



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

SPECIAL EXTENDED EPISODE: What Should We Make of the College Admissions Scandal?

In this special extended episode, Phi Beta Kappa Secretary and CEO Fred Lawrence invites two experienced colleagues to a frank discussion about the unfolding college admission scandal that has rocked higher education. There are no easy answers, and responsibility is spread around generously, but the exchange is one that will certainly spark discussions at home, in the classroom, and in vaulted academic halls around the country.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by an anonymous donor. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley White at hwhite@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of The Phi Beta Kappa Society. This podcast usually features conversations with Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who spend one academic year with us, but this episode today will be different.

Given the developing college admissions bribery scandal, I have invited two experienced and respected colleagues to join me in a discussion about the alleged scam, the conditions that may have contributed to it, and the material, legal, and moral implications of uncovering such practices at some of the most venerable academic institutions in the country.

I want to say a warm welcome to Dr. Andrew Flagel. For more than 25 years, Andrew has worked to make public and private colleges more accessible and inclusive. And he's had almost every job in the process. Senior Vice President at Brandeis University where I had the pleasure of serving with him when I was president there, Dean of Admissions at George Mason, and Regional Director at the George Washington University.

So glad to have you with us for this important conversation, Andrew.

Andrew Flagel: And thanks so much President Lawrence, it's a pleasure to see you.

Fred Lawrence: And you don't have to call me President Lawrence.

Our other guest today is David Hawkins, Executive Director for Education Content and Policy at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The organization has 15,000 members around the world who work supporting students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

David, it's so good to have you with us.

David Hawkins: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Fred Lawrence: And one more twist for today's episode. In order to let me be fully present and engaged for this conversation, which is on everyone's mind, today I will hand over my interviewer mic to our executive producer, Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, so she can guide us in the conversation and keep us honest.

Juleyka is a veteran journalist of 20 years who was a staff writer at the Atlantic magazine and the lead producer/editor of Code Switch at NPR, before launching her digital media company.

Juleyka, thanks for being with us everyday when we do Key Conversations and especially today for playing this role.

Juleyka LW: Oh, it's really exciting to be here. I've been talking about this for weeks. It's an honor to be in the room with the three of you, thank you. I know that we pulled this together really fast, but I think it's going to be amazing.

So the question on everybody's mind: how does this happen? How does actually something like this, which is very complex, that involves so many people, how does something like this happen?

Andrew, I'm going to start with you.

Andrew Flagel: Sure. I think there's two things to bear in mind in terms of this happening. One is, no one should be surprised at the lengths people will go to get into college given the incredible frenzy and pressure that we've put on students. We've created these ridiculous expectations about the importance of what school to go to, this heightened insanity around the admissions process itself. And so, that families begin doing bizarre things--especially given the inordinate influence of wealth in the process--in and of itself may not be surprising, although the level of bizarre fraud certainly seems a standout.

But secondarily, the sets of processes that have evolved at some institutions that empower individuals at the institutions to have inordinate input into the admissions decision and maybe less oversight than they should is a huge contributing factor. So the idea that one would bribe anyone and commit fraud is a question of the frenzy in and of itself. But secondarily, the ability to bribe someone to get someone into college is a question of: are our systems broken and need a level of oversight that we're currently lacking?

Juleyka LW: So David, I think that Andrew made a really good point about the incentive and the pressure and the anxiety that we place around getting into the best college. Like, you represent 15,000 people whose job it is to get these students into college. So what was your response? What was the response of your colleagues? And did you communicate a particular stance to your membership when this broke?

David Hawkins: Our response was primarily one of surprise at the lengths to which these actors went to rig the process. And I think Andrew makes a good point that there are at least a couple of ways in which this plays out.

The first is that you have a legitimate criminal enterprise here, which is something we rarely see in admissions. I think it's the power of that criminal story that has brought up a lot of fears and angst that are constant with the admission process. Our association over the years has always said that the best college for a student is the college that is the best fit for that student. We try actually to play down some of the hype and hysteria because very few colleges are actually as selective as the ones that were involved in this scandal.

So we really try to paint a broader picture of the process, but we very much understand, and this was our statement to the public and to our members as well, that this criminal indictment has effectively tapped into a vein of anxiety, of concern, very understandable concern, among students and their families. And that has been pent up for a very long time.

