believe but we actually had you on the KAFM Community Affairs Hour show about 7 months ago in April, when all of this very first started. So, looking back, kind of, if you could maybe let our KAFM listeners know about the Safe Together Strong Together plan that we put together and kind of where it started and kind of how it's evolved over these last 6-7 months.

John Marshall: Yeah, imagine 6-7 months ago feels like a lifetime ago in some ways...

Katlin Birdsall: It does.

John Marshall: You know, I think back to that March/April timeframe, and at the time, I think we were all... all of us really... trying to figure out what this meant. What was coronavirus? What was it going to mean for us? Where were our families and our schools and our jobs and everything going? And today, we've kind of learned to live with it, but I think it's important not to lose sight of the fact that at that time, there was a lot of uncertainty, and we really did not entirely know where this was going to head, so we put together, with the help of literally hundreds of people, we put together a plan called the

Safe Together Strong Together initiative. And really what that was was a decision throughout all levels of the organization to say we must come back together for in-person learning. It was clear at that time many of our colleagues, many of our peers around the country had made a determination they were going to go online. We came up with a plan and said we don't know what the future will look like, but we know that we're going to do it together, and we know that this is something that has to be part of our "why," so we leaned into it. We spent the time and effort and engaged literally thousands of man hours from hundreds of people, public health, medical, a variety of folks to think through every element of planning for August. Here we are wrapping up our first semester and really credit to all the people's hard work across campus and the community partners, et cetera, who have helped us get here.

David Ludlam: So, Vice President Marshall, you have mentioned that we don't know what the future looks like, and that made me think about the recent iteration of this plan that is titled "The Future is Now." Can you tell the listeners a little bit about what this latest phase looks like, why it's called that, and what we're trying to accomplish moving forward with that part of it?

John Marshall: Yeah, I mean, progressing through this journey over the last 6 months, we... At every turn, it seemed like we were saying things like "We don't know what to anticipate. This is out of an abundance of caution. We're going to try something," and those things. Well, we're kind of past that point, and the reality is we've now navigated an entire semester of, you know, all of it, right? Operating a library, operating athletics, operating dining facilities and housing and classrooms and labs and all the things that put a university, you know, really together. Just, all the complicated endeavours. And so for us, I think it is this pivot to "we've done it now," and frankly, we've done it fairly well. Now, how do we take that, we optimize it. Do we improve it? Do we refine it? And really lean into this next element of what spring semester and the future of our work looks like.

David Ludlam: And I know when you say "we," there's a particular area where Dr. Bronson really focused early on which was the assimilation of community partners, specifically medical experts. Dr. Bronson, can you kind of talk to us about the medical experts who're a part of the team early on and where they are today, and maybe even beyond them supporting us, what are we doing to support them in turn?

Amy Bronson: Absolutely, we would not be here today without our partnerships, and you know, we had not only a medical and health internal advisory team. So, some really smart and dedicated health professionals here on our campus who are a part of that. You know, Dr. Reeder, Dr. Lucy Graham, you know, there are so many smart intelligent people here that really came together to help us with that initial planning. But then it was

our external community partners as well. You think about Grand Junction, we are very lucky to have one of the biggest medical hubs between Salt Lake and Denver, and that is because of our partners with Community Hospital, St. Mary's, not only from infection control specialists, but also Mesa County Public Health, and we really do have a really strong health department, who has really walked through this entire process with us. Without the support of those community partners, we wouldn't be here today. You know, they have done the training that has allowed us to deputize contact tracing teams here on our campus, and in return, we now get to partner in being some of the leaders and some of the testing strategies that we have been able to implement. And now we get to extend those out to the community, and that's really the exciting pieces of what we have learned in this process as we pivot towards the spring, and not only the spring but this winter, as we continue to try to keep not only our campus community safe, but our broader community here in Grand Junction safe.

David Ludlam: So the support has been circular in the sense that they supported us in drafting the plan, and now that it's up and running and we're implementing technologies, we're able to support them.

Amy Bronson: Absolutely.

Katlin Birdsall: Well you are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our guests today are Safe Together Strong Together co-chairs, Vice President John Marshall and Physician's Assistant Program Director Dr. Amy Bronson. So I know for me, one of the really interesting parts of everything that's been happening with the pandemic here on campus and our response to it is seeing all of the really creative solutions that have come out of what we're trying to accomplish here. So that's everything from the wastewater treatment system that our engineering students have developed to partnerships with MIT and Stanford on Operation: Outbreak, so could you maybe talk to us a little bit more about all of these amazing things that have come out of a really difficult time?

