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**CHRIS DAVIS:** So welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*. I am Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at the Extension School. And it is my great pleasure today to have with me-- she is not with me in studio. She's in another state.

But I'm really thrilled to have Joanna Smith here with me. I've been meaning to kind of get her on the record and talk a little bit about her experience at the i-lab during and after she was a student here at the Extension School. I believe she graduated with her ALB in 2016. She's the founder and the CEO of a company called AllHere.

So I'd love to kind of talk to her a little bit about the evolution of that company, how it started, how it evolved from when she was a student at the Extension School, what's she's been doing since then. A lot of more students are approaching me and others at the Extension School and asking about, what happens at the i-lab? What can I do there? And I can't think of anyone more qualified and more interesting to talk to than Joanna. So I'm really thrilled to have her here with me today.

**JOANNA SMITH:** That is so kind of you, Chris. It is an honor to be on this podcast, and thanks very much for having me.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Thank you, Joanna. So, yeah, thank you for taking time from your very busy schedule to do this.

**JOANNA SMITH:** Oh, this is fun stuff.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Oh, good. And AllHere is your baby. It's your company. I think you started it. It evolved from when you started working at the i-lab when you were a student here. If you could talk a little bit about that, tell us what AllHere is, and basically how it started.

**JOANNA SMITH:** Sure, absolutely. So as context, AllHere is an EdTech company that was born out of the Innovation Lab at Harvard that's focused on helping schools to reduce chronic absenteeism. And we do that in three ways. The first way that we do that is helping them to pinpoint the reasons why their students are absent through a simple research-based diagnostic.

The second way we do that is then mapping those reasons to the most helpful interventions so that students are getting the right supports at the right time. And then we track the impacts of all that work. We really got going, I would say back in 2016, 2017-ish with Boston public schools who was one of our first partners.

And for me, this work was very powerful because in the incubation stage, I was actually teaching and going to school at the Extension School while being able to take part in all of the programming at the i-lab. So I was able to go from recognizing that some of my students were missing increments of two to three days of really leveraging my school-based role to then see ways that we could do that work better as well as support both of those youth and their families that better.

And the i-lab was just a powerful space for all of those insights and all of that work to help us get further faster. So since we got started a few years back, we now serve schools nationwide. So we go from the Northeast with partners such as Boston all the way down to Florida where we work with schools in Miami-Dade as well as Broward counties in the Midwest, as well, and then all the way to Texas to a community called Brownsville that's about 10 minutes away from the Mexican border.

But for all that to have started at the Extension School, as well as the i-lab, we feel very fortunate as well as very grateful for just how powerful of a role and an impact that that's had in all his growth.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So you work with school systems to combat and reduce absenteeism. I'm going to ask a very basic question. How do you do that? [SIGHS]

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah, so nationwide, about 8 million students miss about a month of school every year. And it impacts school systems, whether they're urban, whether they're rural, or whether they're suburban. And in the early stages of our work, we realized three key things.

The first thing was that for a lot of school systems, it's very difficult to hone in on the reasons why their students are asked. And I think the field and research has done a great job in outlining the reasons, generally why youth are absent.

But if you're a school leader, or if you're a system-level leader, it really helps to have a very localized sense of the most important root causes of absenteeism, whether they're things, like mindset on the part of youth or families. Or it's transportation barriers or health issues that may be keeping your students out of school in a proactive way.

So that's one of the first problems that we focus on. The second problem that we focus on is specifically the fact that interventions in order to be effective need to be mapped back to the reasons why a child is absent.

So one of my favorite examples of this is that there's a school leader that we worked with in the past who will not be named who used to really love taking in sheet cakes to reward students who had perfect attendance for that day. And while that's a wonderful strategy-- it's great for morale-- a lot of times we see in the field that a lot of the strategies and interventions being used aren't really tied back to the reason why that student may be missing a lot of class, right?

So while an intervention, like cake or a rally, may be helpful on the day of, if the student's real barrier is that, well, it's really tough for my family to understand how absences are adding up, then we actually haven't solved that root cause.

And then the third problem that we really focus in on is that it's very easy for a school or a district to have a portfolio of interventions or strategies that they're using. But to answer the efficacy question, that's usually a bit trickier for folks, because it requires putting data about interventions into conversation with absenteeism, data, as well as youth outcomes info.

