

CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center podcast. I am your host, Chris Davis, associate director of the Career and Academic Resource center here at Harvard Extension School. And today it's my great pleasure to have in the studio with me Alaina Stuart and Julie Lonergan, both from the admissions department here at Harvard Extension School. They're both assistant directors in the admissions office, and we're here today just to have a fun wide-ranging conversation about what the admissions office is, talk a little bit about the application process, anything else that would be helpful to share with students just to give a glimpse at what the admissions office is. So thank you both very much for being here.

ALAINA STUART: No problem. Thank you for having us

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you, Julie.

JULIE Thank you, Chris. We're looking forward to it.

LONERGAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: No, it's nice also because I usually-- when I have people live in the studio, it's usually one on one, so it's nice to have two people. Changes things up a little bit.

JULIE So one of the most unusual things about extensions admissions office, especially compared to
LONERGAN: other schools, is that our students are already students by the time that they're talking to us. So traditionally a student would be submitting an application, maybe never stepping foot on a campus, certainly never enrolling in courses whereas with us we really get to know you a bit more. We've seen maybe some of your grades. We have a sense of what you can do and what you're interested in even before you get to the application process.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, most students come to us after having already taken one course or they're mid-semester into their first course. But some students come to us with many courses under their belt. So we really deal with a wide spectrum of students, and we have long-term connections with our students.

Sometimes a student will come to us during their first class, and they're working towards a mission but also maybe a certificate or doing classes that are applicable for their work. And so we'll work with them for many semesters prior to being admitted, and we're here to help guide students to the point of admission and give them all the support and advice that we can until

they're admitted and handed off to an academic advisor.

JULIE That's right. I think one of the really key things about our role is that we can serve as an
LONERGAN: interpreter for both Harvard in general and for the Extension School specifically. We can talk to you about degree requirements. We can get as granular as does this course count for this requirement, but we can also talk in a general sense about is a graduate degree right for you right now and what might that mean for you and your family.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, and we can help you pick classes so you know the different requirements, but maybe you have a few options to fulfill them. We can really help you get into that nitty-gritty of which course is best for you and your skills. And we can also help you figure out things like certificates, or maybe generally you want to study one area but you're not sure exactly which are degrees in that area is the best for you. We can help you work through all of those questions.

CHRIS DAVIS: So that's a really good point that both of you made. So in addition to just simply applying for the program, there's also a good deal of advising going on.

JULIE Absolutely.

LONERGAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: So by the time students make appointments with either of you or with the other admissions advisors, there's also a personal component of what you are looking to get out of the educational experience. Is it the right time for you to do a master's program or an undergraduate degree program?

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, definitely. Our office is comprised of a team of people who assist with undergraduate degrees, and we also have a few graduate advisors. And then we have a team member who works on outreach and communication to students who are interested in pursuing a degree but not quite aware of all the options they have. We really try and-- we have a lot of different roles to try and reach out to students in as many different ways as possible and support students from a variety of angles if that make sense.

JULIE Something else that I'll add to that talking about our team. So there are 11 people in the
LONERGAN: admissions office. And I think it is about half of us, we went back to school part time while working. We were studying as adults. So we are often coming from the same background that many of you as students are. And I think that we can really use that to help you figure out your

goals as well. It's something that we have personal experience with, and we understand it.

CHRIS DAVIS: It's helpful I'm sure for students to know that their advisors have had similar experiences.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, it's great. And also our students are such a wide spectrum of people. We have undergraduate students almost straight out of high school and all the way through middle aged seeking an undergraduate degree. And we have graduate students who are right out of their undergrad through-- I've had students in their 60s and pushing 70s. So we have a huge wide range of students we work with.

And our office is great because we have a very wide range of personalities and backgrounds and experience. So when talking about work-life balance, we have so many different people's perspectives that we can pull from when trying to advise students.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I'd love to talk a little bit about the application process, but before we do, are there-- is there very frequently asked questions that you guys get asked that either you find surprising or that it would be helpful to address here? Is there a common theme among frequently asked questions that you get from students regardless of where they're coming from and who they are?

JULIE LONERGAN: One of the questions that I hear most often-- and, in fact, I heard just yesterday from a student-- is just a general disbelief that they can go to Harvard, that you can go to Harvard, and that you can be a part of this the school in this degree program. But it really is that straightforward. We have some very clear eligibility requirements for degrees. Take the stipulated classes you submit in application. That is truly what we are looking for.

We're not in a situation where we have a certain quota of applicants that once we get to we can't accept anymore. That's not going to happen. Everyone who is qualified and who applies, we would love to have you be one of our students.

ALAINA STUART: And I think a question that comes up for me a lot is work-life balance. So I'm just starting out. I haven't been to school in 10 years. How do I do this? And the thing that I try to advise students is, one, we're here to support you. So any questions you have, please that is what we're here for. So send them our way. And, two, is how to get back into school. And so we always advise people-- for me at least, I try and start with just one class, take it easy, see how it goes.

Usually once you get your footing in it, then a lot of students will go up to maybe two classes a term. And I always try and tell students, depending on how busy your work cycle is, what's

great about our program is it's so flexible. So you could say my fall is always really busy. I travel a lot for work, so maybe I'm just going to take one class in the fall.

