

EPISODE 70: KATHLEEN POWELL – THE EMPLOYMENT BUSINESS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, back in the day, colleges and universities focused most of their efforts on classroom education, leaving the job and career search to the student. Well, times have changed. Schools like William & Mary invest greatly in career development, offering a variety of programs, services, and classes that help students get off to a positive start in terms of employment. On-campus career teams partner with employers, offer career assessments to students, and coach students on everything from the soft skills to resumé writing to salary negotiation. Kathleen Powell is Associate Vice President for Career Development at William & Mary. She and her team at the Cohen Career Center work with students on all facets of career counseling, placement, and coaching. She joins us on the podcast today to discuss how a partnership between the student and the career development team can lead to a great job and career. Here's our conversation with Kathleen Powell of William & Mary.

Ken White

Well, Kathleen, thank you for joining us. I know you are always busy. There is always a line of interested students and employers over in your area but thank you very much for joining us. We appreciate you taking the time and sharing your expertise.

Kathleen Powell

My pleasure, Ken. I'm happy to be with you this afternoon.

Ken White

When I think back to college, of course, it was a long time for me. There was no career services, career management, probably for many of our listeners. What is it? What is it that you do, and what do you offer?

Kathleen Powell

Right, so just a bit of history about career services. So it really started to churn, I would say, in the 1960s, and it was more of a career counseling model. How do you feel about this career? What are you thinking about this career and it might have been one person,

it could have been a faculty member, it could have been a part-time person generally stuck away in a corner, and then as folks started to figure out that we needed a return on the investment in higher education and what can that look like. What's that value proposition? I think there was more. I know there was more spotlight on career development and what that meant. So career development as a field has grown, and there is a National Association of Colleges and Employers, and I know that we're going to talk about that in a little bit, but what has happened is it went from that counseling model to the placement model. So I know that there is that nomenclature still out there for certain individuals that will say what is your placement rate. And that is a whole different language. Now we talk about our first destination survey. We talk about our knowledge rate. Again just a whole new landscape. So we went from the counseling to the placement, and now we're to that coaching area. And so what we do is we are finding pathways in creating synergies for students to connect either major to career, or alumni to alumni, or alumni to employers, students to employers. So it's this space that we have in higher education that is to educate the college around how students find opportunities and whether it's full-time, part-time, summer internships, externships again, there's just a whole body of knowledge out there in terms of how we're creating these pathways for our students and to get to that pathway it's resumé writing and critique, and it's mock interviews, and it's their elevator pitch, and it's helping with grad school applications. So there's a whole gamut that's in there that helps our students figure out what is it for them after college. What does life look like for them?

Ken White

Which is uncomfortable for anyone, especially a college student. But if they're willing to get out of their comfort zone, what great coaching, what a great opportunity.

Kathleen Powell

Exactly so it's the idea of actually connecting with our students before they ever come to college, and I would say many career centers are doing that, and it's reaching out and saying you can use an assessment free of charge. We want you to think about what are your values what are your interests. Have you thought about your major if you have terrific, and what will you do with that if you haven't thought about it? We think that's terrific too. And that opens up opportunities. So keeping the students mindful about your major may be your career, or your major may not be your career. And today, employers are looking for a skill set. So not so much for majors, as you will. Engineering, yes. Accounting, yes, I would say specific types of areas, but in general, they're looking for career competencies, and that's what we're training our students to think about and articulate.

Ken White

And you mentioned assessments. I mean, these are I know we do them with our graduate business students. These are really helpful.

Kathleen Powell

They are very helpful, and I think it's setting up just the expectation and level setting expectations. So students will say I want to take an assessment that will tell me what to be when I grow up. And we help them understand that it will help them identify their strengths and their abilities, but it will not tell them what they should be.

Ken White

Right.

Kathleen Powell

And sometimes, students will take one. They're like, I didn't like the answer to that; I want to take another one. We have a variety of assessments that they can take.

Ken White

Sure.

Kathleen Powell

So and we'll let them take as many as they want because what we can do as a professional is look at the results and say, yes, these are different, but if you look at the thread that's running through, you have an interest in X and whether they want to own that or not we just talk about ways to help them support what it is that their interest might be.

Ken White

Yeah. Now you mentioned that there's a national association, so career offices and counseling is pretty much the standard across higher-ed.