Amy Bronson: Absolutely. I think we've said so many times across the table that with disruption comes innovation, and I think one of the really, really interesting and beautiful things that has come out of this, if you can say beautiful coming out of a pandemic, is that not only seeing student creativity in response to what's been happening, but also seeing the culture of CMU that's really shown through even a pandemic. And it's really that culture, and that doesn't just start during a pandemic, that's been something that has been here, but to see that shine and to begin to see that culture bring in external partnerships from folks like MIT and Harvard and the Broad Institute who all of a sudden say, "You know, if a culture and a group of students can come together to make a music

video about how to stay safely together and strong together on our campus, they likely are the ones that are able to fight a pandemic.” And to be able to have folks come on board because they see that culture and that energy around wanting to do something different, and wanting to do it in a way that’s innovative is really some of the coolest things that I think we’ve seen come together across campus.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah I would definitely say, you know, even just as you’re walking around here on campus, it always amazes me how much our students have really taken this on. You know, they’re wearing their masks, they’re keeping their social distance, they’re, you know, spread out on campus. I even saw the other day walking by, there was a girl who was talking up to a couple friends in a different residence hall, and she didn’t live in that one so she couldn’t go in it, but they figured out a way to still hang out and talk to each other, but it’s been really incredible to see how our students have taken this on and really ran with it and helped us be successful.

Amy Bronson: Absolutely. And we’re seeing leaders really grow and shine in their ability to be able to take, you know, their group or their mamily or that Maverick family unit that we have here on campus, and really say, “This is important to us.” We have sort of put out the broader “why” and now we see students saying, “Yes, being here for in-person education is worth it to us,” and so we can redefine our campus culture around that and continue to be together.

David Ludlam: Vice President Marshall, I know when you think about... you and Dr. Bronson have been doing interviews, you’ve been talking to media, you’ve been talking to the community, I know one of the themes that continues to emerge is we have these partnerships with MIT and with Harvard and others that seem unlikely on the face of it. I mean, of all the institutions out there, like, why did they choose CMU and how did the two of you pull this off? How did you create these strategic partnerships that have been essential to our success?

John Marshall: Yeah, I think probably immediately, my observation is that Amy and I didn’t really pull this off. It was really a university and community-wide effort and one of the reasons that I have observed that some folks have determined they want to be a part of what we’re trying to accomplish here is a willingness on the part of this institution up and down the organization to do things a little bit differently, to lean in, to show a little bit of appetite for risk. The reality is as humans, when it’s scary and it’s unknown, that there is a little bit of that trepidation right? That we want to sit back and hide and kind of wait and see what’s going on, and I think credit to this team that we say we’re not going to wait and see. We’re going to make a decision, we’re going to follow through and whatever that means, we’re going to do the hard work. And I didn’t mention this earlier,

but one of the things that I have remarked a number of times, just thinking back on summer, is the number of... Just the hours and hours and hours people were willing to grind when much of the world was on lockdown and hiding and vacationing and doing whatever during the summer, during the hot June and July months, there were people here working many, many hard hours to get ready and it paid off. And there is this reality that there is no substitute for hard work, and putting in the hours to be prepared. The other element, I think, that I've heard a lot from our friends is that, "You guys are willing to make decisions and not sit around hand rigging in committees and everything else and sort of arguing endlessly ad nauseum, but rather finding a goal, making decisions, making tough decisions, sometimes. And not all of them have been right, by the way. We've made some mistakes along the way, but just being willing to make a decision and go, and really that can-do attitude, I think, is infectious, especially in 2020, I think some of that positive happy warrior ethic has really paid off for us.

Katlin Birdsall: Great. Well you are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our guests today are Safe Together Strong Together co-chairs, Vice President John Marshall and Physician's Assistant Program Director Dr. Amy Bronson. So this question is for both of you, and why don't, Amy, we'll start with you. So I think, you know, we've been moving at a pretty rapid pace since about March or April and I think sometimes it's nice to be able to stop and really recognize all that the campus community under your leadership has accomplished. So, as you reflect back on these last 7-8 months, what would you say you're most proud of and maybe what surprised you the most that's come out of everything we've been working on to get campus back together and here on campus safely together?