So what we do to address those problems is that we've created a single platform that enables schools and school systems to identify the reasons why their students are absent to then deploy the right interventions so that the right student is getting the right support at the right time and then to track the impact of that work so they're able to just gain clarity into which interventions work best for their students. Helpful?

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yes, no, absolutely.

**JOANNA SMITH:** Awesome.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have this platform. And you are working with school systems to help them implement this to, as you said, track the data. Do you do any kind of student or parent-facing work? Is your work largely done with administrators? Or do you also work with parents of students who are struggling with this absenteeism issue?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah, great question. For a lot of our partners, our platform is made directly for use by school, as well as central office staff, as well as well as any field-based staff. So think of your counselors, your social workers who do that direct work with you, as well as families, especially at increasing levels of absence.

One of the things that school leaders are able to do from our platform is launch any intervention for any student, so ranging from the automated ones, such as email, phone call, text and us and snail mail all the way up to best practice modules for interventions at the most extensive levels of absence.

So if a school leader chooses to leverage all year for us to do those automated interventions, then that's an example of when our platform would directly touch a student or directly touch a family, because they would be receiving the intervention that was launched by and through us.

But what we find is that in working with the school, as well as central office leaders who are closest to students and are closest to the families that we're not only able to supplement as well as to improve the impact and the efficacy of the work but also really change the culture of what absenteeism work can look like as its work that often feels very punitive to families. And we take pride in leaning into those efforts and in working with him through those staff in that way.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So tell me a little bit about the genesis for this. So let's flash back to 2015, thereabouts. You were taking courses at the Extension School towards your ALB. I believe at that point you were working in the Boston public school systems. Is that correct?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Correct. I was a intern in their data office as well at one point.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So how did you get the idea of this? And how did you kind of start working towards what is now this wonderful and growing and evolving organization?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah, thank you. There were a few beautiful experiences that kind of dovetailed and built over the course of a few years, definitely, while I was at the Extension School, as well as before and after that has taken a pivotal role in our growth. The next pivotal experience for me was just prior to when I came to the Extension School, actually.

I had been interning for an organization in Washington DC called the DC Promise Neighborhood in other data work. And at that time, the organization has made tremendous gains in terms of absenteeism and such wonderful folks there who really shaped my thinking on this space and in this field and specifically the role that data can play in a proactive and problem-solving capacity.

We did a research project that consisted of interviews, as well as focus groups with students who are chronically absent across DC's Ward seven. And that research work-- I think it was powerful for me at that time, because the research back then was very consistent in its sense to will their structural barriers that explain absenteeism.

But then it boils down to a family's care enough. Then they'll get their kids to school every day. It's a very us versus them narrative. And I think that that opportunity was powerful for me because I got to hear directly from students, directly from families about valuing school but really facing barriers that keep their kids out of class every day and sometimes feeling as if there's such a sense of mistrust between them and their schools that if they miss a day here or there, it didn't carry the same kind of mental weight as it would if they really trusted that there's a caring adult at my child's school who will miss my child if he or she is not there.

All the experiences came to a head when I was at the Extension School. So one of my favorite courses was actually with Professor Mark Fagan. And his class was a process improvement class and was really focused on getting us to understand any process or any provision of a service as consisting of a series of steps that either create a bottleneck or that help to maximize how efficient and effective that service is in a respect to whoever it's intended to serve.

And especially as I had begun to teach at that same time, as well, I get deeper into my coursework at the Extension School. It created this powerful, almost trifecta of experiences in which I was learning about process improvement. I was really thinking about just the processes that my own school at that time used for working with the youth who were absent.

So, for instance, it seemed that in some cases, it took us too long to really pinpoint whether a student was facing a huge absenteeism challenge and even longer to cultivate our relationships with families that would allow us to dig deep into those barriers so and combine the power of that course learning.

What I loved also was that since the Extension School is really optimized for adults who are also working, I was able to work and teach and go to office hours and sort through what I was seeing in my classroom with faculty members and go to the innovation lab and access workshops and advisement and resources on ways that I could begin to actually think of ways to begin to make some traction against this problem.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you.