Juleyka LW: So let's turn to the only lawyer in the room. Fred, what are some of the legal implications both institutional and individual for the people who masterminded the scheme?

Fred Lawrence: Well, the legal implications for the people who masterminded the scheme could be very severe. It is a criminal enterprise and people could be convicted of very serious crimes. You watch what the federal indictments look like, and those are indictments for a RICO violation, that's racketeering. In RICO, we usually think of in terms of organized crime.

So when the federal government pulls out RICO indictments, that means it's intending to take it very seriously. So I would think with respect to the people who were involved both in taking the bribes, Mr. Singer, if everything that's alleged turns out to be true, who organized the enterprise, and to a certain extent, possibly a lesser extent, although maybe not, people who gave the bribes, there could be very serious consequences and likely jail time for at least some of them.

For the institutions themselves, it's a slightly different question. If you notice the statements that all of the universities involved put out, they very carefully describe themselves as victims of the fraud. And I think that's appropriate in most cases, maybe all cases, but they're doing that also for a reason: because they want to make it clear that they are not parties to this, that they are victims of it as well.

Separate set of questions, you asked about the criminal side on the civil side of this. There are now a couple of class action lawsuits being brought against the universities themselves claiming that they were negligent in the way they did their admissions process. I think that is going to be a very tough proof for those plaintiffs. They're going to have to prove not just that something bad happened, it's pretty clear something bad happened. They're going to have to prove that the schools were negligent. And people like David and Andrew, who have deep involvement in admissions, will be able to tell you that maybe what happened here wasn't right and maybe we need additional processes in place, but negligence is a different standard. That's a 'I knew or I should have known' that something was going off the kilter here. And I think that's not going to be the case.

Juleyka LW: I definitely get that. But then we also see in the allegations that some of the people who received the bribes, funneled some of those funds back into the athletic programs that they were involved in. So in that case, where is the legal line if, in fact, maybe unknowingly, the institutions did benefit?

Fred Lawrence: You know, one of the things it's not surprising in this is that money plays a role in admissions. I hope, Juleyka, that doesn't shock you. And I think when people say there's nothing surprising here, they're overstating it. I think there's plenty that is surprising here, as David said a moment ago. But I think what's not surprising is that money plays some role.

So the idea that a university can benefit as part of a student's application process, that a benefactor of the university gets a heightened kind of treatment in the process, that's not so surprising. In fact, let me just stay with that for a second. When Andrew was senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis University when I was president, we would talk on a regular basis. Right throughout the year, we had what was called the President's List. The President's List included people who were major supporters of the university who recommended an applicant or had a child who was going to be an applicant. And we would make this clear to everybody in every step of the process: being on the president's list did not get you in.

What I would tell people making recommendations, being on the President's List guaranteed you that no decision would be made without touching my desk. I would have some input in the process. But Andrew and I had very frank conversations sometimes. And sometimes the case did not make. And it didn't make because the student wasn't capable of doing the work, or to go back to something David said a moment ago, it wasn't the right match for the student. We'd have a difficult conversation and say, "This is not a good fit for your child, for the person you're recommending. This is not a good place for your student to be able to come and to succeed in the way we all want the student to be able to succeed."

Juleyka LW: Okay. But then that opens the possibility that in other cases maybe institutions kind of nod and wink, and look the other way when someone writes a big check. Now, Andrew.

Andrew Flagel: So, let's take the question of how we address fraud in the process and whether that creates an unfairness to other students from the overall unfairness of our processes and the disproportionate influence of wealth in the system. So we have a challenge in higher education that in order to fund higher education, we rely heavily on donors. And let me also say there are other influencers including government officials, including grantors, who all call the university when they have someone who they're interested in getting into the institution.

Where you see institutions that have historically lacked diversity and lean very aggressively into their legacy pools, lean very aggressively into their donor base. What you do see is a challenge of them leaning into their funding in a way that disproportionately disadvantages potentially some portion of the applicant population. And I think that does present an ongoing challenge to us as we talk about the importance of inclusive excellence in our institutions. Are we representing that accurately in our admissions processes?

But I don't want to confuse a fraud scandal that is really amazing in its scope and methodology from the question of the influence of wealth in our processes and how we ought to treat students more fairly.