Amy Bronson: Yeah, and that's a great question, and I think it is so important to hit pause, because we don't do that very often when you feel like you're running a million miles an hour. You know, I think I have sat back. Specifically, I think one of the most rewarding pieces has been watching this leadership course that John and I have had the opportunity to teach as a seminar course. So it's for a group of leaders across campus, that we come together every Friday in this seminar course and get to hear from some really interesting and cool leaders from across the nation who have been a part of leading during a pandemic, and I think one of the most interesting and really rewarding pieces in that is seeing students who are buying into that this can be a "more than" rather than a "less than" year. And I think there's a lot of people around the country who specifically around and in the world of education have said, "Well, it's probably good enough," and I have seen this group of students say, "No. There is a lot of learning that can happen during a pandemic. Not only because of how we can come together to be influencers and to change a culture, but it can be a big sort of springboard towards what I want to do and further my education as I continue to make

choices that are continuing to make myself and this group of leaders that I am here in it with everyday better.” And so I think that transformation that I’m seeing not only at an individual level but then sort of cast out to the broader sort of campus level has been really really interesting and very cool to watch.

Katlin Birdsall: And I think that speaks to our campus culture that you were talking about earlier that our students are taking this on when they could be really down-trodden and sad about the way that the semester has gone, but instead they’re like, “Alright, let’s take this. Let’s learn and let’s create something better out of it than what we could’ve.”

Amy Bronson: Absolutely. Yeah, and I think one example is seizing an opportunity. So we had this opportunity to partner with the folks at Sabeti Lab to do Operation: Outbreak which is essentially a virus simulation game that we played here on campus that students can learn while doing it what it actually looks like for a virus to transmit to one another and what you can actually do to protect yourself and mitigate some of the potential spread. And I think through that, I really saw a bunch of leaders come around that, and they were able to accomplish getting over 200 folks on campus excited about being a part of this game and learning about what a virus is during a pandemic which we, as our partners will reflect back on, have said, “We couldn’t even get the Harvard folks to get on board, but CMU did it!”

Katlin Birdsall: CMU did it!

Amy Bronson: Which is really cool.

Katlin Birdsall: So, John, same question to you, then. What are you... when you kind of reflect back on these last couple of months, what are you maybe most proud of or what surprised you the most?

John Marshall: I want to reflect on maybe a handful of folks that are illustrations of why we’ve been successful. You know, last March, when we all went home, we had about 100 folks across this campus whose job literally changed over night. There was no coaching tennis, there was no intramural basketball, there was no, you know... There’s all these elements of things that just stopped, and we took 100 staff on this campus and gave them different jobs to help us be successful, and I want to highlight just a few of them. You know, Emma Leenerman, whose day job was in alumni engagement is all of a sudden in charge of a mass testing facility that, to state the obvious, we had never run before. And not only did we do it, we did it at volumes that, frankly, the county and the hospitals and nobody else thought was possible, and we did it within a matter of weeks.

We've now tested almost 15,000 people on campus and enormous credit goes to Emma. She stepped in and made it happen. You know, I think of Michael Hughes, he's Assistant Coordinator, Assistant Director of the campus recreation center, in his day job, well, come July, he gets redeployed and since that time, he's led a team. Dr. Kristin Heumann and others, where they've literally done thousands of contact traces that have helped keep our campus safe and prevented outbreaks. I think of Dr. Kari Sholtes and Dr. Kelly Bevill and Dr. Kyle McQuade and Dr. Megan Sherbenou and others who, you know, have day jobs. These are professors and they stopped what they were doing, they helped us stand up an RT-LAMP assay which is a fancy way of saying a rapid saliva screening where we learn in hours, not days, what those results are. We see Kari Sholtes with her students go build out this wastewater monitoring system that has prevented many, many outbreaks in these residence halls. It's now among the safest places in Grand Junction as we're watching the virus run in the community, and we know in real time because of the work of Kari and her team what's happening in each of our residence halls. I reflect on those things and I think, "That's the kind of team I want to be a part of." People figuring out ways to step out of their comfort zone. "I don't want to think about mass testing. I don't want to think about wastewater," and step in and say, "It doesn't matter, all hands on deck." These are smart, talented, innovative people. They stepped in, they figured it out and that, to me, that's a symptom of a really healthy organization.

David Ludlam: So I've heard both of you talk a lot about humility in approaching this entire process and initiative with humility knowing that there's a lot of uncertainties and variables, so you're probably going to be overly humble here, but when you step back outside of the process and look at what you've accomplished, there's some unlikely, you say quasi-miraculous things. You just described a few of them. How much of that is maybe predicated on the fact that this campaign, this initiative, this planning process began with the president, President Foster, and a virtue or a value prospect rather than operations? Has that helped carry you through, the idea that this is based on a value prospect, a moral obligation I think you said?

