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#### EPISODE 209: CHRIS CARACCI – LEARNING FROM THE PAST

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##### Chris Caracci

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##### Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit [wm.edu](http://wm.edu).

##### Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, one of the best ways to succeed in the future is to understand the past. A new partnership between Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary will count on the past, along with a special place to teach leadership, civil discourse, and engagement in a unique way. The newly created Williamsburg Institute will offer learning opportunities like no other for leaders, executives, adults, and young adults. It'll use Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary as living classrooms while it relies on some of history's most influential leaders to teach lessons for today and tomorrow. Chris Caracci is Executive Director of the Williamsburg Institute. He spent years as a senior leader with Disney University and the Disney Institute. He teaches at the William & Mary School of Business, and he joins us today to discuss the Williamsburg Institute and its unique approach to learning. Here's our conversation with Chris Caracci.

##### Ken White

Well, Chris, thanks for sharing your time with us. Welcome back to the podcast. You're in that rare group. You've been asked multiple times, and there's only a couple of you, so you're right at the top. It's great to have you back.

### **Chris Caracci**

Well, thank you. It's great to be back.

### **Ken White**

Yeah. We're going to have to tease Dawn Edmiston. Professor Dawn Edmiston is very proud of being the one who's been on the most. I think Dawn's been on four times, and this is three for you.

### **Chris Caracci**

Well, we'll look for another opportunity.

### **Ken White**

We'll have a tie. Yeah. Well, this is very exciting the Williamsburg Institute, but before we dive into that, maybe we start sort of at the beginning. And where did it all start?

### **Chris Caracci**

It all started with the thought that or the idea that Colonial Williamsburg, the organization Colonial Williamsburg, should join with William & Mary and do something jointly together and support something together that was very unique. It wasn't completely Colonial Williamsburg's, and it wasn't completely William & Mary's, but really joining the two together to provide leadership programming for participants that want to come to Williamsburg. All the programming will take place here in Williamsburg because we want to take advantage of the place, obviously, but it's unique in that the institute sits between the two organizations, and it uses the resources of both fully. So it uses the intellectual expertise that William & Mary has to offer and the unparalleled world-class historical expertise of Colonial Williamsburg and the place that is Williamsburg.

### **Ken White**

And you are executive director of the institute?

### **Chris Caracci**

I am, yes.

### **Ken White**

And who else? Is there an organization, a board, or what have you?

### **Chris Caracci**

There is a board. The executive chair of the board is Carly Fiorina, and she represents also the Colonial Williamsburg side. The board is balanced between Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary. Carly is on the Colonial Williamsburg side, along with Cliff Fleet, who is the president and CEO of Colonial Williamsburg, and Jeff Trammel,

who is on the board of trustees for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation but also has his foot in the William & Mary side because he's a former rector of William & Mary and a former member of the Board of Visitors for William & Mary. Then, on the William & Mary side, we have Peggy Agouris, who is the current provost of William & Mary, and still one empty seat for William & Mary. That, for the moment, Kendrick Ashton is filling. Kendrick is an alumnus of William & Mary and also the CEO of the St. James Group in the Washington, DC. Area and also a former member of the Board of Visitors for Colonial Williamsburg. I should say I'm sorry. William & Mary and on the Board of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. So there's a lot of representation from both sides.

### **Ken White**

Yeah. So everybody gets both sides and what can be possible.

### **Chris Caracci**

Yeah.

### **Ken White**

So I wasn't sure what to expect when I first heard the name, but it's cool that there are three sort of distinct audiences you're thinking about. Can you tell us about that?

### **Chris Caracci**

There are we are preparing to design programs that will be all Williamsburg-based programs. For the moment, we won't have anything that is virtual or online. Everything will be in person, face to face here in Williamsburg, and three distinct audiences. The first is an audience of what we call lifelong learners. So this is any adult that's interested in learning more about the leadership lessons we can glean from Colonial Williamsburg's past and their applicability to today. Today's environment of leadership and managing. The second group is the executive education group. These are business executives, business leaders, and also community leaders, civic leaders who want to take more of a deep dive into leadership concepts leadership practices. But looking at them in the context of our founding leadership from the nation 250 years ago and, finding out what lessons from that we can apply to today, and finding where those lessons are. And perhaps a lot of those lessons are forgotten. Lessons that we can bring back to the surface and then look at how they can move forward in their own lives as leaders and managers using those practices. And then the third group is for a younger crowd. It's for high school seniors, college freshmen, college sophomores. To give them some context again, going back to colonial leadership, going back to Williamsburg's leadership of 250 years ago, founding leadership, I should say principles, but also giving them some leadership skills that they can take forward with them into their careers because they'll be young in their careers and just starting their careers, but doing something that will give them, if you will, a foot up on their colleagues.