**JOANNA SMITH:** My pleasure.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So I initially from what you said, I am guessing that you scheduled one-on-one meetings with some of the staff advisors at the Innovation Lab. And that's kind of how it started. And then at some point, you applied and were accepted to the Venture Incubation Program--

**JOANNA SMITH:** Correct.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** --for the first time. Right, OK.

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah, yeah. And when I walked into the i-lab for the first time, I remember this, because I kind of probably looked like a deer in headlights, as opposed to, like, whoa. It's a unique space. Harvard has a lot of beautiful spaces, a lot of wonderful study spaces.

The i-lab is unique in that there's no class work that's supposed to be done in a i-lab. There's no case work. There's no group work for a project that's supposed to be happening. It's solely based on entrepreneurship, and how they can help you get from idea to action faster and get your ventures further faster.

So I walk into this space. It's very bright. It's very colorful. And the staff was very friendly. So I think I just walked up to someone and was like, hey, what's this space about? And as they started to tell me about all of the resources there-- so, for example, there are a few.

So even before I was a part of the Venture Incubation Program, which is a program that runs by semester, it goes about 12 weeks from fall. But there's also spring term as well as a summer term. They do have office hours just for any Harvard student who's enrolled full-time in any school. And it's designed to really answer those questions.

So they have office hours with folks who are on staff. They also bring in entrepreneurs in residence, as well, with whom you can schedule office hour meetings with. And those meetings can really cover any kinds of questions you have focused on entrepreneurship. So some of my earliest meetings were really just focused on gaining a sense as to what's here in the i-lab. What can I do?

And then as I got further into, not only those meetings, but also taking advantage of the many workshops that they offer that are all focused on entrepreneurial skill building, I think that it created a powerful learning loop to where there were so many contacts within which I could gain skills, as well as share what I was learning with others and debrief what I was learning with others, as well as find people at the i-lab who were interested in things, as well, to join me in a team.

And then I think that folks love the space. But, really, the space is the least of it. I think that it's the relationships. It's the content. It's the advisement. And it's all of the workshops that really helped to create this truly unique space where you pick up skills, get to know people, get to meet people who can help you really get further faster. So when they say that, they really mean it. [LAUGHS]

**CHRIS DAVIS:** [LAUGHS] I was looking before, because the i-lab has a very thorough website which they revamped last year. And the entire history of the Venture Incubation Program, including all the teams that have been a part of it are there.

And I believe that you and Will Foussier, who's also an alum, you guys are tied for the Extension School students who have had the longest consecutive experience in the Venture Incubation Program. I think both of you had for seven consecutive semesters been a part of the Venture Incubation Program, which is fantastic. [LAUGHS]

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah, so we did the Venture Incubation Program. So every team is eligible to apply to renew every semester. So, for example, if you are accepted through fall, you can apply to renew in spring. You can apply through you the following summer.

And then when you graduate, there's a track specifically for alumni. At that time, it was Launch Lab. It's now called Launch Lab X that now is more tailored specifically to the unique needs of alumni-run ventures but carries a lot of the same assets for it as the Venture Incubation Program.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** That's right, yes. That's correct and thank you for making that distinction. Yeah, the alumni path is a little different now as of last year. But tell me a little bit about-- so as you mentioned, the biggest draw of the i-lab is not the physical structure itself, but the people that you meet and you're working with.

The i-lab is a space where full-time degree-seeking students from all the Harvard schools can apply to be in the Venture Incubation Program. So you're there. You're an Extension School-led team. You're surrounded by your working with teams that are representing, I'm sure, all of the other Harvard schools.

What was that like? Did you feel like, you kind of had the same experience that the other Harvard students were having? What school you were from, did that ever pop up? Or was it just where everyone's venture is kind of the chief kind of anchor of what they're working on? And it's really kind of an equal kind of opportunity for anyone who is admitted into that particular program.

**JOANNA SMITH:** Absolutely. It pops up in beautiful way. So the i-lab is a one Harvard space, meaning that as long as you're full-time enrolled in any one of Harvard schools, you have access to all of the programming, as well as the co-working space itself and the office hours and even the really tasty snacks that they keep in the kitchen.

What you'll also find, as well, so particularly for the Venture Incubation Program, there has to be one Harvard founder. And by Harvard founder, they just mean anyone who is full-time enrolled at anyone of the Harvard schools. But you see a lot of teams actually have cross-Harvard function.