But I know I'm really home and can focus. So I'm going to do to in the spring, and I'm going to skip summer so that I can just focus on spending time with my family. And our program lets you do that. You can really tailor it to fit your schedule and your needs. And so that's usually one of the first issues I talk through with the students who are just coming through the doors is how do we balance their schedule to make them successful in our program.

JULIE

LONERGAN:

I think another question that we get a lot is looking at the very specific requirements of the application. So as you'll know if you've taken a look at our website, one of the main items that you'll need to submit as part of an application is official transcripts. And so there are slightly different requirements, whether you're an undergraduate applicant or a graduate, applicant but just in general, the transcripts need to come directly from your school to us here at the admissions office.

The process does not need to be complicated, and we don't think that it is. Certainly, if you have concerns about it, as Alaina said, that's what we're here to help you with. But we do in general recommend that you start gathering those application documents sooner rather than later. Don't wait until the application cycle to start requesting those documents. Every now and then we hear from students who just takes a little bit longer than they thought it would, and then they're right up against the deadline. So do yourself a favor and start that earlier than you think you might have to.

But in general, a student applies when they are taking their final required course for admission. So depending on your program, it's going to be a little bit different what that course is, but you would submit your application while you're in that course. We collect all your materials during the one month application cycle, then at the end of the semester when we get your final grades, that's when we're able to determine whether or not you'll be admitted.

CHRIS DAVIS:

So let's talk a little bit about the application process itself and the application. I know that there have been some changes and updates recently. So that sounds very exciting.

ALAINA STUART:

Yeah, it's pretty straightforward and simple process. The online form I usually tell students to plan 30 minutes to an hour to fill it out. And the best thing about this new form is you can save and come back if you would like. So you can start it.

Let's say you do all the background information, but you're not ready to write the personal statement. Save, exit out of it, come back a few days later, dive back in, you get halfway through, save, leave, you can keep doing that all up until the end of the cycle. So it's really flexible, just like our programs to fit a working student who maybe has to do things that small chunks.

JULIE
LONERGAN: That's right. And I think one of the key things that I want to repeat is that the application form itself should take you half an hour. It's not meant to be taxing. It's not meant to really require a lot of your time. We want you to take it seriously. This is applying to a degree program after all, but it's not supposed to stress you out or scare you.

So if that's the attitude you have, let us know if we can help with that. But in general, it really should be a relatively easy process for you to complete that application form.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, the application form, what we use it for mostly is understanding who you are as a student. We want to know what kind of background you're bringing to our program, what kind of work experience or bringing to the program. We want to read through your personal statement to see what your life experience is like. It's not some make or break form that is going to decide your application. It's a way for us to get to know our students are.

That also goes for the resume. In the online application form, there's a section to upload your resume. And we don't have any kind of format that we request for students for that because we-- again we really use it as a means to get to know our students are, so we look through it to see what kind of work experience they're bringing, the different companies they worked for, different degrees they might have earned along the way.

JULIE
LONERGAN: That's right. And I think particularly with the resume, what I hear from students sometimes is they're concerned about showing their qualifications for the specific degree field that they are applying to. And we completely understand that one of the primary reasons that people come to the Extension School is because they want to change their careers.

So if you are applying to a degree program in journalism but you've never worked as a journalist, that's completely fine. We are focused more on how we can help you right now and in the future than what you've done in the past in terms of your career.

CHRIS DAVIS: One thing I wanted to ask you both about, and, Alaina, I think you made reference to earlier. The application process admissions is something that's manual that is triggered by the student

starting the process is we have noted before different degree programs have different requirements similar to specific courses, similar to three specific courses.

In some cases there are students who right as soon as they're going to be eligible, they apply, and there are other instances where students will have passed the courses-- they've already taken the courses necessary for admission, and they apply to the degree program later in their journey. Can you talk a little bit about what some of the benefits of being an admitted degree candidate bring to your experience?

**JULIE
LONERGAN:**

So that's a great question. I think in the admissions office, our perspective is always the recommendation that a student, a, become eligible as soon as possible and, b, apply as soon as they are eligible. So certainly if you know that you want to do a degree program, prioritize those required courses for admission. Take those as your first two or three courses. Apply right away.

There are a lot of benefits. One of the major ones I think that students might not know about is access to course evaluation data. So once you're admitted, you can read what previous students have said about professors, about courses. It's really helpful for you to plan out how you'll fulfill your next degree requirements.

Before admission, you're relying on just maybe a gut feeling, word of mouth from your friends, but you can be a lot more strategic with that information once you're admitted.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah. Some other great benefits are you get discounted summer school tuition. So you get to take classes during the summer school at the Harvard Extension School tuition rate, which can be a huge benefit to students. You-- if you are eligible, you can qualify for financial aid, which is a huge benefit to students as well.

Other things, you get expanded access to our career services office with-- you can have appointments with a career advisor. You can use our online career tool. You get an academic advisor who is an excellent resource for you for finding all of the different benefits you can take advantage of as a student that will-- and they will-- either to help guide you from the point of admission to graduation.

