



## The View from Campus

In this episode, three admissions leaders talk about the pressures from campus stakeholders; the responsibility to serve families; and how colleges are adapting to the rapid evolution of the prospective college student. David Burge, vice president for enrollment management at George Mason University (VA), Mary Smith, senior associate director of admissions at Gettysburg College (PA), and Gil J. Villanueva, associate vice president and dean of admission at the University of Richmond (VA), join a discussion moderated by journalist Juleyka Lantigua-Williams.

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**Stefanie Niles:** Hi, I'm Stefanie Niles, president of NACAC. Thanks for listening to College Admissions Decoded, our podcast for counseling and admissions professionals. We are an education association of more than 15,000 in the U.S. and abroad. Our members support students and families from across the country and around the world through the college admission process. We offer professional support to our members, but the public is welcome to attend one of over 90 NACAC college fairs, including some in the performing and visual arts and the STEM fields. If you'd like to learn more, please visit [nacacnet.org](http://nacacnet.org).

**David Burge:** Hello, and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded Podcast, an occasional series from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

I'm David Burge, the Vice President for Enrollment Management at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia and past president of NACAC. NACAC is an education association of more than 15,000 college admission professionals at both secondary and postsecondary schools who support students and families from across the country and around the world through the college admission process.

The Varsity Blues bribery scandal, which featured the indictments of wealthy individuals in an alleged cheating scam to get their children into college, broke in March, and now months later, the story remains in the news. Beyond the now familiar details of enormous bribes, imposters taking the SAT exam, and fake athletic accomplishments, the story has revealed that many Americans think that the college admission process is opaque and mysterious or worse: corrupt. Others say that the problems with the US college admissions process reflect the influence of wealth and privilege in our society and our culture. We'll talk about those perceptions and much more in this episode.

With me are two friends and colleagues who are also members of NACAC: Mary Smith, Senior Associate Director of Admission at Gettysburg College and President of the Pennsylvania Association for College Admission Counseling. Mary, welcome.

Mary Smith: Excited to be here.

Burge: ...And Gil Villanueva, Associate Vice President and Dean of Admission at the University of Richmond in Virginia and past Chair of the Board of Directors for the Common Application. Gil, great to see you.

Gil Villanueva: It's great to be here.

Burge: Thanks to both of you for being here. And moderating our discussion is Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, a veteran journalist with more than 20 years of experience in print and digital audio and film. Juleyka, I'll turn this over to you.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. It's really great to be here. This is my third conversation with the pros, and I get to talk to you guys about what actually happens on campus today.

So, I'm going to ask you a really simple question and I want you to give me a really simple answer. Is the college admission systems really broken or simply misunderstood? Mary?

Smith: No, it's not broken or rigged, but it often feels nebulous, uncertain, and beyond students' and families' control. I've had the pleasure of working with many colleagues and friends both at my own institution

and in our state organization who are excited to be a part of students' process, and they're transparent in their process in talking about how to evaluate students through the application process. So, no, it's not broken or rigged. It's just perhaps frustrating, because it's not as easily accessible in the conversation.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay. Gil?

Villanueva: Yeah, I'm not so sure it's broken, but I do feel that there's much work still that we have to do.

Lantigua-Williams: So, fractured, not broken?

Villanueva: Perhaps. The fact that we're really just talking about nine 9-10% of institutions tells me that, you know, it is really not broken. And in fact, I like the fact that—and I value the idea that—so many of our young people these days have access, more so than ever before, to higher education. It's just that we have this focus sometimes on the most selective of schools in our country.

Lantigua-Williams: So bad apples. David?

Burge: Somewhat objected to the characterization of a singular college admission process, as our organization represents 15,000 members across hundreds of institutions, and if you look across each of them, you see commonalities, but you also see some distinct differences in how each of them approach making a decision and enrolling a class. And oftentimes, a conversation in the media, as Gill suggests, is focused on one type of process at the ultra-selective institution—which is mysterious—and then all of us get cast in that same box.

Lantigua-Williams: But you guys also do things to convince us that it is a seamless, transparent, accessible process, like the Common Application. So, here is a very tactical and practical message that you're sending us, the lay people. So, explain that one.

Burge: So, from my perception, something like the Common Application... they're designed to allow some simplicity in comparison across institutions. Now, there's a lot of information out there, and it's too much to consume, which is again why our organization, which represents both the college admissions side and the school counselor, as well as the independent educational consultants and

non government agency... I mean, all the people who are invested in the students is critical, because there is a human-needed component to help counsel students and families, especially when they're in the first time going through the process.

Lantigua-Williams: So talk to me specifically about your institutions, about your roles, and how you have approached this demystification in very practical terms.

Mary?

