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Brian E. Clark
Roger Williams University

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Alumnus, parent and trustee Tim Baxter '83 – president of Samsung Electronics America – chats with President Farish about this fall's Samsung/RWU partnership

November 19, 2012 │ Brian E. Clark

This fall, alumnus, parent and trustee Tim Baxter '83 – president of Samsung Electronics America – launched a partnership and case study that allowed RWU to roll out a cloud computing platform using state-of-the-art Samsung displays. Among other benefits, the solution saves money for students, frees classrooms and creates an even more collaborative academic environment. Baxter shares thoughts with Don Farish.

Donald Farish:

Tim, let me start by thanking you a great deal for the wonderful consequences of this partnership between Roger Williams and Samsung. I talked with Steve White – dean of our architecture school – the other day, and he is just rhapsodic because he is seeing his expectations exceeded. Not only is the cloud computing approach working well in terms of hardware and software, but they are now calculating how much money this will save for the average student. This feeds right into our Affordable Excellence initiative, and it turns us into a leading-edge campus on this technology. We couldn't ask much for much more!

Tim Baxter:

That's excellent news – this is really exciting. In September, we hosted about 100 alumni for an event in Manhattan with Dean White where we showcased this partnership. It's a wonderful demonstration of what can be done in the context of the Affordable Excellence strategy – and it's being done in a way that supports initiatives that Samsung, my company, has as well.

Farish:

Let me ask you about your own motivation. How it is that you feel, as both an alumnus and a trustee, in terms of helping your alma mater become an even stronger institution?

Baxter:

First of all, to me – as an alumnus, as the parent of a student who just graduated, as the vice president of the Alumni Association, and as a trustee – I'm very committed to the enhanced success of the university. Number two, this is a university that took a chance on me as a student, offered me an opportunity and then gave me the post-graduation confidence I needed to be successful. And I believe I have some responsibility to find ways to give back. This opportunity really was borne out of the combination of your Affordable Excellence strategy, a very real business need at a university (defined and limited space, and the need to optimize it), coupled with a B-to-B strategy for Samsung in the education sector. This has been an opportunity to bring those things together in meaningful ways for us both.

Farish:

It's great when it works on so many levels. You took it upon yourself to look for opportunities, while certainly being responsible to your business, but to help your alma mater in the process. This is exactly the kind of thought process that we would hope to see on the part of many of our alumni – you become a great exemplar by virtue of what you're doing. Generosity such as yours makes it possible for us to bring real meaning to the Affordable Excellence initiative. I mentioned the dollars saved for students in architecture – we can certainly see this being broadened on campus to areas such as engineering, for example.

Other side benefits aren't even as immediately obvious – for instance, being able to recapture space that was previously devoted to computer labs. If we were to implement this campus-wide, it would free classrooms to the equivalent of constructing a brand new building. When you think about the cost of a new classroom building, it might well be some $20 million! That's an enormous amount of money that the university saves and that it doesn't have to obtain by raising tuition. This is exactly the kind of project that shows how technology can save money and improve the outcome of student work.

Baxter:

This touched a chord with people at the New York alumni chapter event. You have the financial benefits that you just described, but then you have the educational experience, too. How many times are students challenged during exam weeks or near the end of a semester, in trying to secure

computer time in a lab? To use a cloud solution takes that burden away – you saw the heads shaking from everybody in the audience, whether they were architecture, business or engineering alumni.

Farish:

I suppose we'll have fewer students sleeping at their work stations now in order to preserve their place in line!

The challenge for the university – *any* university – has been, how much do we devote in terms of resources to the acquisition of how many high-end machines? And then how much space do we have to dedicate for their use, to provide a balance for students that doesn't require lines out the door, but at the same time keeps the total cost under control. It's such a balancing act and there's never a right answer – the more you spend, the more product you have, but that comes at its own cost.

In this case, to be able to create what amounts to a virtual high-end machine by using the cloud, we're finally seeing the fruits of all these years of exploration in this area. And the students are indicating to us already what a difference it's making in terms of the quality of their projects, the time it takes to get them done and the capacity to collaborate in ways they haven't been able to previously. It's quite phenomenal.

Baxter:

This also adds value for graduating students, many of whom will be coming into corporations, large and small, with a view toward the benefits of the cloud – the cutting edge of computing right now. They will be able to say: "I understand the benefits, I've experienced it firsthand and now I am learning different ways to apply that education to different form factors instead of the traditional operating system or desktop computer. I'm collaborating on large screens, understanding the benefits of touch and different input devices and user interfaces to demonstrate my work and to show how I can explore, create and navigate." That adds great value, and it gives students a new conversation for interviews with prospective employers. It's a point of differentiation, and in this job market, it is all about how you differentiate yourself from others.

Farish:

If you think historically, universities were places where people studied on their own and became individually adept at a particular area of study. We have generally discouraged joint projects because we used to think of that as cheating – we need to grade you on your work, and how can we tell what you've done if you've done it with somebody else?