## Ken White

The fact that it's in Colonial Williamsburg really differentiates it, for I think everybody knows of Colonial Williamsburg. Maybe not everybody has been there, but for those who just know it by name, why would this be unique to have a program in Colonial Williamsburg?

## Chris Caracci

One of the reasons we wanted to start this was because we had that uniqueness. We not only have the uniqueness of Colonial Williamsburg, but we have the uniqueness of William & Mary and the campus for William & Mary that can't be replicated anywhere else. So if we think about it, very big picture, we think, well, why would we want to start a leadership institute to teach leadership principles when you can find leadership institutes and leadership executive education in 1001 other places? And the answer to that is we do have the uniqueness of the power, what we call the power of place. And the power of place is here in Williamsburg. So Colonial Williamsburg is it's going to celebrate its 100th year as a restored Williamsburg in 2026. It is the world's largest living history museum. It tells the story of the very foundations of American democracy, the American representative government, and it does that in world-class ways that aren't duplicated anywhere else in the world. So by bringing people here for these programs, we not only can create programs that use leadership expertise from William & Mary, from the intellectual academic leadership side, but we can blend those with experiences. So it's a very immersive program, experiences that Colonial Williamsburg can help us with because they have a whole cadre of colonial interpreters. And we had our opening event last week, and it was a discussion about civil discourse. We had that on the steps of the Raleigh Tavern, which is the place that debates were taking place, from the discussions in the Capitol just down the street 250 years ago. And our guests for last Friday night were Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Pastor Gowan Pamphlet, Reverend Gowan Pamphlet from the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg. All recreating and, in the context of their roles, talking about what did civil discourse look like 250 years ago and how can that be applied to today. So very unique and really not something that others can replicate.

## Ken White

Absolutely. You hit the nail on the head. There is some great executive education out there. There's a ton of it. But this power of place is so unique. What a differentiator.

## Chris Caracci

Yes, the power of place, and I call it the power of people, because nowhere else can groups have a conversation with somebody who is interpreting and embodying Thomas Jefferson or Gowan Pamphlet and finding out, well, what was it like when you were debating these things? What kind of discourse were you having? How were you finding common ground to move forward? Those are the lessons that are important for us

today. When we're living in such a hyper-polarized environment, everything is politicized, and nobody can find common ground in order to get to the next step. And I think the lessons are really there from 250 years ago that can give us at least some insight into what we can do next.

### **Ken White**

We'll continue our discussion with Chris Caracci in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. This year, the Financial Times, Bloomberg Businessweek, Princeton Review, and US News and World Report have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the US and the world. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has outstanding faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at [wm.edu](http://wm.edu). Now, back to our conversation with Chris Caracci, Executive Director of the Williamsburg Institute.

### **Ken White**

And you've had experience in what we call executive education or corporate sort of education, where the leadership team would be taught something, but going somewhere, getting away from the building, the city, and just unplugging, leaving the cell phones and the laptops and focusing for a couple of days is pretty powerful stuff.

### **Chris Caracci**

It's very powerful, especially in adult education. Adults like to learn through experience. They like to learn through seeing and understanding as they see it's commonplace now for executive ed programs or other institutes that teach leadership programs to have programs, but they're limited to a classroom space. They're limited to a ballroom in a convention space. They're sterile in such a way that there's really not a lot of outside influence on that learner other than what they're seeing or perhaps seeing projected on a screen. The differentiator with the Williamsburg Institute will be all of those participants. We may talk about something in a room briefly, but then we're outside, and we're meeting somebody in a historic building or on the campus of William & Mary, in a very historic place, talking about things that happened a long time ago, but have direct relevance to what's happening now. There's nothing more powerful than being able to experience that power of place.

### **Ken White**

Yeah, and this is such a beautiful place. This is my 10th year, and still, every day, every day, I walk in and say, wow, you can't help it.