John Marshall: Dr. Bronson, do you want to lead?

Amy Bronson: Absolutely. You know, I think early on, being able to answer the "why." Why are we coming back here? Why in-person education? And I think that rally call has given everyone something to look at when things felt hard. When the unknowns and the uncertainties felt overwhelming, you could look at that and say, "It's because of the in-person education, because of the transformational education that we do here well at CMU, that we can continue to do well with some strategies in place to allow for that to happen."

David Ludlam: And is the moral imperative that the president laid out on the initial phase, I mean, is that... Do you still see that now that we've been doing it for a while? Will it carry through to The Future is Now phase as still an important part of the two of you and your planning?

John Marshall: I want to go back to Katlin's question about what are some of those things that we're most proud of, because I talked a lot about some of the "how's," but a few weeks back, we had our first football game, okay? There were sparse attendance for obvious reasons, we couldn't have a lot of folks, but after that game, there was a celebration in the end zone between our football team and our marching band, and there was a moment there of just pure joy. I mean, just pure elation, and those are kids who, you know, if you rewind over the last several months, really have had kind of a tough year. I mean everybody has, but I think as a parent, you look at your kids and you think, "I want something better for them," and to watch those students that were core to our "why" get to experience that level of joy to be able to safely come back and pursue their dreams, you know, I think of the leadership class and there's these example, these moments that have illustrated our "why" in such a way that really is hard to put words to. But I think those "why's" is really... That's what allows us to power through and do the work and to grind and really remember, you know, why we're doing... Not everybody gets to wake up and do something that is meaningful, that's changing lives, that... they're really hit the pillow that night knowing they made a difference, and I mean my goodness, how lucky are we that we get to be a part of that?

Katlin Birdsall: Well you are listening to CMUnow on KAFM Community Affairs and our guests today are Safe Together Strong Together co-chairs, Vice President John Marshall and Physician's Assistant Program Director Dr. Amy Bronson. So I think, you know, as all of us are dealing with the pandemic on a personal level as well as on a professional level, it's hard sometimes not to get caught up in when you're thinking about the future and the uncertainty being really nervous or anxious or almost negative, where, you know, it's always all the news you hear coming in is constantly this negative barrage that we're all getting. So what maybe is making you excited about the future, for the spring semester and beyond that? What gets you going and makes you excited?

Amy Bronson: Do you want to take this one first, John?

John Marshall: Sure. The antidote to anxiety is more information and more education, right? And so, if you think about it, we've got a small community of 10,000 here who we have shown each other we can do this. We now have the confidence that we can do this. We've spent the time and energy to educate ourselves, to educate our students.

We've all leaned into this and I think, for me, what's exciting and optimistic is we can do hard things if we're committed and I think we've demonstrated that. So, to me that, again, you know, what does that look like? I think to me that looks like an organization that has resilience, and that you want to be a part of and momentum begets momentum. You're going to look around this country and there's a whole lot of universities and organizations that have, frankly, withered in this experience, and I look at CMU and we are thriving. And I think that, to me, is incredibly hope inspiring and gets my eyes pretty squarely painted on the future.

David Ludlam: Talking about hope inspiring, tell us about Dr. Sabeti. I mean, I think everybody knows she's a former Time Magazine Person of the Year. She's done some groundbreaking world-class research all over the world, but she's doing some stuff with us. She was referenced, but tell us about that relationship, tell us about her.

Amy Bronson: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah and Dr. Sabeti, John and I have talked about her a couple of times. If you want to feel bad about yourself, you should probably just go up and look up Dr. Sabeti's bio. She's not only a world renowned researcher, she also is in a rock band, and she just has some of the coolest energy of someone that you will meet, and I think when you talk about joy and finding joy in the moment, it's in seeing these external community collaborators, right? That look in at the lens of what's happening at CMU and get excited about what we're doing here. And I think she shares a similar energy in being willing to sort of go after what may seem big and may seem like a sort of big, hairy audacious goal. And she says, "Go for it," and "I am here to support you, and go after it with you." And she brings a whole cadre of support behind her, right? And an incredible lab that's on the front lines of fighting pandemics in other countries, third world countries. So she has the knowledge to be able to sort of shepherd us through that. And she just has a really cool creative spirit that wants to be a part of it and in the trenches with us fighting, and so I think when you sort of find a connection with those kind of folks, you realize that some of this work that we're doing at CMU is so much bigger than just this small community. It really reaches a nation of others that want to see that hope and excitement about what it can be.