Kathleen Powell

It pretty much is, so the National Association of Colleges and Employers has over 11,000 members, and it is folks in career services offices across the country and their teams. It's also employers who do talent acquisition across the country. So we come together every year in an annual conference, and we're trying to solve for x. So it's like, what are you looking for in your new hires? And then they're asking us what's new in the curriculum, what's new in terms of ways that you're working with students. How do you get them career-ready so when we get them, they can launch? So it's this great opportunity to have those bigger conversations about what the landscape looks like around career readiness.

Ken White

Wow, you really touched on something because it seems like every week I read another piece on how college presidents say we're preparing our students for work and how

CEOs are saying I'm not. I don't agree there's a disconnect there. You're trying to bridge the gap.

Kathleen Powell

We are trying to bridge the gap, and I think Gallup has done a great job in terms of surveying and looking at employers and looking at students, so students will say my communication skills are spot on. I'm an excellent writer. I am good at communicating in terms of face-to-face. And then when they land on the employer side, and they think they're ready, the employers are saying you think you're ready, but you're not ready in the way that we need you to be for our organization. So again, I think it's also solving for some of that, and you know, testing academic testing is not going to get to that soft skill piece. And I think that's where we come in as the complement to the educational experience.

Ken White

So back in the day, an internship meant you printed out a resume, you sent it around, you shopped around. How do students go about acquiring internships today?

Kathleen Powell

Well, technology is a beautiful thing, Ken and I would say every school across the country has some platform that they use. And it is a space where employers come in, and they post their opportunities, and it's a place where students come in, and they upload their resumes, and then they can search different databases, and then they can actually send their resumé out through that platform and employers can actually search the resumes based on the students saying that yes I've raised my hand I'm interested in X internship and then they can post the position students subscribe to that position. We bundle the resumes in the package, and then they go off electronically, so no more copying resumes. No more putting them in the mail and hoping that they get to where they need to be.

Ken White

Sure.

Kathleen Powell

It's just in time, and the employer has access to the platform as well. In terms of looking at students who've applied and they can decide just in time, I want to interview a b c d student, and then the students get a notification they need to sign up for an interview for their internship interview and then the schedule is set, and they just show up.

Ken White

That's a lot of pressure on the resume, then, right?

Kathleen Powell

It is, it is. Right, so students say oh, the resume will get me my job. And we say the resume does not get you the job. You yourself get you the job you're in front of that person, and whether it's on the phone, whether it's a Skype interview, you know, face to face, it is your people skills that will help win the position that you're trying to land.

Ken White

Right.

Kathleen Powell

The resume is your preview, and you've got to get it right. And it's got to be right for the vertical in which you're applying. So you know, sometimes students will say I just want to use one resumé, and I'm going to use that for everything. The shotgun approach. That's probably not in their best interest. And if they do have, you know, if they have an interest in government, I'm interested in consulting. I'm interested in foreign service. Then their resumes need to be different, and they need to understand that, and that's part of our job to educate them on what the other side of the table is looking for.

Ken White

So this terrific online tool that you have for students and many universities have that. What about the networking piece thought. Do you still coaching students to get out there?

Kathleen Powell

We do, and we do it in a variety of ways, so and like most institutions, I would say we have our trips, and in December, you'll see schools from across the country going to Wall Street or going to out to Silicon Valley looking at tech opportunities. And it's this way to engage students in an immersion, and they can actually see what's happening and what that career field is all about. So that's one way, and they're making connections during that time. We also encourage students to use LinkedIn as an online tool to do some networking and finding out who's in their groups and who would be a person that they need to connect with. And then even coming on campus. So it's outward facing, and it's also bringing our alumni and professionals to campus to talk about ways in which they can engage in their career. So it's important to have that conversation. So I think sometimes students think networking is I'm going to go to, Ken, I'm going to say hello Ken and say do you have a job for me?

Ken White

Right.

Kathleen Powell

And helping them understand that you have to put your brand out there and they have to feel comfortable with who you are before they might take a chance on you or recommend you to someone else in their network. So helping again the students understand that process of networking and what that means.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Kathleen Powell in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education is offering a terrific program for professionals looking to expand their business leadership skills. The certificate in business management is a five-day program that runs from April 10th through the 14th at William & Mary. Each eight-hour day is dedicated to an important facet of business, including communication, managerial accounting, business strategy, operational effectiveness, and executive leadership. The program will broaden your professional skills and help you think and lead strategically and successfully. For more information, visit wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Kathleen Powell, Associate Vice President for Career Development at William & Mary.

Ken White

But as an undergraduate, you're young. You don't have a whole lot of experience. How do you stand out?