### Chris Caracci

It's like walking into the past but in such an impactful way. History impacts you in such a way that you can't help but not leave feeling changed or transformed.

### Ken White

Well, along those lines, you're going to hear from someone who was leading 250 years ago, and it is a human being wearing a costume, and I think it takes a few seconds to buy in. And at least for me, I was like, okay, but doesn't take very long before you're sort of there with them.

### Chris Caracci

It's very true. And we think that it's just about somebody putting on a costume and pretending, if you will, to be another person. But what we don't realize is that here at Colonial Williamsburg, those interpreters spend their entire career in that character. They are scholars. They know that person inside and out. So when they speak, at first, you may think, well, it's an actor. They're pretending, if you will, to be James Madison. But within a few seconds, you realize, oh, my goodness, I'm listening to James Madison opine about whatever it is we're discussing. And it's so impressive that you can't help but feel impacted by the experience.

### Ken White

Certainly, that's my experience. Absolutely. It doesn't take long at all. And you realize that, wow, this is not an act. It's not even close to that, like you said.

### Chris Caracci

Yeah, very powerful.

### Ken White

Yeah, it is. Extremely powerful. So you're pretty much starting out.

### Chris Caracci

We are.

### Ken White

It's fairly new, right?

### Chris Caracci

We are very new.

### Ken White

What are you working on now? What's the goal for, like, short?

### Chris Caracci

We had our kickoff event last week with that gathering at the Raleigh Tavern. We're going to start producing our first program, which will be the programs that we do around those three demographic groups that we just shared. They will be from a day to three days in length, still to be designed. So we're going to start working on the first one, hopefully, and we're going to start with the lifelong learners, and hopefully, we'll have that one ready to go in February or March and be able to invite people to join us and participate in those first programs.

### Ken White

And you say maybe you're staying over a night or two nights. Not a half-bad place to stay over, either.

### Chris Caracci

Not at all. Even in the wintertime, when it's cool, it can be cold. There is a beauty about Williamsburg in general, a beauty about the campus of William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg that in the wintertime takes on an entirely different complexion. It's stark, but yet it's beautiful, and there might be some snow on the ground, and it brings you to a whole different place than if you're here in July and August when everything is green and the weather is very warm. It's very moving. It speaks to a certain part of your soul and your character and takes you back to another time and to another place that's deeply enriching if you allow it to be.

### Ken White

Yet winter is still pretty mild.

### Chris Caracci

Well, compared to other places, but it's still cold.

### Ken White

Yeah, for us, yeah. I can't believe what I consider cold now compared. Yeah. Growing up in Pittsburgh. Very different.

### Chris Caracci

Very.

### Ken White

So, what excites you about what's taking place and what's ahead?

### **Chris Caracci**

I think the possibility, just the possibility of coming into an organization that will let creativity be its guide, that will let curiosity be its guide. We're not married to any kind of approach to teaching other people or having people go through a learning experience. We're really open to wherever our imaginations can take us because we want these programs to be exciting. We want people to look forward to them. We don't want it to be one more passive sort of learning experience with not a whole lot of stimulus. We want the stimulus to be all around everybody every moment they're in one of our programs. And that's exciting to me because it speaks to adult learners very much, and we think it'll be very successful. As I said, we're just in the beginning stages of that and beginning to design. But we have high hopes that it'll be a real differentiated set of experiences for our participants.

### **Ken White**

And for listeners who would like to see what's going on and learn about programs. Website? Where do they go?

### **Chris Caracci**

Yes, they can go to our website, which is [Williamsburginstitute.org](http://Williamsburginstitute.org). Very simple.

### **Ken White**

Easy enough.

### **Chris Caracci**

The programs are described on there. There's an about us. Yes, they can go there, and they can also sign up for more information and to be on our mailing list for our programs.

### **Ken White**

Well, it's exciting. You and I have both had a lot of years in executive education. There's not anything like this.

### **Chris Caracci**

No.

### **Ken White**

This is really different.

### **Chris Caracci**

Yes, it's very, very different. And that's what we're hoping makes it a success.



## **Ken White**

That's our conversation with Chris Caracci, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at [wm.edu](http://wm.edu). Thanks to our guest, Chris Caracci, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

## **Female Voice**

We'd like to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at [podcast@wm.edu](mailto:podcast@wm.edu). Thanks for listening to Leadership & Business.