Fred Lawrence: One way you can illustrate the distinction between the fraud and the normal process: the normal process may have conversations that are private, but there'd be nothing wrong with disclosing them. And by and large, it was done in the sunlight, which is to say if someone's name is on the library and that person's grandchild is applying, the cards are face up on the table. Everybody knows what we're doing. What happened here? It had to be secret because it was based on lying, it was based on cheating, it was based on bribing, it was based on fraud. So that's an entirely different kind of process that takes place in the dark, not in the light.

Juleyka LW: Except that the public doesn't see it that way.

David Hawkins: I was just going to insert that -

Juleyka LW: Major minor detail.

David Hawkins: Yeah, absolutely. Part of the difficulty that higher education is going to face and people like all of us around the table, is going to be how to talk to a public that has been legitimately and understandably upset about this issue for a long time. And for whom this scandal, this bribery case has really just brought it to a laser focus. And the public is not going to make a distinction, and I don't blame them certainly, between something like I think they could probably understand that the fraud case is an outlier, but what they're going to see though is a continuum of how money just persistently gets into the process like water in a crack.

I read an article this morning that was brought to my attention from The Brown Daily Herald. It's illustrative of how these signals are going to get mixed with the public. And that is that the advancement office, according to this article at Brown University, was

arranging interviews for alumni children who were in the application process with faculty members. Now this was not something that was disclosed as part of the information that all students got, which is something that our association requires our members to do, which is to be very transparent about all the factors that get considered and that most if not all, 4-year colleges are very good at trying to lay out. The problem comes when you have these very little cases where influencers might come into the process and these might well not take place in the light of day.

Andrew Flagel: I think adding more sunlight to the process is useful. Although what I think people will see, much like sausage and politics, is it's a lot less easy to guess at because we are assembling a class from very disparate information and ultimately those decisions cover a broad range of topics that may not feel fair if you're the one who's getting that denial letter.

Fred Lawrence: One of the factors we have not talked about in all of this is the whole role of rankings in higher education and the way in which institutions over the past couple of decades have had to measure to metrics that come not from the higher education space, but from ranking institutions and magazines that rank and the like.

So I was asked one time when I was president of Brandeis, "You presidents have always complained about ranking. What would you do if there were not ranks that take into account such things as median in SAT scores, and median Grade Point Averages, and whatnot? How would it really make a difference in your life?" And what I would say, I would point to Andrew if he were in the room and I would say, I would tell him, "You are experienced at this, you admit 25% of the class based on what you think will make an interesting group of students here."

So I actually wanted him to use more judgment, not less judgment. Now I understand the risk here. The judgment is also the place in which error can creep in and where bias can creep in. So the best hope for all of this, I think, is that you bring all of these issues up to the surface, if in fact the process is as transparent as possible. And here, I think, we do have to take responsibility in higher education, generally, admissions in particular. We're having a process that is shrouded in a kind of mystery that's not fair to the students, and does create anxiety in the students, and gives rise to a lot of the things we were talking about.

So if we are more transparent, then I think bringing all of those issues up to the surface means judgment is more likely to be a fair balancing of the kind of factors that you want so that you have a class that is in fact a balanced class.

David Hawkins: The idea of a lottery has in fact surfaced over the years at various points. And I think where you might actually see that discussion take a little more root as a result of this scandal is with public university admissions. One question that's popped up a number of times in the last couple of weeks has been, why do public universities get to be selective beyond a certain threshold? And why do they get to be selective in a way that they currently are? So that you not only have to exceed the minimum qualifications, but can then be either picked based on institutional requirements and needs, which is a legitimate need. Institutions need to fill chemistry departments and

music departments and English departments. But then why are you able to sort of skim from the top as opposed to ... and this is a public perception here.

We can debate whether this is an accurate perception, but I think in the public universities there will be a much more vibrant discussion of that. Private universities have a very rich history, both legally and culturally, that suggests that they are free to admit the students they want. And based on the criteria that they determined that has come to light in a number of court cases most prominently through the cases against race conscious admission, it's a well established legal principle there.

The other point that your question brought to mind though was that, when you look at the population of 4-year colleges and universities in the United States, there is a very small percentage of them that are so highly selective. The average 4-year college acceptance rate in this country is 65%.

