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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 153: HENRY BROADDUS – COLLEGE ADMISSIONS & THE PANDEMIC

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 help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. College admissions. Like many other sectors, it has seen significant disruption this past year. Admissions offices across the United States are in the midst of a cycle the likes of which they've never seen. First COVID-19 hit, which kept college-bound high school students from visiting campuses. Then some high schools moved from letter grades to pass-fail grades. Then many colleges and universities waived the required SAT and ACT. Well, those events and others have changed the admissions landscape considerably this year. As a result, some schools like William & Mary have seen significant increases in applications, while others experienced dramatic drops. Henry Broaddus is Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Public Affairs at William & Mary. He spent over a decade in the admissions profession at Dartmouth and William & Mary. Now admissions and financial aid are a part of his leadership portfolio. He joins us today to talk about the pandemic's effect on high school students, their families, and college admissions here at William & Mary and across the country. Here's our conversation with Henry Broaddus.

Ken White

Well, Henry, thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule. Seems like everybody's so busy today in our Zoom world. So, thanks very much. I'm sure your schedule is just as packed as it's ever been.

Henry Broaddus

Well, it's delightful to be with you, Ken. And what's fun about this Zoom is this is a little bit more like one of those hall conversations that one would have when going between meetings. So this is the life.

Ken White

Exactly. Yeah. Thank you. So much written about college admissions this year in the media, it seems like that's the big topic. What's going on? We hear a lot about test-

optional, what's happening with admissions, and what we're seeing is many top-tier universities are seeing an influx of applications. Other universities, not so much. What's happening? What's causing that?

Henry Broaddus

Sure. Well, it's a great question to start with. And we are seeing a very interesting set of dynamics in these applicant pools. The Common Application saw an increase of applications submitted this year that was at about 11 percent. But the increase in applicants was less than three percent. And as you point out, there was clustering of where you were seeing this kind of growth. So here at William & Mary, we had a twenty-three percent increase in our applicant pool, which was substantial. That puts, as you would expect, strain on process. But elsewhere, it's been uneven. And I think it's fair to say that the most selective places, flagship universities, flagship, both in terms of size and stature and also urban campuses prior to the pandemic were where a lot of the action was you know there's going to be some interesting disruption, and we're going to still see where things fall out. But that's been where the growth occurs. And one other thing I'd point out, Ken, is that the decision to go test-optional has been one of the things that has stoked the growth in these pools because it's really removing a barrier. So more students are electing to take a shot at a pool in that way. And then another factor that I think you have to take into consideration is the inability to have visited campuses in the same way and pare down college lists. So I think many students are taking more of a broad net approach just because they've not had that ability to evaluate which ones are really the best fit.

Ken White

Yeah, wow. Didn't think of the fact people can't get to campus, but William & Mary, along with some other schools, did some pretty clever came up with some pretty clever ideas so prospective students could see campus and get a bit of a feel, right.

Henry Broaddus

Well absolutely. I think every college and university has been going through reinvention of what outreach and recruitment looks like in these new minutes, not unlike what you and your colleagues in the business school are doing with classes that are hybrid and remote. So actually, it's interesting as I speak to you. Although we are not yet running in-person campus tours through our undergraduate admissions offices, we are, in fact, offering four varieties of tours. So there is a video tour, there is a virtual tour with even richer media. There is a self-guided tour that's available to a visiting family that wants to walk around on its own. And we do have tours for which one signs up that are guided by a student, but they're more like a slide show and with a student presenting via Zoom.

Ken White

Yeah, interesting time for families to look at schools. You briefly mentioned the Common App. I think a lot of people know what that is, but many people might not. Can you give us a definition on what that is and how that sort of changed things?

Henry Broaddus

Absolutely. And you're right to point out that it's still going to be new. I expect a lot of your listeners really only about a generation old. So so the Common App started in the mid-70s, but it really took off late later than that and became the ubiquitous tool to use to apply to colleges and universities. And the benevolent function of the Common App is that it reduces the strain of what it takes to submit individual applications. But there is a downside to that. The University of Chicago, for example, was one of the later adopters of the Common App and for a time really prided itself on saying, look, when you apply to us, we don't want you to be applying to college generally, we want you to be applying to the University of Chicago specifically because you've done the research and you see it as a match. So there are pros and cons. I think overall, most in the profession would say that the Common App has done a great job of creating more access, enabling students to grow lists in responsible ways. But others would say it has led to a kind of shotgun approach, that means you're going to see declines in yield, more volatility within the system, and many students that will just misuse the instrument thinking kind of a fallacy that if I just apply to enough of these highly selective places, at least one of them is going to take me. These aren't random trials or rolls of the die. So that's just not how it works.

