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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, and welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*, the *CARC Podcast*. I am your host, Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. Today, it is my great pleasure to be speaking to Julie Lonergan and Christina Burkhardt. Julie is an associate director, and Christina is an assistant director in the Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions at Harvard Extension School.

Today is going to be an opportunity for me to ask them some questions about who exactly is the Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions, what they do, and to share some helpful input, some feedback, some anecdotes or highlights that will be of interest to you, whoever is listening. Whether you're a course taker who is on the road to applying to a degree program at Harvard Extension School, a prospective degree candidate, or even if you're already an admitted degree candidate, I'm sure there will be some things of interest in our conversation today.

So first and foremost, Julie and Christina, thank you so much for being here today.

JULIE Thanks, Chris. Yeah, my pleasure.

LONERGAN:

CHRISTINA Yeah. Thanks for having us.

BURKHARDT:

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to start off with something pretty basic. Can you guys talk a little bit about the Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions, who you are, and what you do?

JULIE So as Chris said, our acronym, OPAA, is just our shorthand for saying Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions.
LONERGAN: And so I think the predegree part is really key to who we are, that we're working with students who are preparing for admission to a degree program, but they're not there yet. And so typically, that means students in maybe their first semester, students in their first year. Depending on how you're shaping your courses required for admission, that's when you'd be in touch with us.

And practically speaking, our office is 13 people. And so we're a pretty small team. All of us have some experience with attending school while working or as adults. And that's something that we're really, really proud of because that's who all of our students are as well. And so being able to bring that into our work and also just see our experiences really being reflected in our students' experiences as well is really powerful.

CHRISTINA Yeah. And we support students right up from they're in their first course or their first semester at the Extension
BURKHARDT: School, all the way up through students that may have already completed a graduate certificate, for instance, and now they're interested in the degree program. So our office is positioned to help those students figure out, is there a degree program that aligns with their academic and career goals, and then what sorts of courses or things you need to complete in order to become eligible for admission to that degree program.

So we work with a lot of different students from their first course, all the way up through-- they've already completed a certificate. So we're here to help map out what your next steps are going to be if you want to pursue admission to a degree program.

CHRIS DAVIS: Great. That's a great segue into something else foundational that I think it's worth talking about here. You both alluded to it a little bit. But our "earn your way in" admissions model is somewhat unique. Can you guys talk a little bit about that?

And for the nomenclature, too, I think it's a good opportunity to put up front that we do have students who are individual course takers. They are taking courses for graduate certificate programs. Some of them already have the plan in mind to apply to a degree program once they're eligible.

So we do have different buckets of students, and there's a continuum. There are folks who are course takers who stack a certificate into a degree at some point. And there are also students who are going to be just course takers, and that's fine. But can you guys talk a little bit about the earn-your-way-in admissions process, what it is, how it benefits students?

JULIE LONERGAN: Yeah. So I would start with the big picture of what we call "earn your way in" admission, which is that fundamentally, the primary thing that we're looking for in order for you to get admitted to the program is, what's your performance here at Harvard, how are you doing here in your Harvard courses.

And so "earn your way in" is a philosophy that follows that. We don't need standardized test scores. That's not going to tell us something about what you'll bring to the classroom here. We're not looking at your prior transcripts from other schools to see what your GPA is because, ultimately, that's not something that really affects how you're doing here.

When you're coming to Harvard, you're starting here. You're getting access to our professors and your classmates. And you're putting in a lot of effort into that study. And so that's what we're focusing on in the admissions process as well.

CHRISTINA BURKHARDT: And what I love about our structure of our programs is that as an admissions office, we're charged with identifying who the students are that are going to be successful in our degree programs. And what better way to measure your future success, is by seeing how you're doing in our courses?

And I love that we look at degree candidates or prospective degree candidates from the lens of, what are your capabilities right now? You may have attended a college, a number of colleges in the past, a number of years ago. And we'd rather base our admission decision on your current capabilities, what you're going to be bringing to our classroom, and how you're going to be performing in our degree programs.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's excellent. Yes. And if I -- hopefully, I can paraphrase this correctly but I think the kernel of that that, hopefully, people take away from is that for our global adult learner population -- and it also makes sense to mention that we don't have a single kind of demographic profile. Our students can sometimes be younger or older than that. The median age of our students is in the early to mid 30s. That can shift a little bit.

But for our global adult learner, this philosophy is meant to indicate that your prior academic performance, which, as Julie, you mentioned, it may have been years ago and under very different circumstances, is less important to your success as a student now than how you can perform and how you can develop in the courses that you are taking with us here and today. Is that correct?