Smith: I'll share a story. I was working with a student a few years ago. We'll call him Adam. I was interviewing him at a wonderful parochial school in the Reading area in Pennsylvania, and we were talking about his excitement about going off to college. He was nervous about it. He was from a single-parent household and he was struck because he couldn't afford the fee for the ACT, and the more we talked about it, I said, "Well, you know there's a fee waiver for that." So, we talked through that and he brought up his school counselor and how closely his counselor was working with him and encouraged him even to meet with me on that day.

So, what I have found, kind of speaking to what others have said about the counselors' role in this process, it's huge. By the ability to connect with counselors from our perspective on the admission side, and for students to use their resources in their counselors, the counselor in this case encouraged the student to look at our institution and to look specifically at a stem scholars program.

He ended up enrolling at our institution, part of our STEM Scholars program, and now is in his senior year.

Lantigua-Williams: What are some of these practical concerns that the families that you work with face in the process of getting their child into college? And how do you help them through?

Smith: Number one, it's how do I afford it? Where is the money coming from? I work with a lot of rural populations in Pennsylvania, and one of the great community-based organizations I work with is called The Pennsylvania College Advising Corps, and they have additional individuals that helped us supplement the school counselor to help with that guidance. And, what we're able to do is assist with

application days and FAFSA nights and different opportunities to to share it: not just “Here's how the process works,” but “Here's how you afford it.” Too often we hear, “Well, it's not affordable, it's not attainable. We can't do this.” And yet, those resources that are right in the school counseling office, those scholarship opportunities, have gone untouched. No one's known about them. So, those connections, again with the counseling office, with great community based organizations who really opened the door for both the attainability of college but also the financial piece... I think that's the key, as we need to have that conversation.

Villanueva: Well, in our country, it's really fascinating how the level of expectation plays such a big role in the outlook of young people, and particularly those from low-income and middle-income families, relative to their wealthier counterparts. Their wealthier counterparts expect to earn a college degree, whereas our low-income students and middle-income students—Wow. Such a low percentage are actually thinking about college; the highest attainment for education for them is actually earning a high school degree, so it's clear that we have more work to do. And, the idea that we have to continue to extend good information and be timely about it is something that we all could work on. And, I worry sometimes that the onus is always on higher education professionals. We need to think about this from a nationwide perspective. For us to continue to compete in a global marketplace, for us not to extend opportunities for postsecondary education, for such a burgeoning population is going to be an issue for us moving forward.

Lantigua-Williams: But, listening to the three of you, I feel like in the college admissions counselors office, you've created a type of funnel lockbox of this information that is so vital. If there is all of this information to be had and to be shared, yet somehow you want it all to be funneled through the college admissions office, we've got an accessibility issue, no?

Villanueva: I think there's more information out there. The key, in my opinion, is making sure that we get to start earlier when we're trying to plant seeds to young people—regardless of their socioeconomic background—that college is something that you need to aspire to and it's something that is attainable.

Lantigua-Williams: So when would you start?

Villanueva: We have started as early as sometimes the elementary school, depending on the district, depending on the resources available, colleges and universities. I feel good about the fact that we have done such great outreach over the past x number of years, but we need to do more, and again, outreach should not just be on the backs of higher education professionals. It should be everyone's job in our society.

Burge: I concur and would add that there is an obligation amongst the higher ed community to take additional responsibility for nurturing students at a variety of different ability levels to graduate from college.

In other words, if we're just talking about shaping a class, and we aren't growing the number of students and the number of offers that we're making for students to join us in higher education, then we are eventually going to have a large scale problem on our hands in that the wealth and privilege that my colleagues have mentioned will only continue to manifest itself over generations. Whereas, if we are able to say that we're going to alter our definitions of ability and we're going to take responsibility for students who need additional assistance once they're at our institutions in order to facilitate their graduation, then we get to a mindset shift. Right? Then, we get to the point of saying, we're not going to rely on K-12 or any sort of outside operation to prepare students to come to college. We are going to take additional responsibility to build bridge programs to develop for mediation, to develop coaching and assistance all throughout the student lifecycle. Because, if we don't do that, then we're going to be left with the same definitions of merit, and that is already proven to be self-sustaining and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Smith: I think it's going beyond the numbers. I think, so often, we're locked into, you know, students hear about this GPA, this SAT or ACT score, and that's where their focus is. And, it's really building that conversation to say, "You are so much more than your numbers. You are the athlete, you are the artists, you are the student, you are the community builder." It's helping to get beyond those numbers, helping students to understand that it's all of the above that goes into that process.

Lantigua-Williams: Sometimes, the admissions office is not making the decision by

itself. Sometimes, you've got athletic directors, alumni, faculty, the president, somebody on the board, people who gently nudge.

Smith: We do have competing goals. We have input from many different constituents, whether it be parents, alumni, friends of the college coaches, et cetera. And, we look at it as: There's a whole big puzzle to every student, there's a whole story to every student. First and foremost, it relies with the student's record, it relies on the student's application. And then, there are all of these additional pieces that we have to think about. You know, someone is talking about, "Hey, you know, this is someone who would be a great oboe player. Okay, I'm going to take that in as wonderful input as a part of the conversation. But bottom line, can they be successful at our institution?"