Ken White

Yeah, we look at the test-optional, so many schools have embraced, how does the admissions profession and universities in general, how do they view the test? Why is the SAT the ACT? Why are those important today?

Henry Broaddus

Yeah, excellent question. And even prior to the pandemic, this was a conversation we were having internally at William & Mary? And the only thing that the SAT is intended to measure is not even to measure, to predict is freshman year GPA. Now, what we know and what the College Board itself shows through its own research is that high school GPA by itself is more predictive of first-year college GPA than the standardized test. But having both is more predictive than either in isolation. And actually, at William & Mary, we had a ten-year study of research looking at a single school system in Virginia with more than twenty-seven hundred data points in this study. Where we were looking at how predictive is the GPA from high school, how predictive is the SAT for a William & Mary first-year GPA? And what we concluded was that, yes, having both adds predictive value, but having one or the other, but not both is pretty close. And so the debate we were having is, is it worth it in terms of all the other things that a standardized testing requirement

imposes on families to get that modest additional predictive value? And what we also know is it's more predictive for some groups than others. So we know, for example, low-income students tend to outperform what their test score predicts. Many students of color, same thing. This is okay in the context of our process as long as there is keen awareness of that limitation of the measure. And so one of the things that I would say is there is great acknowledgment of the flaws of the test, but that doesn't mean it's useless as long as that awareness is being brought to bear. So we were again in the midst of this debate when then the pandemic created, I think, what was a clear and compelling reason for at least one year to be test-optional because students did not and did not have access and could not get access to a test administration. We went further than that, as did several others and said, if we're going to do that, let's really embrace this as an opportunity to see if we can conduct a test-optional process, not the same thing, by the way, of saying we don't want standardized tests where there's no rule, but that we're not going to require it for all of our applicants. And we've committed to a three-year pilot. We just finished the first cycle of that with the class that will arrive here next fall. The reason to do three years is that we that will give us time to see their first-year GPA, evaluate any unforeseen consequences of this ship, and then make a longer-term decision about what the right role for testing is in our process.

Ken White

Interesting. You know what? I think people who are unfamiliar with admissions find fascinating is in that world, there are formulas that the admissions professionals use to determine. Okay, we have a number of apps over here. This is how many we need to accept and so forth. Is that, I assume, sort of turned a little upside down this year because of all the changes.

Henry Broaddus

It's turned a lot upside down. And I think maybe you'd say there used to be formulas that one could apply here. So the year under pandemic. So going back to last spring when we recognized that we were going to have a really crazy year ahead of us, even then, I don't think we saw just how volatile it was going to become. So give you again an example in the context of William & Mary; usually, our admission team will see what you refer to as summer melt on the magnitude of about one hundred students. So we're enrolling a class of 15 20. You would get you'd want to get north of that by about one hundred so that you're buffered against waitlist activity elsewhere. Students who decide to take a gap year. Other reasons that students are going to fall out between that May one deposit deadline and convocation. In the cycle that that ended when students arrived in the fall of 20, we had lost more than two hundred and fifty students to summer melt. So really shot holes in the predictive value of that formula. And I think the great question is whether the cycle we're in now, where we're in the month of April, the cruelest month, as T.S. Elliot would say, but the one that puts admission officers on the edge of their chairs because they're

waiting to see what choices students will make. The question is, will we see a rebound or a rebound to kind of the old yield, or is last year the indicator of the new normal?

Ken White

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Ken White

I don't think the average person has any idea how tough the admissions world is. Wow, it's brutal, and it's a profession, you know, it takes a lot of education and an experience to do this the right way, doesn't it?

Henry Broaddus

Yeah, absolutely. And I think the reality of it is Ken that at some point, the craft of building statistical models gives way to the instincts of something like a gambler. And you're really trying to read what the signals are based on a variety of many of them highly qualitative indicators. Tim Wolfe, our dean of admission, is a master at that. But you are right. It is a is an art as well as a science.

Ken White

Yeah. Now I know you and I, you were talking to some of our business school faculty and staff recently, and you were talking about some of the efforts William & Mary has put into place to ensure that those incoming students include a diverse population as well. Tell us about some of the things that the school is doing. It's pretty cool stuff.

