
EPISODE 129: KATHERINE ROWE – THRIVING AMONG RAPID CHANGE

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The 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. She's an entrepreneur, an athlete, coach, teacher, scholar, and listener, and she's at the helm of America's second-oldest university. Katherine Rowe became president of William & Mary in the summer of 2018. The first woman to serve in that role in the university's 325-year history. Since her arrival, Rowe has been focused on making William & Mary a university that thrives amid rapid change, one that successfully serves people and organizations for the long haul. She joins us on the podcast today to talk about life as a university president, the importance of cross-training, and how public liberal arts and science universities are preparing the next generation of innovative leaders. Here's our conversation with William & Mary President Katherine Rowe.

Ken White

Katherine, thank you very much. You're busy, but you're spending time with us. I greatly appreciate it. Welcome.

Katherine Rowe

Thank you so much. I'm really thrilled to be here, Ken.

Ken White

So a university president. I don't know that people know what that job entails. What do you do for a living?

Katherine Rowe

Well, every day is atypical.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

There at least four things that I'm always doing in one way or another. One is that in partnership with our board, I am setting strategic direction for the institution. And in that process scanning the environment for incoming challenges and opportunities and then listening to our constituencies. The second thing that I'm doing is I'm deepening the relationships between this university and our external constituencies. Partners, alumni, donors, the legislature, the business community, and strengthening the relationships internally cause we're an institution that really cares about deep human connections.

Ken White

Right.

Katherine Rowe

That's part of our business model.

Ken White

And you said atypical no two days are the same, I assume.

Katherine Rowe

There's a lot of travel. I don't love airplanes, but I do love spending time with our far-flung alumni, and on campus. I am with students, with faculty, with staff, with senior leadership, connecting with our regional partners in the city and beyond.

Ken White

How long is a typical day?

Katherine Rowe

Oh, 10 - 12 hours, but I move fast, and I like moving fast.

Ken White

What abilities should a university president have? What skills should they bring to the table?

Katherine Rowe

You need to be able to work between a good sprint and a good long endurance run. So it's partly a sprint sport, and it's partly an endurance sport, and as a lifelong athlete and coach, I have both skill sets.

Ken White

Yeah, let's talk about your background athletics, entrepreneurship. Um, yeah. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself from that standpoint?

Katherine Rowe

Well, I am somebody who has thought of myself as extending my range and cross-training across many different domains. So I am a coach and very competitive. I have had a very satisfying life as an athlete competing internationally as well as nationally. I started a business and learned how to build and run one. How to make a business case. And I think about marketing and distribution, and I am a passionate teacher and scholar. Those are parts of my identity that mattered a lot. And I draw on all of those aspects of my life in my current role.

Ken White

It's interesting that of all the guests we've had on the podcast so many entrepreneurs that have an athletic or a sports background right, it trains them.

Katherine Rowe

That's right. And they're incredibly close alignments between those modes of thinking. Collaboration is one, resourcefulness, thinking on your feet, seeking opportunity, systems thinking, looking at the pattern of play coming off halftime, and thinking how do I make an adjustment. What are they doing well? What are we doing well, and how do I maximize one and diminish the other?

Ken White

Every university has unique qualities. William & Mary is certainly unique. What do you feel is makes it a special place? What's it about William & Mary?

Katherine Rowe

A couple of things drew me here. One was a large sense that in the challenges facing higher education right now, which are considerable, it's public higher education that's in the lead in innovating, thinking through the responses to those challenges. And I saw that in the William & Mary promise a way of making the cost of college predictable to students in the commonwealth. We're also deeply committed to liberal arts and sciences as a model. That idea of range and cross-training is really important to the way we think about developing citizens and professionals. And I was drawn to the unique mix of professional schools like the business school and our rich Arts and Sciences undergraduate experience that's fairly unique and certainly very unique in public higher ed.

Ken White

Can you tell us more about Liberal Arts and Sciences? What why is that important to you?

Katherine Rowe

Well, at a moment when as all of our listeners know, the workplace is changing very very rapidly. The ability to think across domains and to transfer what you know from one domain to another, to look around the corner and say what's coming, how do we change, and for what. For the sake of what do we change. Those abilities which are the ones we teach in a liberal arts and sciences curriculum. Those are among the most important success factors. I've been reading David Epstein's book Range, and he has a marvelous idea that modern work right now demands that ability to transfer knowledge and that breadth of training predicts breadth of transfer.

