

## **Business and Community Services with Randy Pilkington**

**Patrick:** Welcome to the Building a Better Iowa Podcast!

\*Intro music\*

**Patrick:** Welcome everyone to our first episode of the Building a Better Iowa Podcast, brought to you by Business and Community Services at the University of Northern Iowa. I'm here today with my co host, Ricki Alford.

**Ricki:** Hi everyone.

**Patrick:** Good to see you, Ricki. My name is Patrick Luensmann and I work here at you and I at the John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center. We're excited to bring our first episode of our podcast to you. Joining us as the Executive Director of Business and Community Services, Mr. Randy Pilkington. Randy, glad to have you on the show today.

**Randy:** Thank you. Great to be here.

**Patrick:** So where we want to talk about today is really the history, the exciting – I am sure exciting history of BCS, how it sort of came to be and what really – for those of you hopefully know who we are, what Business and Community Services has done in the last three and a half, four decades-ish across Iowa. So, Randy, why don't you start a little bit of your background, then maybe how BCS came to be.

**Randy:** Well, thanks, Patrick. First of all, Business and Community Services or BCS is our overall economic development vision division for the University of Northern Iowa. And I came here almost 34 years ago. I received a call from then President Deno Curris and he said – he was telling me about the new initiatives that would happen at UNI and the area of economic development. And at the time, I was working for the redevelopment authority in downtown Waterloo. He had met me through several of the organizations I belong to, told me a little bit about some of the programming so I said I would be very interested in following up on this. So the history started in 1987, when I became the first staff member for what was then called the Institute for Decision Making Science. Later became the Institute for Decision Making and started our role in the Economic Development Service across the state.

**Patrick:** That's awesome. I've heard of that Curris guy, I think maybe the business building is named after him.

**Randy:** That's exactly right. After–after UNI he went on to become the president of Clemson University, and then became the president of ASCII, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. So he really helped move us forward in our outreach and he's pretty much known for the beautification of our campus here at UNI.

**Patrick:** So when he made that call, you know, what was he – at the time what sort of other programs were there at UNI or across the state that were looking to serve the community in that way?

**Randy:** Well, the call was really precipitated by a visit he had from then first term, Governor Branstad. He went to all three universities and said the economy of Iowa is not doing well. We were in the middle of a farm crisis. And he said universities do a good job of graduating students and putting them into the workforce, but we want you to do more. We aren't going to dictate what you do, we'll provide – we'll seed it with a little bit of lottery funds, and each university can then go ahead with the programs that they see fit to help the economy of Iowa. At the time we had a Small Business Development Center, and we had a Professional Development Center and then the Institute for Decision Making was the next program.

**Patrick:** The Institute for Decision Making has been here for a whole 34 years then, right? So at the start, what was sort of the – the focus of IDM and how has that sort of changed?

**Randy:** It was kind of a fun process then because we really didn't have an exact detail of what we would do. We just knew that communities would get together and the back of a restaurant with pizza and beer, and there's nothing wrong with that, but they would talk about how they needed to do something in their community, and how they really needed to address some of the issues of Main Street or workforce or industrial development. Then they would adjourn the meeting and do it all again, the next month. And so Dr. Robert Waller at the time, who is better known for the Bridges of Madison County, was the dean of the College of Business. And he felt that communities needed some guidance for their future; they needed to create a vision. They couldn't do it with just academics you needed with practitioners. So we put the practitioners along with decision making techniques, and started to work with communities to create visions, but we also then help them outline how to. How are we going to do these things? How are we really going to achieve that future vision? That was how we started at that time, and obviously a lot of things have changed over 34 years, but the basics of what we do is still wrapped around that plan for the community and their future vision and then helping them accomplish it.

**Patrick:** IDM has done hundreds, maybe thousands of projects all across Iowa in those years. And from there, we've now added 12 other distinct programs into the BCS family. Can you talk a little bit about what some of those are and maybe how those uh—all sort of fit together—you know, into this service for Iowa?