Juleyka LW: Wow.

David Hawkins: Which means on average 4-year colleges accept two out of every three students. Not many people know that, and that's not counting the open enrollment colleges. So those are left out of the equation. If you put those in, the average acceptance rate is, in fact, much higher. So the student's chance of getting into college in this country are very good, to the point where if you applied to three colleges, you're probably going to get into two of them.

Juleyka LW: So then that bears the question of if it's not about getting into college, why do we see the potential for this type of corruption at the top 1% of institutions? Because then it becomes about something much bigger.

Fred.

Fred Lawrence: Look, part of this is also about prestige, not just from the student's point of view. In fact, I would argue not primarily from the students point of view, from the parents' to be able to say that my child went to and then fill in the blank of which school it is that they want to be able to say their child went to. That goes back to the idea of this being some kind of a prize as opposed to a place where one should be educated.

I was told when my kids were in the admissions process that this is a match to be made, not a race to be won. And it sounds like a cliché, but I have to tell you, it was actually very clarifying through the process. My kids are similar in some ways and very different from each other, and they went to very different schools, and each was the right one for that child. So, which was the better school is an incoherent question. So I think you broaden that out generally as a societal matter. We can have a conversation about that.

But if you look at college as about prestige because of where you went, it's going to skew that process.

Andrew Flagel:

You're exactly right. The frenzy around admission is an assumption that schools that deny more people are inherently better. The old adage often attributed to Groucho that you know, I only want to be a member of the club that would not have me or I didn't ...

So, this concept of that it's better to get in where it's harder to get in is somehow better for an individual. We know statistically it doesn't have a whole lot of accuracy. It doesn't bear up. There's been a series of studies about what the impact is on individuals going to a wide range of institutions. So there's an article in Inside Higher Ed today from former Michigan State President Peter MacPherson about the influence of legacy, particularly at state universities, and whether it ought to be a factor.

And it's really a gut check moment for higher education because you run the risk of replicating bias and lack of diversity by bringing in folks who are from the same families. On the other hand, there is a sense of community at institutions. There is a sense of giving back, and I don't just talk here about dollars, but about the network of hiring students, coming and cheering on one another. And so the idea that there's no role for affinity for the institution or legacy in the institution whatsoever, maybe one that I think should be pushed back on and have some challenge. I think the question is one of balance.

How do you seek our deeper mission of inclusive excellence that we need in society at all of our institutions? How do we seek higher rates of success for first generation and low income students across the board in higher education, and still build the sense of community on our campus? As it turns out, in every study that's been done, community is one of the factors that increases student success on the campuses.

So there are elements of this that are not so easy to pull apart without thinking more, pardon the pun, holistically, about how one's trying to build the institution towards the goals of supporting students.

Fred Lawrence:

One of the reasons I think transparency is going to be so important is that, it is always going to be a balancing act of a whole host of factors. And if we are explicit about what those are, then the public hopefully develop some trust over time as to how those factors are being balanced. I think right now for a good reason, it feels shrouded and therefore there's a sense of that a fast one is being pulled. And that's what leads to the idea of having some fixed system, some fixed rule, that's going to break down the rigging of the game.

The economist, Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen famously said, "I'd rather be vaguely right than precisely wrong." And I think this is one of those contexts where seeking to be vaguely right rather than precisely wrong is going to serve us well. If we were to say for example, let's just do this on straight merit. And by merit we mean board scores and grades. That is going to build in all sorts of biases from a societal point of view in terms of who can afford to have various kinds of training courses, who goes to better high schools, et cetera. So okay, we don't want to do that. Then what

other factors do you want to take into account? Well, who worked hard in different circumstances?

So we're already moving in a much more vague direction if you will, but it's not really vague, it goes back to the idea of judgment. I think to me one of the biggest concerns of this scandal right now is that the idea of judgment in higher education is being attacked and not trusted. And I think that's something that higher education is going to have to confront. And it's not trusted for a very understandable, good reason. We present ourselves to the country, to the world, as the engines of social mobility. So people show up at the door and they say, "I'd like to get a little of that social mobility. Where do I do that?" And we say, "Well, there actually are lots of different ways into this. And you have to go through this door, not that door." And then people say, so the game is rigged.