JULIE LONERGAN: Yeah, absolutely, that both our office and the Extension School as a whole, we see our place within the university as opening the doors of the libraries of the classrooms, of professors' office hours, and welcoming you from wherever you are in the world, wherever you are in your career or your life, welcoming you into that. And so exactly as Chris said, we're focusing on meeting you where you are right now and figuring out how we can work with you to get you towards where you want to be here at Harvard.

CHRIS DAVIS: Let's jump ahead a little bit and say we have a student who's taken a course or two. They are working towards eligibility to apply to a degree program. Can you guys talk a little bit about what the relationship then becomes between their advisor, one of the members of your team -- when you start to work with a student, what a student can hope to expect out of that partnership and building to the actual application itself? If you guys could talk a little bit about what that entire journey is like for a student.

CHRISTINA BURKHARDT: Absolutely. So the journey is going to look a little bit different for each student because they come in with a different set of expectations or needs. But our office really is here to share the information needed to plan for admission to a degree program.

So we will support students in selecting courses that will qualify them for admission, narrowing down which degree program best aligns with their academic and career goals, all the way through planning out the specific details of their application, what transcripts will be required to complete it, do you meet our fundamental eligibility criteria, and things of that regard. So we're really there to make sure that any student that contacts our office, that asks us for support has the full picture of what it will be like to pursue admission, the steps they need to take to successfully pursue admission, and then answering any questions they have along the way about courses or planning their degree program.

We support students up through the point of admission. So from your first course, you're just getting acclimated to the Extension School. You're able to schedule appointments with us or attend our drop-in virtual office hours or webinars that we hold. And then all the way up through the point of admission, you can schedule one-on-one appointments with us or connect with us in other ways. But we're there to support you to make sure that there is no mystery behind our admission process.

JULIE LONERGAN: Yeah, to add to what Christina's saying, that there's no mystery there. There's a lot of information in the education world that is not immediately accessible. And so what we can do on our team is break down those pieces for you into things that make sense in your world and in your terms. And as Christina said, we'll really talk to you one-on-one about, all right, here's what your experience has been prior to coming to Extension. What does that mean in terms of what you need to do here and as you're working towards admission?

CHRISTINA BURKHARDT: And I think, Julie, what you just said made a lot of sense because we also are there to support students that may have not been enrolled in school for a while. So that terminology they might have been accustomed to at a prior institution might be very different here as well and changes over time. So we're there to make sure that even if you've been away from school for a while, we can still translate the information to you in a way that you feel like you understand what you need to do to pursue admission here.

CHRIS DAVIS: Am I correct in assuming that that's where, also, the advising component comes into? Because I think, as you both have alluded to, I mean, there are certain mechanics, certainly, in the application process. And also, setting them up for success beyond the application, the admissions process itself, is that a part of how you guys interact with students and what you hope students get out of the relationship?

CHRISTINA BURKHARDT: Yeah, so if we're thinking about how we start an advising relationship with a student, any of our advisors, when we get ready for an appointment and we're meeting a student for the first time, the first thing that we try to do is really understand their academic and career background because they're coming from a lot of different places, both in time and in space in the sphere of education. And they're coming to us to earn a degree.

And so we want to help understand what it is they're going to need to do to pursue admission. So even things like understanding what kind of prior degrees you already have is important information for us so that we can make sure that you're eligible for our programs, that you know what kind of transcripts, for instance, that we're going to require to complete your application. So we want to make sure that we tailor our recommendations and our advice to you based on the specific circumstances that will ultimately be surrounding your future application for admission.

JULIE LONERGAN: I will also add that the advisors themselves on our team are truly the heart of our office. The work that they do in terms of interacting with students, whether it's email, appointments, or our regular drop-in virtual office hours, that face-to-face interaction is something that we are really proud of. We've gathered so much knowledge and experience on our team. And being able to share that amongst ourselves and find new and even better ways to translate that to our students is really the best part of our work.

So getting to know someone individually, again, even if it's just, we're sending a few emails back and forth, we're still having the chance to get to know that student and learning about where they want to go. So we know that they need to take an economics course. And so what does that mean for them? What does it mean to be in an economics course? Is this the first time they've studied the subject? Do they already have a strong background in it?

Or if you're looking at a field where it's a new pathway, you're switching careers, you're doing something for personal interest, again, our advisors have-- we have experience with that ourselves. And we also have experience from talking to other students in the same situation.

And so being able to come in and develop that relationship with you, where we're both understanding exactly where you are or exactly where you want to be at Extension, working together, we are going to take away those pieces of the conversation that we can then translate -- as we were saying before, translate into the education world and give you, based on our own experiences working with thousands of students, give you this really clear path forward.

CHRISTINA And I think when you think about the name of our office, we're the Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions. So
BURKHARDT: yes, there are certain times of the year when our applications are due that we are transactionally processing applications. But the vast majority of our time and effort is really spent at that predegree advising piece, whether it's helping you pick your courses, decide on a degree program, determining, do you start off with one course or two? Do you take a course outside of your comfort zone? Or are you looking for a course that's going to meet a very specific goal that you're hoping to set?