Of course today, that's so non-reflective of the reality of what these students will be doing once they graduate. The old notion of an office full of cubicles… companies are tearing those cubicles down and converting them into bullpens, places where there can be a free exchange of ideas. It's the Skunk Works approach to things. The notion that our students are graduating already used to

thinking in terms of collaborating with others, bouncing ideas off of people and using the collective resources of a team to come up with outcomes that none of them could do on their own – we're getting all of that now embedded in the education of these students.

As you say, Tim, they are working at the cutting edge of where technology is these days. It's hard to imagine that our graduates won't be impressive people when they sit down with an HR director and say: "Here's what I know, and here's what I can do – because I've done it."

Baxter:

For Samsung, this also allows us to show how our technology is providing those benefits to students and to the university. We are nearly a $200 billion company that's gone through rapid growth, yet we're also known very much as a consumer company. We have put great efforts into expanding our presence in the enterprise and B-to-B space, and we have aligned ourselves around four key vertical markets where we can both add and extract value. One of those markets is education. In both K-12 and higher education, we are looking to create smart school solutions and find ways to leverage our leadership in displays, tied into cloud experiences like this one at Roger Williams.

Clearly, because the cloud is the new frontier, a lot of companies are wrestling with how and when to get into this space. You really can't just put a toe in the water – I think the university recognizes that and is learning more and more about the benefits. For Samsung, it gives us a very tangible case study of a university, a business, an entity that is making that move forward. That's where the case study comes in – we will be able to share that with other universities and give them the opportunity to learn and benefit, in a way that also benefits Samsung.

Farish:

What's lovely is that this is a two-way arrangement. Roger Williams may benefit more than Samsung, but by the same token I hope we are providing a proof of concept that this solution works well at universities. We would obviously be delighted to speak to people at other universities (in due course) about how this really can be a game changer. We're happy to be the guinea pigs in the process – obviously this saves us money, but in the end, hopefully it turns out to be a very good economic investment on the part of Samsung.

Baxter:

This technology deployment is a relatively new frontier, and we're both out on the edge. We are doing this together, and we'll be learning along the way – at Samsung, we believe in the benefits associated with that. It is no different than being out in front of the curve on the need for the University to embrace this strategy outlined under Affordable Excellence. The University has been moving forward on these issues for the last year, and only now do we hear the president of the U.S. beginning to talk about it. We really are out in front with this strategy. We're embracing the need for change. For both entities, that's about leadership, right? It's about anticipating what's happening – good, bad or indifferent – and trying to create something new out of it.

Farish:

That's an interesting point. There was an article that appeared recently that featured a well known individual at the University of Pennsylvania. He argued that the solutions to the crises facing higher education right now will not come from the leading institutions, because they are the ones least impacted by everything that's going on. The University of Pennsylvania is not about to go out of business or have problems recruiting a freshman class. They are part of the elite, so they don't see the need to change. Instead, the change has to come from institutions in the second tier. But the challenge is that the corporate world generally wants to work with the top-tier institutions.

What's special about this relationship, Tim, is that Samsung is part of it. You saw the opportunity that would present itself by working directly with your alma mater, and you believed that we were capable of doing this work. You didn't have to test it at an Ivy League university to show that it would work. You had faith in us, and Samsung had faith in us – I'm sure that Samsung's faith had a lot to do with your intersession on our behalf!

But the outcome is that we are demonstrating a lot of things simultaneously – the impact of the cloud and the way in which we can save students money and expand the quality of the educational experience. It was going to be a university like Roger Williams that would do this, just because we were feeling the need to do it more than the top-tier institutions. Making that happen is difficult – and the catalyst here was the fact that you were in the corporate position that you're in and at the same time an alumnus of this institution. We're doing some really important work here at a time when the country is looking rather desperately for solutions.

And when we have a partner with the international credibility of Samsung, right away the question comes up: "Why would Samsung be involved with little old Roger Williams University in Rhode Island? There must be something really significant going on there." Credibility is the operative word. I'm sure this partnership is going to register pretty strongly on the minds of prospective students and their parents over the next year. That excitement becomes contagious, which raises the image of this university, entirely as a consequence of our association with a world-class institution like Samsung.

So, Tim, thank you once again for the very significant contribution that you have made to the quality of education for today's students at your alma mater. It means a lot to me personally, but even more to the students who are the beneficiaries.

Baxter:

It means a lot to me, too. I think it's a great way to give back to the university, and we all can do that in different ways. I'm thrilled to be a part of this.

This conversation served as the basis for "Off the Script" on Page 3 of the Fall 2013 issue of RWU Magazine.
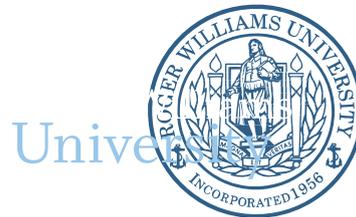
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