Andrew Flagel:

So where's the good potential outcome? To me, I think ... You saw there's been a couple of articles by Brandon Busteed, who's the former president of Kaplan, talked in one of the papers today about, I think it was Forbes, about the potential that this takes some of the luster off "elite higher education." And maybe expands students' thinking about what the other possibilities are. Maybe it gives us an opportunity to talk about the wider array of institutions and how they can support students. And maybe it allows us to be a little more transparent about what's going on in our admissions process.

I'll tell you, frankly, my colleagues, those of us who have worked at the most competitive institutions, we would often appreciate a few fewer applications, would like to see that spread around because the frenzy for those institutions is patently unhealthy. There's a wonderful movement from the Harvard Graduate School of Education called Making Caring Common that seeks to ratchet down the stress in the admissions process, ratchet down the stress among parents, and is being adopted by a wide variety of secondary schools to try to shift the thinking and the culture around this frenzy that it's a prize to be won rather than an educational process.

Juleyka LW:

I get that, but I want to go back to the question of public trust because for as long as I've been alive and in the United States, there has been a fundamental mistrust of predominantly white institutions from people black and brown like me. And I am a very proud scholarship kid. I got into Skidmore through their equal opportunity program, and that changed the course of my life and my siblings' lives, generationally.

And when I first heard about the scandal, I was hurt. That was my first reaction. I was hurt because I know how hard I had to work to be competitive to get into a place like Skidmore. And then that in turn made me push my siblings that much harder to make sure that they were competitive to get into the schools that they wanted to go to. And I think that that sentiment reopened a wound that was open a few years ago when a white student from Texas took a case all the way to the Supreme Court where she claimed that a brown student had probably taken the place that she so richly deserved.

And so I get that there are practical ways that we need to address this, but I think that there's also psychological, emotional component that needs to happen and I feel like

we can't drive it. Meaning me, someone like me, people like me, hardworking middle class people of color, first generation college students, I can't come to the table with a solution because I represent a blip in the universe that you guys inhabit.

Fred Lawrence:

You know, when that Texas case happened, Ms. Fisher sues University of Texas, and Texas defends itself just as Michigan did in a prior case and University of California in the first case on affirmative action. What the universities have always said is that we are uniquely situated to be able to comprise our class. That is part of the core academic mission, that's academic freedom, that's faculty governance, it's one of the core things we do.

The four building blocks: who gets to teach here, how they get to teach, what they get to teach, and who gets to study here. Those are the things universities are in the best position to define and to decide. And that is based on trust. And I think that trust has been fractured now. So to a certain extent, the two pieces of your questions really come together, which is that if universities wished to say, we have this unique competence to comprise our class and that's a legal defense to these kinds of attacks, they're going to have to rebuild that trust in the court of public opinion.

So if anything good can come out of this scandal, it seems to me part of it is a kind of frank conversation and a drive towards transparency of what our processes are and a rebuilding of that trust. You asked a racially inflected question at the beginning and it's spot on. There's a reason that black and brown people questioned the legitimacy of the admissions process because there was overt discrimination. And by the way, if you go back a generation earlier, there was a reason that Jewish Americans questioned the process cause there were quotas against Jewish students at all of the top schools and particularly the Ivy League schools.

So as we are talking about all of these problems, we ought to pause just for a second and say that there has been enormous progress over the last century in American higher education, which is not to say that we're done, but we should also acknowledge the amount in financial aid that now flows through virtually every school and the ability to focus on opportunity and accessibility. But there's a long way to go and I think in many ways those issues are affected by this.

Andrew Fligel:

You know, it's vital that we expand our partnerships with community based organizations, with community colleges. When you login ... one of the studies, actually, David helped to support a grant where I was able to do a national study on transfer admission from community college to 4-year institutions. And what we found is, was ... Now, gosh, it's been a decade since that study, was that there was enormous bias at the most competitive institutions, very limited space for community, for transfer students at all, and a bias particularly against community college admission.

And so we need to shift that. When you think about the impression for students of color, for first-generation students, for lower socioeconomic students, about how the system's rigged, there are accuracies to those perceptions that we have to acknowledge and own. You don't get anywhere by just sitting in your office talking about how we change things, we have to be out in the community-based

organizations, in the churches, at the festivals, talking about how our schools can be more accommodating and listening as much as we talk.