And so we have those conversations with students year-round. And so we really do develop those relationships. Students can schedule regular appointments with one particular advisor, if they'd like, or with anybody on our team.

But we do a whole lot more than just talking about what it means to apply for admission. For our degree programs, they require two or three courses, typically, for admission if you're applying with one of our standard pathways. And so that means that a student, if they are one of our typical students, they're taking maybe one course a term is pretty common -- one or two.

So they're in the predegree phase for a number of terms, usually, before they're ending up applying for admission. So we're there to support them through that entire predegree stage until they get to that receipt of an admission decision letter, and they're admitted to the degree program.

JULIE
LONERGAN: Our advisors as people, one of the things that you'll really find when working with us are-- there are two words that we hear over and over again from our students in terms of feedback, is that our advisors are welcoming and enthusiastic. And what more could you want right when you're getting started on something that is probably pretty nerve-racking for you?

So don't think of advisors as being this, we're kind of representatives of the whole world of Harvard, and you have to be ready to talk to us. Nope. We're there for you. We're there with you.

CHRISTINA
BURKHARDT: And we are also not an elusive or mysterious admissions committee that sits around a table and makes admission decisions. We are also the ones reading your applications and getting to know you before you apply and then being really excited when we see your application come through our system because we've developed relationships with you. And then we are the ones that are reading your applications. So our advisors are so approachable and friendly and welcoming. And they truly love what they do and love the support that our office provides students.

And so we're ultimately the ones, too, that are going to be processing your applications. There's no mysterious committee or anything like that. It's truly just coming through our office. The office that has supported you right from the get-go is the one that's going to be hopefully giving you that admission decision and then connecting you with your academic advising office for moving forward.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you guys. I want to leave with -- I'm sure there are some frequently asked questions that pop up a lot. If you guys could talk about maybe one, clear up a misconception, or something that students are just curious about and you see a pattern.

CHRISTINA
BURKHARDT: We talked about this a little bit earlier. But students can first be connected with our office when they're in their first course. Or sometimes they come out to our office after having completed a number of courses.

And so one of the things that we really try to encourage students to think about is pursuing admission when you are first reaching that eligibility to do so because there are so many benefits that come available to you as an admitted degree candidate, like financial aid, if that's applicable to you, access to your academic advisor, who helps you plan the rest of your courses for your degree, access to a lot of other helpful Harvard resources and support.

And so we also like to make sure that students meet the criteria for admission as early as they can so that they have the confidence that the courses that they are pursuing here are going to be able to be used towards a future degree here. We often find that students will start connecting with us in their first couple courses if they're confident that they want to start with the degree program.

But we also sometimes start working with students who completed a graduate certificate and then fell in love with the field and want to keep going towards a degree. So we tend to recommend, and it obviously is going to depend on each individual student's circumstances, that we tend to encourage students to apply or pursue admission earlier in the process just so they have access to all of those other resources to help them towards their degree completion.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, that certainly makes sense to emphasize because getting the most out of your experience with us as an admitted degree candidate -- there are certain perks and benefits. You mentioned a couple of them, Christina. I'll also add -- I'll put in a plug for some other things, too, just to keep it on people's radar too.

I mean, once you're an admitted degree candidate, you can benefit from the Office of Career Services, their one-on-one career advising. There are certainly additional physical resources available if you're a local student in terms of museums and athletic facilities, other perks.

The Harvard Innovation Labs is a wonderful world-class facility that many of our students have benefited from. Whether you're in the initial planning stages for a business or a venture or further along, that's something that can certainly benefit you. The Faculty Aide Program, the opportunity to be paid for working with a faculty member outside of your courses on research that they're doing, depending on whether you're interested in having work published at some point or you're looking to a terminal degree or a PhD, a doctoral program. That can certainly be a benefit.

So yeah, I think it's worth mentioning these things because they are wonderful world-class benefits. And certainly, we want students to be able to take advantage of them as early as possible when they're eligible.

Well, in closing, I want to thank both of you, Julie and Christina. Thank you so much for being here. The Office of Predegree Advising & Admissions, I think, is such an integral part of the student experience here at Harvard Extension School.

As you guys mentioned, it isn't just a committee that sits there beyond the reach of students. You are very much developing one-on-one relationships with students, advising them, working with them. And so it's great to have the opportunity to chat with you both today.

JULIE LONERGAN: Thank you so much, Chris. And I really hope that anyone listening, no matter where you are, reach out to our office. Come talk to us. We'd love to meet you.

CHRISTINA Absolutely.

BURKHARDT:

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much. Thank you again.

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