So, like, you can have someone from the Extension School, someone from the business school, someone from the Ed school all part of this team that's operating out of the i-lab in one space and in one function. So I think that the way that school affiliation factors in most to i-lab is i-lab access, right? Like, can you get into the space, but then everything else is what you put into it?

So if you go to workshops, if you build relationships, if you talk to people-- and especially talk to people you don't know, right? I think that sometimes we get so comfortable in the social spaces that we in habit with so much of the beauty of i-lab is that cross-school environment to where the first question is not what school are you from, even though it's an asset, and everyone I've experienced.

They've displayed either authentic joy at meeting someone from the Extension School or extreme pleasure at working with someone from the Extension School or even getting to know more about what the Extension School is, right? I think that sometimes I view it as an opportunity to serve as a in my own humble small slice of other world way, an ambassador of the Extension School itself.

And I think that because a lot of us work, and because a lot of us not only work, but also juggle a full-time educational pathway that we bring a lot of unique assets and strengths to the spaces, as well, that really just enrich the ventures that we're working on.

I've experienced it only as an asset. And I think that definitely up a powerful one in terms of how our ventures can be shaped by the unique kinds of students that we are. It's really dependent on the relationships you're building and just the ways you're engaging in that community.

And then you quickly see that the venture you're working on becomes your first point of identity in this space, right. So, like, you have folks who are working on EdTech Ventures. And then they have their little subcommunity. You have folks who are working on consumer ventures. And they have their own little sub--

**CHRIS DAVIS:** You are accepted into Google Entrepreneurs, I believe. And when I say you, I mean all here, got a pretty significant federal funding. Is that correct?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Correct. So we were a party to a grant that had been written to the US DOJ and specifically with regard to supporting students who are struggling with absenteeism. So that support has directly supported work that we do in Holyoke, Springfield, Illinois, Massachusetts and in reducing absenteeism in those areas.

And the Google for Entrepreneurs Program is similarly another program that's like the i-lab in the sense of the advisement and the resources and the help focus specifically on the needs of early stage organizations and ventures.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** You're now based at one of those Google spaces. Is that correct?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah. So we do maintain space in Boston, as we have a lot of partners there who I think would be sad to see us completely go. And it's also a great hub for EdTech. We've also established a second hub in the Southeast that aligns with the Google for Entrepreneurs space there but also aligns with a lot of our partner expansion efforts in the Southeast as well.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Oh, that's wonderful. So one final question, Joanna. If there is one thing you could pass along to an extension student who has an idea for a venture, is thinking about reaching out to the i-lab if they're eligible, what piece of advice would you give?

**JOANNA SMITH:** Yeah. One is that I would do a two-parter piece of advice. So part A of that piece of advice, I think, is to take pride and to look at the backgrounds and the path that led you to the Extension School as an asset, being a working adult. Managing school and other commitments are oftentimes that.

That is giving you grist for your venture that you don't even know is going to happen yet. And it's also allowed you to cultivate work ethic and skills and the capacity to manage multiple things at the same time that come into play every single day in your work and especially in my work personally. Those are skills that I live with every day.

The second thing I would say that part B of that advice is that, just go. And you can go in multiple ways. You can just choose to go to a workshop. You can choose to go to an office hour. You can choose to go to a roundtable. You can choose to look on the website at the staff listing and set up a conversation with one of the folks there.

They're really there to authentically help you and to help you get to the next step and get your idea for further faster. So I would say whatever, just go, just set a time, so set a date and do it and be willing to, not only go, but to also converse and to get to know people who are not only from our same school, but from other schools as well.

You may meet teammates that way. You may meet co-founders that way. You may meet advisors that way. And it all creates a very rich context within which the idea you had can one get outside of you but become the next thing that changes the world. And you owe it to yourself to do that.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Joanna, I can't thank you enough. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences, your advice, the journey that you've been on with all here. I'm really grateful that you had the time to share this with our students.

**JOANNA SMITH:** This has been an honor, Chris. Thank you so much. And if anyone listening to this podcast has any questions specifically about the i-lab, the i-lab staff offers point of contact and our super friendly people. If there's any questions for me, I'll say it publicly that Chris has, again, give you guys my contact information for any follow-up questions that folks may have about anything. [LAUGHS]

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Thank you. Thank you so much.

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You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is a podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.