I never want to set a student up for failure, but then all of those other pieces enhance the story, enhance the conversation. But, the bottom line is the decision rests with the admissions office and needs to.

Villanueva: Institutional goals exist at so many institutions these days, and in many ways, to your point, it influences admission decisions. And I tell people all the time, one way you can figure out the institutional goals from school to school is to go into that search box and type in "strategic plan," and if you type in "strategic plan," you can see it could be archived—even from, you know, year to year, or you know, five years or—

Lantigua-Williams: Dude, you're giving away the code to the Matrix.

Burge: The blue pill!

[Laughs]

Villanueva: It's like a roadmap for a lot of schools, and many strategic plans that are very detailed in terms of what they want to accomplish over time, including student recruitment.

Lantigua-Williams: I want you to talk to me about the student, and the family, and one, assessing the level of preparedness to go into the college, but two, there's the question of: Colleges are known for being particular types of colleges, and they attract a particular type of students because of that reputation. If you are to respond to the changing trends and the openness of the Gen Zs, is that antithetical to

maintaining the reputation of your college and to maintaining that thing that makes you distinctive and makes you differentiate yourself in the marketplace?

Smith: You have to have an interesting balance there, because you still are tied into your identity as an institution, but at the same time, the world is changing and it's understanding the context of: where does your institution fit within all of that? And so, it's constantly thinking about, "Okay, how do we rise above the noisy marketplace on one hand for students to hear, "This is my type of institution, these are our distinctive programs, this is who we are," but at the same time meet the students of this generation who are ever-changing, who have different cultural backgrounds, who have different interests, who have different needs from a resource perspective even.

Lantigua-Williams: One of the last questions I want to ask you—because I'm sure you get asked this all the time—I'm your neighbor, I'm your friend. You go to the gym with me. Tell me, what's the secret? Tell me two things that I can do right now to improve my kid's chances of getting into your particular school.

Villanueva: Yeah so, growing up in a low income immigrant household, the prospect of of obtaining a college degree might as well be out in Mars, Jupiter and so on. It wasn't going to happen I looked at my divorced parents' situation, our tax forms, my mom's, and, "Well, I guess college is not going to happen." And I have to tell you, having mentors is key. You have community-based organizations that are, I believe, doing yeomans' work, that are doing a lot of good things for our communities these days. But, if you have a mentor that either was assigned to you, or you are so lucky enough to have one, being that person puts you in another path in so many ways.

Burge: The good news is that actually my advice to families is that they have more power in this process than they realize.

Abandon right now the idea that selectivity of an institution is somehow a surrogate for quality of an institution. And, once you do that, you realize that what matters the most is fit. Where do I feel welcomed, included, and where do I have the greatest chance of success in my life? And, all too often, I'm talking to friends, and neighbors, and people at the gym, who are asking me, "How do I game the system in order to get into institutions who are judged by who they exclude and not by who they include?"

The decision that you need to make right now is: How am I preparing myself for whatever institution I go to? And that answer is always the same, which is take the harder classes whenever you can. Focus on being the best student, and academic, and person that you can be regardless of whether or not you're validated through an admissions process one day. Focus on your own development and you will be successful in life.

Lantigua-Williams: Thank you.

Burge: See, that was worth the wait, right?

Lantigua-Williams: Oh, that was totally worth the wait. But now, I feel like this is more like a philosophical approach to living a fulfilling life than how to get into college. [Laughs] Mary?

Smith: What I always say to family members, friends, ask them. David talked a lot about the parent control in this process. There's opportunities. Ask the question, go visit the campuses. That campus might be 20 minutes from you. In some ways, that also takes out some of that nebulous piece, it takes out some of that anxiety. Step on that college campus. Understand what's going on in that college environment. Eat in the dining hall. Get to know the students, walk through the career center. How do they prepare students for the long-term, for what's next? And, ask the question in the admissions office: how do you evaluate? They'll tell you—it isn't a secret. We are happy to talk about the importance of academics, that the essay matters, that those recommendations from your counselor, from your teacher matter, that your visit to our campus matters. All of those pieces, A, it takes out some of that fear of the process, it makes it just a little less disconcerting, and B, it starts to build a relationship.

Lantigua-Williams: This has been so instructive. Thank you to all three of you. Thank you. Thank you, Gil. Thank you, David. Thank you, Mary.

Burge: Thanks for moderating today.

College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, The National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams and Co. Paola Mardo is the sound designer. Emma Forbes is the show's intern. If you would like to

learn more about our guests, our organization, and the college admission process, visit NACAC's website at [www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org). I'm David Burge, thank you for joining us today.

## **CITATION**

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