Ken White

Interesting.

Katherine Rowe

That's the I'm quoting him there. And I think that that's right. That's certainly been the experience in my life. And as I watch every, I think every member of my board in my small company was a liberal arts and sciences degree and humanities degrees, I believe.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

Yeah.

Ken White

It was interesting somebody the other day found out that we have Business Analytics program and

Katherine Rowe

Yes.

Ken White

They said wow at a liberal arts school, and I said exactly.

Katherine Rowe

Exactly.

Ken White

That's why.

Katherine Rowe

Exactly.

Ken White

It makes sense. And once we had the conversation, you could see the light. Light went on, and they understood, of course.

Katherine Rowe

Yes.

Ken White

We don't want just people who can generate numbers. We want them to be able to communicate what those numbers, in fact, mean to the organization.

Katherine Rowe

Attach the new domains and corpora that we're gathering of data at scale attach them to mission-critical questions for an organization or business.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

That's how you gain value from your data.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

If you can align it with those mission-critical questions and so it's that alignment that systems thinking, to go back to your beginning question, that I think entrepreneurship and athletics and liberal arts have in common.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

We cultivate systems thinking.

Ken White

In addition, in terms of your entrepreneurship background and innovation. What other pieces of that life do you pull in to use in your presidency?

Katherine Rowe

Well, I certainly use my life as a parent. We were just talking about that. I have the playdate rule for meetings. Which is that you always end before people are finished because at the moment when they're still excited about the work, and there's a sense of energy about the work ahead, that's when you close the process down and say let's meet again next week. Same principle for playdates that I've used my whole career.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Katherine Rowe in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. If you're looking to raise your game and take your career to the next level, the Center for Corporate Education offers non-degree programs that help you become a more effective professional. Topics include business analytics, communication, leadership, strategy, accounting, and more. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with the president of William & Mary Katherine Rowe.

Ken White

You've placed considerable time and energy and effort in the strategic direction

Katherine Rowe

Yes.

Ken White

Of the university for those who are unfamiliar. Can you tell us about what you've done so far and where you hope to go with that process?

Katherine Rowe

It began my first month on campus, which was listening to the campus think forward. We called. We held this long series of open conversations for the whole community, asking as you think over the next decade and more about the work you do. What's changing and what we heard back very powerfully was everything. So the very first conversation was with faculty about changing ways of knowing, modes of knowledge, and we said what's changing in your discipline, and it was a humanities faculty member who put his hand up and said everything. Who my students are, the technology I use in the classroom, the questions I ask, the context for our learning, what students bring in

into the classroom, the content we teach. Everything's changing, so the next question became after that series of conversations, how do we pursue that insight into the necessity and omnipresence of rapid change. To me, we needed a theory of change. That's one of the roles of a leader. Certainly, the university president is to say at a high level what is it that we're engaged in and for the sake of what. Why do we change? We change in order to advance what we value most. And so I spent some time working through that idea in the service of what do we change. Right now, we're engaged in strategic planning, starting with the big picture external question. What's changing in our external environment? And once we've settled on our sense of what are the dominant trends that are facing higher education and facing our predominant constituency students, then we'll begin to develop some strategies to address them.

Ken White

It's interesting almost everyone in business I talk to and say what's up. It's change. I mean, there's not an industry that isn't faced with it. Higher Ed certainly. If you had a crystal ball, any idea where higher education will be in say 10 years say undergrad education. Where do you see that in a decade?

Katherine Rowe

Well, I do see the value proposition for Liberal Arts and Sciences, for the range that we teach increasing very significantly from where it's been. We had a notion in the mid 20th century, and this is certainly one that I inherited as a graduate student that preparation for citizenship for being a thinking human being and preparation for professional life are opposed to each other. I think it's clear that that's a false opposition and that the two mutually reinforce each other very very powerfully. So I think that evolving thinking that thinking will evolve very rapidly and we will come to understand what it means to be preparing people who are tech-savvy, who are great communicators, who are good collaborators across real differences, and who have the ability to rapidly learn new ways of work.

Ken White

How will people get that message? Is that the responsibility of higher education to share that message? Will society teach it?

Katherine Rowe

It absolutely is. We're certainly hearing it from business leaders.

Ken White

Right.