Henry Broaddus

Yeah, absolutely. Well, obviously, we take very seriously the obligation to enroll a diverse class. We know that that's going to create the best learning environment for all of our students. A great letter Emerson writes, where he says, I pay the schoolmaster, but it's the school mates to educate my son. And I think what we all know about a great undergraduate residential college experience is that it's those late-night dorm conversations. It's getting challenged by somebody who approaches a problem from a very different perspective or background that leads to the best, the best outcome. So it is critically important, and it's critically important for us as a public university. So we've been

looking at a variety of ways to help do even better on that measure, one that I'll just give you as an example because we're in our first year of it. And it's something that that I'm just enormously excited about is our partnership with the Posse Foundation. And the Posse Foundation has a concept that quite literally, Debbie Bial, their founder, received a MacArthur Genius Award because it is just a genius idea, which is that one of the ways to improve success for students who are often first-generation is to not expect them to be solo operators but to enroll a group of them and have that group start working together late spring into summer. So that then when this posse of 10 students arrives together, they have that peer-to-peer support that's going to contribute to successful outcomes. So what Posse does is they work with partner universities. We became a Posse partner university, and we'll be the first university in the country to enroll a posse of Virginians. And one of the neat things is that heretofore posse has tended to operate in a single metro area. So if a partner university wanted to enroll a posse from Washington, D.C., that could be done from New York City, that could be done. The posse that will arrive at William & Mary is actually coming from across the Commonwealth of Virginia. That's another thing that was possible because of the broken constraint of needing to get people together in person. Posse had to learn to do that work remotely, and now we're going to capitalize on that. So we will enroll a posse of 11 students. We couldn't get it all the way down to 10 because they were just that strong. That were identified based on a nominating process at the school level. More than four hundred students across Virginia were nominated for it. Posse conducted group interviews. They use their dynamic assessment process, which is a lot like the way we would want to interview somebody for a job. And it also includes things like problems that are approached by groups in evaluating students in that way. They get to 20 finalists are Dean of Admission Tim Wolfe and I and our Associate Dean Tish Canady spent six hours with those 20 finalists, and we picked our posse of 11. It's a really exciting process. A lot of students of color, a lot of first-generation college students in that group. And we are committed to providing full scholarships for them in order to ensure the access and affordability.

Ken White

Fantastic. Yeah, how great to come to school and people have your back, right? I mean

Henry Broaddus

Yeah, in fact, that's the name Posse came from a college dropout who said if I had been there with my posse, we would have made it. And former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said, you don't send a person to the moon, you send a team. So, again, that idea, I think, is a beautiful idea. And it's going to extend our reach. Not just for the 11, by the way, but the fact that William & Mary is now a leader working with this foundation and working within school environments where you have a lot of under-represented students. We hope that's going to raise our institutional profile overall and that will attract even more underrepresented students through that initiative.

Ken White

I think it depends which publication, website, or media outlet you read. It seems one day there's a survey saying people are not interested in sending their children to college, and the next day there's an uptick in people who want to do send their children to college. I'll put you on the spot a little bit. What do you think we'll see in the next couple of years in this strange environment? Where how do you think it all? Where will it all land?

Henry Broaddus

I think we're going to see an acceleration of changes that were already in progress. Certainly, again, you don't have to get to the pandemic to see that disruption was at work already. My friend Bill Conley at Bucknell had had a piece it ran in the Chronicle of Higher Education in the fall in 19 called the Great Enrollment Crash. And it was looking at especially you go through two thousand eight. The economic downturn there, and I think the thinking and the value proposition about education was something that was already very much in flux. And I think what we're going to have to see is a faster evolution. And I think that's in play already. And I think it's also going to mean, Ken, that we need to look at different ways of accessing higher education that may not be the traditional ones we know now. One that we're rolling out. This will be our second year doing this, by the way, is revisiting the notion that fall is the only real point of entry for a first-year student. The reality is that education has been artificially constrained, some say, to an agrarian cycle. There's some evidence that's actually more like mid-19th-century affluent family vacation cycles to have summers off. But we now have another partnership I'm really excited about with a company that enables a gap semester experience abroad. And we're turning to our waitlisted students, who are a really strong set of students. And we're saying, hey, many of you want to be at William & Mary next spring. And it excites you to do something like a Costa Rica field experience through our partner Verto education. We would guarantee your admission as a second-semester freshman at William & Mary if you do that. In the spring, we have more capacity than we do in the fall. We have a lot of students who study abroad. In fact, you know well, we have the highest participation in study abroad among all public universities in the country. We also have students who finish early and so those seniors who finish in the fall. So I mean to be able to optimize by growing the enrollment through a new entry point in spring. I think we're going to see more of that. And then summer would be the other important frontier. And are we going to figure out new ways to use that time?

Ken White

Exciting times.

Henry Broaddus

It's exciting, fraught, and a little stressful would be another way to put it. But yes, I think the great thing from my standpoint, I think what keeps me really energized right now is that every spring that we've endured, and we've had a tremendously successful academic year, as you know well, despite having to operate so differently, I think all of this is revealing new opportunities and new ways to do things. So it's an exciting time to work in this space.

Ken White

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