Kathleen Powell

That's right. So when we talk about career competencies, it's one thing for a student to say I've had three internships, or I've had four summer jobs, or, you know, I've been doing research, or I'm the president of 10 clubs or organizations. You can be all that, but if you can't articulate what you've learned from those experiences, you're dead in the water. So we tell students it's not so much about capacity. It's more about breadth and depth. So what have you done that will bring value to the organization in which you have interest in? So you might not have worked in that particular vertical, but you've had a course, or you've done research, or you've done independent study or a paper. There's something that you can glean from that experience and transfer it back to that person that you're talking to, say I've had this experience in this way, and this is what I have learned from it, and this is how I can take that learning and pass it on and be a value add to your organization.

Ken White

And at the same time, I would assume employers are somewhat reasonable a 19-year-old has not been a CEO of five different companies, right? And so they have to be.

Kathleen Powell

Yes. So, Ken, the ironic thing about that is the students think that they've had to be president of a company like that's what's in their head. Where the employers are saying no, that's our job to train you up to get you there in our succession planning. So helping the students understand what the employer's expectations are. I'll give you a good example. We have an employer Advisory Board. They come in the day before. It's a two-day thing the day before they come in, and we have them do résumé reviews, mock interviews, and then we always end that day with a panel. And it's everything you always want to know about recruiting, and we know the emperor has no clothes. This is what we're looking for. This is a rubric that we're using we use it for everybody. If we see 12 students in a day, whether they like it or not, they'll say we're not going to remember everyone that we've seen because we're at William & Mary today, we're going to be at X school tomorrow. We just can't remember everyone, and we're out for a week, or we could be out for two weeks or a month. So all we have is the résumé and the rubric that we have on you. So we are really looking for that fit. So it might not even be a particular major that you have or particular skill that you're trying to shop. It could be I liked you. I can see you fitting in here. It might not be for me, but I have someone that I want you to talk to. And it could be the other way thinking the students like this is the job I have to have. If I don't get this, you know the sky is going to fall. And then after the interview, they find out, you know what, this isn't at all what I thought it was going to be, which is also beneficial.

Ken White

Right, oh, sure.

Kathleen Powell

You're not getting into something and for the wrong reason.

Ken White

Yeah absolutely. Yeah, there's really not failure, is there? Because if it didn't work, then it probably supposed to work.

Kathleen Powell

Right, and we say, you know, use your campus experience, so we really do encourage our freshmen to start career readiness very early, and we say if you're going to make mistakes do it here. And if you're going to network with someone and you have a misstep, do it now. You don't want to be out there in the professional world and make a mistake that is really almost a rookie mistake that you would during the college experience. And again, it's a learning lab. So think of the career development process as a learning lab, and that's what we're providing.

Ken White

Fail fast, okay here.

Kathleen Powell

Right, exactly. Exactly.

Ken White

You mentioned the interviews. That has really changed when I talk to whether they're undergrads, MBAs, the video interview everybody's in a video interview. It seems like so many companies are doing that. Why.

Kathleen Powell

I think it's to be scalable. If you think about you know, certain organizations, because of brand recognition, may get 500 resumes for one position.

Ken White

Sure.

Kathleen Powell

And it is they'll do word searches to figure out who they want to bring into the pool, and then the video interview is very quick, and it's not so much maybe what our listeners are thinking about the video interview where I can see you, and it's a Skype opportunity. This is a new platform where it's this timed opportunity that you pull up on your laptop, and they give you questions you have so many time so much time to answer the question, and it's videotaped, but you're just looking at the questions and you recording your voice, they're recording you visually, and it goes back, and that's how they're making some determinations. So I think we're preparing students actually, I know we're preparing students to handle those types of interviews because not all companies are using them, but I think as it gets traction and they find the cost savings in it, I think that will grow. There are some larger companies who hire 90,000 people a year, and they said no, we're not going to do that. We're in the people business. And it's important to us to be face to face.

Ken White

Wow, yeah, but what a difficult task, as you're describing it. This student is literally looking at a blank screen on their laptop, answering questions, and wow.

Kathleen Powell

Yes, and we're like, you have to sit up straight, and you have to smile.

Ken White

Smile.

Kathleen Powell

And you can have your notes there but you can and you can refer to your notes but you don't know the questions. And if you need to have a do-over, you get one do-over. So you've got to make that time count. And if they're prepared, and again we talk about know yourself and know the position, and if you know yourself, that's first and foremost because you that just wins the day I know what I want. I know what I have to offer.