Katlin Birdsall: I always love getting to hear those pieces of what's happening, because I think sometimes, you know, we all get focused on our area and what we're doing, and then when you hear that we're working with these partners from across the country and that those are having direct impacts on our community here, as far as CMU as well as the larger community, and I think it's nice to be able to share those stories out with the KAFM listeners today.

Amy Bronson: Absolutely.

Katlin Birdsall: So I've got another question for you guys. So we've covered a lot today, I feel like, across, you know, where we've been with Safe Together Strong Together, the campus plan, everything that lead up to where we are today, kind of where we're going with The Future is Now, so out of everything we've kind of talked about, what is maybe the one big piece of nugget of information you would want the KAFM listeners to take away from today's conversation?

John Marshall: I'll take a stab at that. I think, you know, one of the challenges in our community right now is that we are... we're experiencing our first wave at a time when we're all a little fatigued, and I think, for all of us, that's tough, right? You're physically and emotionally, intellectually sort of drained after the many months that we've all gone through this as a country, and I think there's a moment in all of this where I think our community can move past this stronger, but it really does, I think, require all of us extending each other an extra measure of grace and kindness and civility and, frankly, you know, just taking the time to, you know, give each other that measure of care. And to me, part of that is, you know, how do we extend each other respect? It's doing simple things, right? It's staying home if you're not feeling well. It's wearing a mask in public places and in your workplace. It's paying extra attention to your kids' symptoms before you send them off to daycare, send them off to school. You know, it's all these little things we can do to show kindness and courtesy and respect to one another. And so, I think, my encouragement for all my neighbors and friends out there is just, you know, keep plowing ahead. We're not out of this, yet. The holidays are probably when this thing is going to peak. And so, I think we kind of need to catch our breath and, you know, settle in here for the next 60 days, because it's going to be tough.

Amy Bronson: Absolutely. And I think it is what we have seen over the last few months is just how integrated our community is, you know? And I think there's nothing like watching transmission of a virus to really show how connected we truly are. And so I think what we've been telling students, you know, is beyond thinking about yourself and why you wear the mask, it's about your community and your community members, and as we think about how to be a better community member, you know, I hope that when we sort of get through all of this, we realize that we all can be stronger together, and it just takes a little bit from each of us. Whether it is that moment of grace or that moment of being able to just make a decision that may feel uncomfortable or feel like you have to make a little sacrifice individually on the front end, that in the long run, that that may be better for the broader community, so I think as we continue to sit back and be so thankful for our community partners and all they've given to us, we really look forward to the future of being able to continue to give that back in meaningful ways as we come out of this.

David Ludlam: Well I can't think of better sentiments from both of you in terms of how to wrap up the show and I want to tell you, you know, you probably don't see it because you're so close to it and you're working so many hours and there's so much complexity, but as a fellow staff person here at CMU: greatly appreciate everything you've done. I look back at where we started and where we are now, and it's quite an accomplishment and I think the two of you deserve a lot of credit, so thank you for the service that you have provided to all of us.

John Marshall: Thanks, Dave.

Katlin Birdsall: And I can definitely second that. So I was recently out on maternity leave and had the opportunity to take a step back in being in the nitty gritty of it...

David Ludlam: This is your first show back, right?

Katlin Birdsall: First show back!

John Marshall: Thank goodness.

Katlin Birdsall: Gotta take a step back and I was telling my team, I mean, not just to make their heads bigger, but I was like it was impressive on the other end of it, seeing the email communications, the videos, the Facebook Lives, the tele-town halls, I mean, all of the things that CMU is doing under your leadership to communicate what's happening here, how to keep us all safe and together. It was really impressive to see it as an outsider. And now being back in it, I'm right back in it, so...

Amy Bronson: That's amazing. And Katlin, I think you bring out such a cool piece that we didn't hit on, which I think really made this plan successful was communications, and I think the team here at CMU that really wrapped around that and provided the infrastructure to be able to roll that out I think has been huge, and we continue to look forward to communicating early and often.

David Ludlam: The future is now.

Amy Bronson: That's right.

Katlin Birdsall: Well great. Well Thank you so much to the both of you again for coming on the show today.

John Marshall: Thank you.

Amy Bronson: Appreciate it, thank you.

Katlin Birdsall: Alright well this was another edition of CMUnow on KAFM. This segment airs on the second Tuesday of each month on KAFM Community Radio. You can also listen to a podcast of today's show at KAFMRadio.org. I'm your host Katlin Birdsall, along with my co-host David Ludlam, and we will be back next month for another edition of CMUnow on the Community Affairs Hour.