Juleyka LW: So David, I wanted to come back to you because you have to now rethink the roadmap. What are you thinking? What, organizationally, what are you all thinking about next steps, immediate, mid-term, long term, for your 15,000 members?

David Hawkins: Right. Well, the first thing we want to do is try to organize our thoughts. I think this is a real inflection point and in our minds, something's got to give. I think in this country we are at a point on, in many of our daily lives and in many aspects of our existence where we're questioning a lot because we're running systems of separate but unequal in many different, many, many different facets of our society. And higher education is not immune.

So as we look at the problem that this has really drawn out, we're looking at three broad levels of conversation, and recommendations, and places where we need to consider a serious change. The first is a broad policy level. When I hear the phrase, and I do hear it fairly often, the admission system is broken. You have to break down what is admission, because as we know, most schools are actually quite accommodating for students. So what are we talking about when we talk about admission? What is a system? There is no system of higher education in this country. We have a market for higher education. Some states have systems, but this is not a system. So we have to define what we mean by system.

And then broken. We have to define what we mean by broken. At the systemic level, there are inequalities. There are inequities in almost all phases of education. From when a kid comes home from the hospital, they already are born into inequity. And it starts the first day they walk into kindergarten. And it continues right with them through the college admission process, whether it's the fact that their parents decided what neighborhood to move in because they felt like that had the "best schools" all the way up to being able to purchase test preparation coaching. And this is of course completely legal, but we have to understand what policy ramifications those decisions have. So that's one big level.

The next level is at our institutions and at the system level where there are systems in states. Why do we have the admission policies we have? And frankly a lot of the debate, the angst, that we're talking about at the level of this scandal is about those very deliberately exclusive institutions. So there are questions we have to pose at that institutional level. And then finally at the individual level, we have to ask ourselves as college advisors and college admission officers, what are the things that we individually do or don't do that could be affecting access to higher education? And I think we have to think more carefully about how we talk to the public about how we stress the message that college is actually quite attainable from an acceptance standpoint at the vast majority of colleges, and have a conversation about the kinds of reassurances and the kinds of work we have to do to really roll up our sleeves and talk to people in a meaningful way.

Juleyka LW: So I want to bring an economic complicating factor here, which is \$1 trillion in student debt and 80 million millennials who are thinking that was not worth it. So now you've got a morally questionable situation compounded by the fact that we have the numerically largest generation of Americans thinking this simply is not worth it. Why did I make this investment?

Fred Lawrence: When David talked about there's not a single college admission system in this country, there's also not a single debt structure, so you have lots of different ways in which debt is accumulated. For most students going to 4-year colleges that are not for profit colleges, the debt load that they leave college with is in the neighborhood of \$30,000 plus or minus. The huge numbers that one hears by and large, come from for-profit institutions. And I think there are serious questions about the regulation and the impending deregulation of for-profit education. That might be another conversation for another time that we ought to do where debt load is much higher. For students proceeding into graduate and professional education where the debt load is very high and there are very serious questions there as well.

But for right now to stay focused on the 4-year undergraduate experience, many of those students are taking on debt and it is to obtain an education that changes their lives.

Juleyka LW: I was being a little bit of a contrarian there because the lay person who is not following academic news as closely as the three of you sees these bubbles of news pop up, the big numbers, the aggregate stories. And we're creating an impression, an incomplete impression, of what is happening in a world that already felt foreign to us.

And so what I'm trying to get at with this line of thought and line of questioning is how can colleges be more practical and less theoretical about this?

Andrew Fligel: But you're hitting the nail on the head. And the largest challenge that we have is really the focus of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is on talking about how we explain the value, particularly of undergraduate education. That's where we spend the vast majority of our time researching and working with our 1,400 college and university members on improving. And we have a mountain of data that has not been transmitted well for public consumption.

So we have this incredible data from employers about what they're most looking for, not just now, but in terms of immediate employment, in terms of promotability, in terms of the evolving workforce. And the things they talk about over and over again, and this wasn't just founded by our association, but by Gallup, by Pew. Over and over again, they find what they're looking for is critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration, code switching, and the ability to be culturally competent in your communications.