**JULIE
LONERGAN:**

So in addition to the academic advisor, for many of our fields that have a capstone or a thesis, you'll also be assigned a research advisor or a capstone advisor. That terminology is a little bit different based on the field. But this is basically just another advisor who can really help you

plan out that final segment of the degree.

So if you're pursuing a master's degree that has that capstone or thesis requirement, you really cannot even begin that portion of it until you're admitted. And I think we sometimes see students run into some issues there that if they've completed a lot of courses before they're admitted, they want to get going with their thesis or capstone. But there are some administrative procedures, some research work that you really just can't do until you have been admitted. So if that is something that applies to your field, I would say that's yet another reason to prioritize admission.

ALAINA STUART: Oh, and another thing, of course, is you can get a Harvard ID card. So once you're an admitted degree student, you can get your Harvard University ID.

JULIE LONERGAN: And, of course, the final benefit is once you finish the program and you graduate, then you get to join the Harvard Alumni Association. And there are tons more benefits associated with that, too.

CHRIS DAVIS: So one of the things I wanted to ask you-- and I think this is something that comes up-- I get questions like this sometimes-- I'm sure the admissions office does. One of the things that makes Harvard Extension unique is that we have open enrollment courses where students who are not enrolled in a degree program will take a course or two for professional or personal enrichment.

We have many students who are in open enrollment courses that are not affiliated with a certificate or with a degree program. And we also have an application process for degree programs, whether they're undergraduate or graduate. Can you talk a little bit about the contrast. I think sometimes that confuses people.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah, definitely. We do have a lot of students that just come here for classes, personal fulfillment or developing a skill for work. So we have about 15,000 students that just come to take classes, but the people who are actually in our program-- the number of people in our degree programs is actually quite small.

The management and finance degree program together only have about 1,000 students who are admitted into the degree program. Most of the programs aren't small, in the hundreds of students for any one degree. There is of a formal application process because we are one of the degree granting schools of Harvard, so it's not just anybody who takes a class here gets to

say that they have a degree from us. You do actually need to go through an application process, make sure that you meet eligibility requirements, make sure that you can prove yourself as we talked about before.

We want anybody who can prove that they can do the work, but we do need to have a process where we actually check in with you and make sure that you are achieving the grades that you need. And that's what our application process is about. It's like a check in point for students who really want to commit to our program, and we check in and make sure they actually can handle the workload of our program.

What's great about our degree programs is we really support students. So we are the admissions office. We advise and support students prior to being admitted. Once they are admitted, students get academic advisors, research advisors, thesis advisors to support them until commencement. And so our actual degree programs have a really high success rate.

Most of our degrees have something over 90% of students actually graduate once they're admitted. So we really do have a strong program for students who want to pursue a degree. But we acknowledge that the vast majority of students with the Extension School are just course takers.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for clarifying that. I think sometimes it's worth explaining that we do serve several different populations. We have opened enrollment course takers. We have graduate certificate seekers. And we have undergraduate and graduate degree programs students.

ALAINA STUART: Yeah. And a lot of questions actually flow a little back and forth between those things. We'll have a student who comes here just to take one class, and then they'll realize a certificate might get good four-course credential to help me advance in work. And then once they finish this certificate, they realize they're a third or a good chunk of the way into their degree program, so they decide to pursue a degree program.

And then they move along all our different courses. And then once they graduate, we have students who decide to either complete [INAUDIBLE] certificate or take a few more classes just for personal enrichment. So people go back and forth on the spectrum of what our students are.

CHRIS DAVIS: So thank you, guys, so much for sharing all this. I did want to close with asking both of you if there's a highlight-- both of you have been here several years, have worked with a large

number of students, and as we have made reference to earlier in our students run the gamut. But is there a highlight that you could share, either a student that you advised, some that you worked with, or an experience being a part of the admissions office that stands out to you and encapsulates the best of both the admissions office and Harvard Extension School?

JULIE LONERGAN: I met with a student recently who described herself to me as just an ordinary person. And I remember she used that word because this was towards the end of our conversation, and she had just been telling me about how she was working full-time. She had two kids. She was taking one class at a time, thinking about adding a second one but wasn't sure. And in my head I'm thinking that's not ordinary at all. That's extraordinary. That's incredible.

And I think that is so many of our students is that even somebody who-- maybe you're, quote unquote, only doing this for a promotion or only doing this because your company is giving you money. But that's still incredible just to be taking this time that you could be spending doing anything else. To go back to school, that's a huge accomplishment to even get to the point where you're considering that.

So to then continue that and be admitted to a degree program while you're working, while you're taking care of your family, while you're involved in your community, while you're living your life, that's never an ordinary thing. So I just-- I feel like I think a lot of our students are doing this quietly, but it's something to be so proud of.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, that's incredible. Thank you both so much. I think the admissions office is such an integral part of the degree program experience at Harvard Extension School, and I'm grateful for both of you for sharing your stories, your expertise, your knowledge.

JULIE LONERGAN: Thank you, Chris.

ALAINA STUART: Thank you for having us.

CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the CARC Podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.