**Randy:** Yeah, shortly after the Institute for Decision Making we started with the Iowa Waste Reduction Center. And this was a program that was created to help small businesses across the state deal with some of the environmental regulations that they didn't really know how to deal with. And so that was started shortly right after in 1987 as well. Then over the next couple of years, we saw unmet needs across Iowa—across the entire state of Iowa, especially in rural communities. And so we thought, is there a way we can create some type of a program so we can serve these businesses, small businesses, nonprofit organizations and help them? So now that we've come up with 13 programs that are very distinct to UNI across the state. For

example, we talked about the Institute for Decision Making, but also working with a lot of organizations and local governments is the GEOTree program. They work with local governments and geographic information systems and mapping and datasets so they can really make better decisions. We have Advance Iowa that works with business innovations, succession planning, and peer groups. We have the John Pappajohn Center that works with students, student entrepreneurs, and also co-manages the IASourcelink with the Economic Development Authority and provides assistance to entrepreneurs all over the—all over the region and also hosts the Small Business Development Center for this part of the state of Iowa. We have the Center for Energy and Environmental Education, which works with energy, environmental education, and also serves as the host for the Green Iowa AmeriCorps. That organization has literally served hundreds of households, thousands of households across the entire state of Iowa with energy efficiency, and helped a lot of low income residents with that. We have a Tallgrass Prairie Center, restoring the native prairies and roadsides across the entire state. I think last I heard they have completed roadside projects and 57 of Iowa's 99 counties. We have a really unique program in Strategic Marketing Services, which is a professional market intelligence organization that's provided services to the fortune 500 companies to small rural Iowa companies. So that's really unique and we involve students in each of those areas. We have a Metal Casting Center and an Additive Manufacturing Center which is very unique, maybe one or two in the entire country and provides services for the foundries in the foundry industry and foundry suppliers as well. So that's what the organizations we have right now serving across the state.

**Ricki:** And for those of you that this information is new, we have information that you can find on all of these on our website and we will be having more podcasts to discuss all of these programs.

**Patrick:** We are a big happy family where you can—as Randy just mentioned, really get any service that you're thinking about in terms of business, environmental science— where do we—we talked about the state of Iowa, can you talk a little bit more specifically about how you've expanded that reach to really hit every county and what does that sort of look like over the past a couple decades?

**Randy:** Yeah, when we put all these programs together over the time, it really was 2000 the year 2000 before we came under the umbrella of Business and Community Services to organize that. Ever since that year 2000, we have served clients in all 99 counties across the state of Iowa. And while we do this, we look at each of these individual and unique programs and what we have for the needs across the state. What's really also unique is not just the 3500 clients we served in the past year, but the amount of students we get engaged in our programs. People will ask so why did you and I have these outreach programs? Why do you do this? This work that you do? Well a lot of reasons. First of all, we want to impact Iowa, grow a better Iowa. Second is the engagement of our students. Last year alone we had 300 students directly engaged in our programming with the clients. But more importantly and more impressively, we had 2500 UNI students that were engaged in some way in a business and community services project. Maybe through a classroom project or a special website development or marketing plan. So that's

pretty impressive and we involved 125 faculty members and this service to the state of Iowa. So it's not just those 3500 clients that we work directly with. It's the engagement of our students and faculty to really contribute back to the state of Iowa. And we know that our students that have an entrepreneurial activity or an entrepreneurship—or any type of engagement with the businesses across Iowa are more likely to take their first job in the state of Iowa and stay here.

**Ricki:** Wow, that's really impressive.

**Patrick:** I mean, I think that bringing those students and faculty together—because you were answering the question, Why UNI? Why a university? and as you look across, you know, probably the whole country at universities like UNI, are there any other types of—we are a Midwest comprehensive—are there any other types of programs like this that exist outside of the huge universities?

**Randy:** Not exactly like UNI. You'll find comprehensive regional universities that have one or two programs based on a need in their region, but to really serve an entire state and do it in the way we have where we've grown to 13 programs and 50 professionals. I think it's important to point out too that we're using the resources that we're generating. We get a small allocation from the state of Iowa. We leverage that five times over with fee for service and private funding and foundation funding. So it's quite unique to do this type of thing that UNI has, and the value we add to the entire—entire state through these programs. So it's quite unique to have this much comprehensive approach and we're really fortunate to be here at UNI. Because over the last four presidents they've all supported what we do. They believe in the greater good of the entire state and it's more than just educating students. It's really Building a Better Iowa that we use as our mantra. And so we've been able to have a pretty clear path to go out and create our own future to create our own programs. And as long as we continue to support ourselves and meet more needs of businesses, I think this will continue to sustain itself for many years to come.