And it turns out the research at our association demonstrates in great detail how well our colleges do at transmitting that information to undergraduate students. And we

can even analyze the high impact practices that lead to better outcomes in these essential learning outcomes that we need for our democracy and for the workforce.

Fred Lawrence: You know, Phi Beta Kappa has been advocating for the liberal arts and sciences for back 250 years. And one of the things that I will hear a lot in my capacity is that, "The liberal arts are a luxury we can't afford today." And I think that is a complete misconception of what the liberal arts are about. But if people don't understand how important the liberal arts are and a liberal arts education is, my guess is it's not because they can't understand it, it's because we've done a very poor job of explaining it.

It is not just that it provides for a more meaningful life, although it certainly does that too, but it also provides for a more productive life as well as a more engaged life as citizens. My favorite example of the productive life piece of this was a dean of a very celebrated engineering school who was asked, "What's the most important skill for an engineer?" And you're assuming it must be physics, it must be calculus, it must be something in the applied sciences.

You know what he said? He said, "Empathy." And of course when people look, just the way that you just looked Juleyka with your eyes going wide open, he said, "Because if you don't understand for whom you're building things, you're not going to be much of an engineer." Now where do we teach empathy? That's part of a liberal arts education. So maybe paradoxically a liberal arts education, in fact, is the most practical education there is. But again, coming back to where we started this conversation, if there's something good that can come out of this moment, it's that right now the patient is on the table and we're ready for a national conversation about what higher education is about, where it works, for whom it works, and hopefully something good can come out of that. And that colleges and universities can get better both at reaching out more broadly to various populations, have been much more transparent about how they're doing their admissions process and listening to what the needs are of others.

Juleyka LW: David, you look like you want to say something.

David Hawkins: In response to your question about the trillion dollar debt, I think we have to ask ourselves some very simple and deep questions. Much like some of the new members of Congress here in Washington are asking some very blunt questions. I think we need to ask ourselves, why does college cost so much? And we need to be prepared for the answer to be because we don't invest enough in it. We as a government, we the people, have not funded public higher education in a way that allows broad access.

In fact, it promotes a privatized sort of market and we just have to stop and ask ourselves as a country, "Is that the way we want higher education to be?" Because if we do, this kind of scandal is going to keep happening.

Andrew Flagel: And if free college means even more resource scarcity for our community colleges and our regional publics, we are not increasing access. That investment that David is talking about is exactly the right thing. We need to invest deeper in higher education if we're going to see the success rates increase.

And there's great models for it. If you look at Miami Dade College in Florida, and the partnerships they've built, if you look at the George Mason University Nova Advanced Program that they've just build based on some of the models out of the CMU of pathways programs at institutions, you really have some phenomenal potential for increasing the pipeline, increasing access for students, graduation at higher rates with lower debt loads. So those models are out there and what we need is larger investments in those success model.

Fred Lawrence: In fact, you go back in earlier generations and one of the greatest social experiments in American history was the GI Bill for the returning veterans coming out of World War II, and some of these were young people who were on their way to college anyway, but the vast majority of them had never considered going to college. And to say that it changed the arc of their lives, which it certainly did, is to miss the story that it changed the country. It changed the country economically, it changed the country socially, it changed the country politically. And by any objective measure it was a phenomenal success.

So right now is exactly the time to be increasing in this investment.

Juleyka LW: So the answer is universal free education for everyone so no one can be bribed?

Andrew Flagel: You come back to a reasonable question: if you make things free for everyone are you discounting a lot of folks who can well afford the investment in higher education? I've worked enough years of my career in public education that I actually have some skepticism of discounting everyone. But I think the idea of investing in higher education and investing in seeing that as a core infrastructure investment in our future, is incredibly valuable.

Juleyka LW: Thank you so much Fred, and David, and Andrew. This has been incredibly instructive and I know that our listeners are going to have a lot of fodder for great conversations with their families, with their friends.

Fred Lawrence: We would like to thank you for your role in moderating this conversation, keeping us on point, keeping us moving, and keeping it honest as always.

This episode was produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. The episode was mixed by Paula Mardo. The Phi Beta Kappa producers for this episode were Hadley White and me. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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