Ken White

You mentioned cost savings on the employer side. How is that affecting campus visits or companies visiting fewer times a year now or what? Where does that stand?

Kathleen Powell

So what we're seeing here is that it is the prescreen. So they are cutting down on their time away from campus to figure out who to bring into the fold. But they're still coming on campus. And ironically, Ken, we've just had a meeting with Virginia career services directors in January, and we were talking about our career fairs. Will they become a thing of the past?

Ken White

Right.

Kathleen Powell

On-campus recruiting with technology will it become a thing of the past. In all of the state institutions in Virginia, we're saying that everything's blowing up. More employers are coming to campus more. Employers are subscribing to our career fairs. We're trying to find new spaces to fit everyone in. So I think it's just with all the technology, I still think that people to people that relationship and especially for a place like William & Mary where relationships and relational opportunities win the day. I think that will still continue for us.

Ken White

Now I believe as we're recording in a couple days, you have a major event.

Kathleen Powell

We have a major event, so twice a year, we have our career and internship fair so we have the fall and we have a spring, so on Friday, we'll have over 70 employers coming to campus recruiting our students, both undergrad and grad and they are looking to fill positions that I would say on the business side most of those positions are generally

filled at the fall career fair, but not all of them are filled so they'll come back for spring. And then there are other careers that it's just spring is their hiring season, and that works out very well for our students and to help them understand, and I think parents too that everyone has a job but my son or daughter or even for students everyone has a job at me and that's not the case. So helping students understand that your career job search may be different than someone else. So if you're in finance, it's going to be early, very early. If you're in nonprofit government, it's going to be spring. Marketing can be fall or spring. So just helping students understand what their search is their search. And I think that goes back to a student who might be in a club or organization, and the one student comes in, and they've had a great experience and we go over their resumé and then the next thing you know, you have many students from that same clever organization coming in, and the resumes all look the same.

Ken White

Oh.

Kathleen Powell

Because this is what they told me to do so, I'm going to do mine just like that. So it's like, but what is you? Is this you? Is this what how you want to talk about your skills and your abilities? Have you had the same experiences? It's like I haven't, but I just I thought I had to put that down. I said well if it's not you, you can't really talk about it. So it's an interesting line of work that we're in.

Ken White

Very. I love to go to the fair, and I thank God I'm not an undergraduate trying to go up to these. I mean, it takes guts. You got to have confidence. You've got to go up there and shake that hand. I know you go to you work hard to try to bring in alumni from the employers. It really takes a lot of the pressure and stress out of that. I think half the time, some of the recruiters are just as nervous for the students.

Kathleen Powell

Exactly.

Ken White

Because they want them to do a nice job.

Kathleen Powell

Exactly and you know we do help our students in advance for career fairs, and we have career fair prep workshops. We use executive partners to come in and just talk about, you know, what is your pitch. What would you say to that employer? What if they ask you, X, how would you respond? So again, I think it's setting them up for success and

knowing that they are comfortable and will stand in line with you or buddy up with someone, so you're not feeling like you're the only one or there's no one standing at that table go over to that table and talk to that employer because you don't have to compete for attention they've got your full attention.

Ken White

Yeah, and last question.

Kathleen Powell

Sure.

Ken White

I think many students I've got to be with a named company. It's gotta be a name company. I was just reading a book the two-hour job search. I was just reading on the plane the other day, and the author says ninety-five ninety-nine percent of the companies out there just have a couple of hundred employees or less.

Kathleen Powell

Right.

Ken White

It doesn't have to be the fantastic brand to get a good job. Is that difficult to persuade students to buy into that? Or do they need the name-brand company?

Kathleen Powell

I think in their head, they feel like they need the name brand company, and sometimes that might translate down to the parents saying you know who are you going to work for. And they'll say oh, I've never heard of them or the students will say I don't know who they are; I'm not going to talk to them. But we do provide all of the information in their career fair guidebook so they can look at it and it's done by just kind of career verticals. So if they're looking, I'll give a good example. We're aware, and they do marketing, digital marketing, and we have a recent alum who's coming back for the fair. She is beyond excited, and she said who knew that I would be with a company that I've never heard of before, living in a city I never thought I would live in? I'm doing amazing work, and I get to come back and sell the brand. So I think that just adds capacity, and you know, we're aware for our students might not be something that they had heard of before, but because of the capacity of our alums, I think it's just going to grow and grow.

Ken White

Yeah, and the job search is tough but do the right thing, and it'll work out.

Kathleen Powell

That's correct. That's correct.

Ken White

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