**Patrick:** No, that's awesome. Over that storied history, there's got to be a few favorite projects, maybe some learning moments, maybe that we have from clients, any of those that you want to highlight for BCS?

**Randy:** One is relatively recent, and that's with COVID. As we know, and that started in—in the March of 2020 period of time. We were all in a little period of bewilderment. We didn't really know what direction to go as a state or as businesses or as communities. And immediately, we started to work with the Iowa Economic Development Authority to create a business impact survey. What are the impacts COVID is having on your business now? And what do you think it'll have with employment and sales impact into the future? And then Director Durham with the Iowa Economic Development Authority has stated numerous times, the data that she received from those surveys has helped guide her decision making on the types of programs that are needed to help with economic recovery. We did subsequent surveys as well, as a combination of the Institute for Decision Making and Strategic Marketing Services. And to really understand not now—immediately afterwards, it was just figuring out what direction to go. Longer term it's

been—What about recovery? How do we make sure? And I think Iowa has done a fairly good job of addressing business needs and the programs to help them so that was one example.

Another example is a really fun project. One of my favorites is the green brewery project and helping this growing brewing industry in the state of Iowa. More than 100 microbreweries and brewpubs in the state of Iowa have learned that sustainability is a good business practice and helping them come through the certification to use less water to have less waste. And many of those customers, including myself, really do appreciate this effort that's happened in the green brewing industry and I know other states are looking at us right now and what we've done and then how to copy that. So that's been really fun too. I'm really proud of our work that we've been able to do with business transition and—and the Family Business Program. Let's go back to family. To the whole transition and help having students actually help create—understand the value of a business working with a faculty member in the finance department to put together estimates of what a company is worth and then try to help them through that process of transitioning. Very important for the state of Iowa and all the rural businesses to keep as many companies as we can here. Especially if you think in a rural setting, a company of 25 or 50, that's the fabric of that rural community and they do much more than just employ people. That's philanthropy. That's the leadership in that community. So working through that and then taking that to the next level with the family businesses. There's not and there hasn't been a Family Business Center in the state of Iowa. So really proud of the group that's put together this over the last three years to work with some of the bigger ones and some of the smaller companies in Iowa to really put our—our stamp on a family business program for this entire state and I think that's a great opportunity as we look into the future. Really also, I have to mention the Green Iowa AmeriCorps. We've been the host of that for the last 10 years. And the thousands of families that have benefited from the services of the green Iowa AmeriCorps and the thousands of volunteers that they've generated to help with those home weatherization projects, and other projects. We're really proud to have—be the host here at UNI of the Green Iowa AmeriCorps.

**Patrick:** Those are a lot of great projects. Ricki it sounds like we need to get a map of all those breweries though and maybe take a tour sometime and check them out.

**Ricki:** Yeah, that'd be a lot of fun. Maybe our next podcast will be hosted from the road.

**Patrick:** Will go on the road. So as we think about those stories and some of the projects you mentioned, can you talk a little bit about—sort of the methodology we've got all these different centers provide lots of great programming. How did we land on those? Where—you know, in the world we could do anything. We've got, or we think—I think, are a bunch of really strong programs. He talked a little bit about how you've helped guide the different centers to reach their market in that way?

**Randy:** That's a wonderful question and we reflect back on how we got started, and then what program came next. For example, when we started the Institute for Decision Making, we noticed there were a lot of issues with market research, and especially rural areas in Iowa. There was no availability for these companies to get the market data that they needed. We have received a

federal grant for one year to try a pilot program and market research. It worked well. We created a fee based program and we've done this now for 30 years. So we looked at—based on the programs that we had out in the field of Iowa, just like we start with succession planning and family business, as we've looked at—What are the needs across the state? Are we the right organization to do it? Is any other organization already doing it? If there's a gap—What resources does it take to really put this together, to make it a sustainable program, and have it meet a real unmet need across the state of Iowa? And that's really helped all the programs, even those within. You take the Iowa Waste Reduction Center—that's the food waste program that they've created. The Green Brewery Sustainability project, those are all created when they saw an unmet need in the state. That's one thing—I'm really proud of our team. Because really, all we are is the people that work here. It's the talented team that we have. They're always looking across the state of—Iowa, what else could we be doing to impact the economy to Build a Better Iowa?