Katherine Rowe

The number one thing. First, they say I need some tech skills, but I need adaptable tech skills. And then the number one thing that they asked for is great writing skills. Writing is not a soft skill. It is a craft and an art, and it is a practice, and it's much slower to learn than quantitative skills.

Ken White

Yeah. In terms of the way, higher education looks right now universities where students come for four years and live in a residence hall and so forth. Do you see that changing over the next couple of decades?

Katherine Rowe

Well, we're interested in expanding the flexibility of that model. For example, at William & Mary, we have a dual degree with St. Andrews, one of the rare joint degree programs in the country. We are looking at how we use the summer for undergraduates. We're going to be piloting the concept of a summer and intensive summer minor computer science first. So what's a super high value minor that you could get in a single summer. Data sciences might be another one. Environmental sciences might be one. What's a super high value minor 15 to 18 credits intensively in a short period of time. That gives you a boost on some area that you want to move into as you're exploring your passions.

Ken White

You're the first woman at an institution that was founded in the sixteen hundreds to be the president.

Katherine Rowe

Yes.

Ken White

Do you think much about that? And if so, how?

Katherine Rowe

The most exciting part of that for me is that when I walk into a room and people are meeting me for the first time; it's an invitation to the question. What else do we want to change? And I'm a longtime reader of Hannah Arendt, wonderful 20th century, such a philosopher who spoke about the importance of thinking about what we're doing. That simple sentence. Think what we are doing. The invitation to reflection on what we are doing, why we're doing it, what matters, and how we do it. That's what the difference in a new kind of president can mean in the conversation in the room. So I think of it as an invitation to think what we're doing and ask what might we want to do differently.

Ken White

I've been in large rooms a couple of hundred people in the room, and when you're introduced and when you get up there, they're juiced. Do you feel that? Do you see it?

Katherine Rowe

Yeah, I do.

Ken White

That must be incredible.

Katherine Rowe

It's incredible. It's such a privilege.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

This is an amazing place. The students, the faculty, the staff, and leadership that I get to be partnered with. It's thrilling to be part of this community.

Ken White

Yeah, it's sort of like no other job and no other sector.

Katherine Rowe

Absolutely.

Ken White

It seems to me, yeah.

Katherine Rowe

Absolutely, I said earlier on our business model in higher ed is about long term relationships. If we do our job well, we have a relationship with a human being for maybe decades, right.

Ken White

Yeah.

Katherine Rowe

And so we think in terms of the investment that compounds over time in relationship, in knowledge because knowledge is another compounding investment. And then in

their prosperity personally and the prosperity of their communities. We're in it for the long game. And it's thrilling to step in as somebody new to this amazing institution and be able to talk about what it means to be part of a three hundred and twenty-seven-year-old institution. We're always in it for the long game, and we innovate. We've led a number of innovations in higher ed, and we want to lead some more.

Ken White

And as it's speaking to an alumnus, I assume they're saying the long game; that's what I want to hear from my alma mater because they care about me in my 40s and my 50s and 60s.

Katherine Rowe

Yes.

Ken White

So does that. What will we have to be offering programs and working closer with that group as they age and mature?

Katherine Rowe

We will. The fastest-growing population of learners in the country are adults, especially adults with degrees already. So as we think about what is a world-class university in the 21st century, it's a place where you return to, to learn, and lots of different modes. I think the business school here has been very exciting in the ways it's explored that and thinking about blended degrees online and in person. And then thinking about adults as an important part of our community.

Ken White

Yeah, no doubt. I mean people are living so much longer they're so much healthier they want to learn.

Katherine Rowe

And the workforce asks for it. And our lives as citizens ask for it. To be complex problem-solvers, we need to be reactivated in the way we learn over and over again.

Ken White

If someone listening either works in higher education or doesn't and says I'd love to have her job someday, I'd love to be a university president. What kind of advice do you have?

Katherine Rowe

Cross-train, cross-train. You are developing skills and domains that you don't think about. You don't recognize. Many of my strongest skills as a manager, for example, developed in the process of coaching young adults and adults, and I love that I love the I love creating leadership culture. I love working with senior leaders and being their partner and think about how they grow and how we together grow the institution's success. So I would say cross-train, take that lesson of range.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Katherine Rowe. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the William & Mary School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education offers programs that help you reach your career goals, and the programs are taught by the William & Mary MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we love 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. Thanks to our guest this week, Katherine Rowe, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week.