**Patrick:** Now that's great. In my 10 years here, we've done a lot of those different—ability to try things some of them didn't always work out. We had a few that maybe didn't go where we wanted to but we learned a lot and have definitely built that foundation to really drive deep into expertise. I think we thank you for allowing us to do a lot of those different experiments with—I mean, I can think even just through technology, the sourcing platform we tried to speak out about in small business once. Don't google that but it was okay. We learned a lot and I think it really helped us connect to the smaller entrepreneurs across Iowa—really build from there. So as we are on that topic then, what are some of the things that you're excited about looking into 2022 and beyond? You know, that BCS is hopefully going to be striving towards.

**Randy:** I'm really excited because of our team. We've always been able to adapt quickly and move forward, so I think the sky's the limit for what we do. We adapted quickly to COVID. We created new ways to assess workforce issues over the years. We became a leader in reducing food waste, and now we're becoming a leader in manufacturing 4.0. So I'm very excited about what direction we're going with the Foundry Industry and Defense Supply Chain and that entire 4.0. I'm really excited about moving forward with innovation and business. You think about the business and retention. That's so important that we do with our economic developers, but we've added that innovation piece—How do we assess innovation and how do we guide that innovation in the whole economy working toward that Industry 4.0? And I'm really excited as we help others think about their opportunities for the future. As I talked—I started out by talking about future visioning. And if you come circle all the way back around, it's—how do we create a future vision in our regions, in our community, and for our state, so we really move forward into the future and not be held back by the current burdens, our financial situation or our budgets that we have, but really start to think much bigger than maybe what we have in the past.

**Patrick:** That sounds exciting to me. Ricki, you get to work with all the programs being the communications manager. You know, as you've been here for three years now, any—any things that especially reach the state that you've seen that have been exciting for you or things you're excited about for the future?

**Ricki:** I just think that there is a strong sense of community with our clients. There's always an interesting story or just an interesting relationship that we have built with our clients that I think is really unique.

**Patrick:** Absolutely. Well, I'm excited for where the future holds for us as well. With a lot of people listening, one thing that I think is definitely unique to UNI—all of our programs and mine included is our partnerships. The way that we work not only with the communities, but with the state, counties, you know everyone. Any thoughts Randy on how we've built those partnerships, and you know what they mean to us?

**Randy:** Partnerships and collaboration are key, because all the things I've mentioned, none of them happen in isolation. Every year when I get to present to the Iowa legislature, I point out a slide that has 30 different logos on it. And that's really what it's all about in Iowa. We work with all those 30 organizations. We work with Iowa and Iowa State. We work with the associations of professional developers and associations and business and industry and many, many more. But it's all about our collaboration, our partnerships with each of those organizations because we don't operate all in isolation. I think we have a really good situation in Iowa. We work well together, we like each other and we are all up for the greater good of the state.

**Patrick:** I think anyone that's listening – business or potential community or partner – you know, we want to hear from you. Part of the reason why we want to do this podcast is to share a bit of our story, engage with you in meaningful ways that we can bring you into our community and continue to help and build throughout the state. So if you're going to be sure to hit that Like and Subscribe button and reach out we'd be happy to have you. Randy as we sort of wind down our time here today. Any other, you know, final thoughts? We've sort of been through most of the story. We've talked about how it started. We're excited for where we're going in the future. Is there anything in there that we want to make sure we cover for BCS?

**Randy:** Yeah, just one thing too is we are involved in a lot of organizations around the state but we just don't show up at meetings. We take a leadership role. You know, we've had four past presidents of professional developers of Iowa, so right there in a leadership role and in a working role. Whether it's socation of business and industry, whether it's the Iowa Recycling Association, whether it's the energy board, so we try to take our responsibility seriously and we want to engage and be considered leaders and collaborators around the state.

**Patrick:** Absolutely. Well, Randy, thank you so much for the time today. We appreciate having you on. Is there anything else Ricki? Thoughts, anything I missed? Ricki's here to fact check me and make sure that we are covering all of the bases.

**Ricki:** No, I think I think we covered it all.

**Patrick:** Final word Randy?

**Randy:** Just we look to the future in Iowa and any way that you think of that's an unmet need across the state reach out to us because we would love to build a better Iowa.

**Patrick:** Absolutely. Well, thank you for joining us for this episode one of the BCS podcasts Building a Better Iowa. We hope to hear from you and see you in future episodes.

\*Outro music\*