

Transcript: Changing Higher Ed Podcast 155 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Kevin Grubb

Tailoring Student Services to Create Career-Ready Graduates

Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton

Thank you, David.

Our guest today is Kevin Grubb, associate vice provost for career and professional development at Villanova University. Kevin is an internationally recognized expert on career services delivery in higher education. His expertise focuses on community-driven approaches to career education—a High Tech High Touch approach—and prioritizes equitable access to career services, especially for those historically excluded from higher education. Kevin is driving important changes at Villanova that enhance college to career success. He joins us today to talk about the holistic approach Villanova is taking that creates career- and job-ready graduates. Kevin, welcome to the program.

Kevin Grubb 01:20

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here to talk with you.

Drumm McNaughton 01:24

As am I to have you here. We're going to have a great conversation about the college-to-career transition and some of the great things you guys are doing at Villanova. But

before we get into that, please let our guests know a little bit about your background. How did you get here, and how did you become passionate about this subject now?

Kevin Grubb 01:42

Yes, thank you. I've certainly been interested in the success of individuals and making sure they have a life that is meaningful to them. It has been interesting to me since my graduate school days. I wound up working in career services in higher education while I was in graduate school and was fortunate enough to keep doing that as my first full-time role. I have been able to evolve in this profession ever since.

I am currently the associate vice provost for career and professional development at Villanova University, a position I've held for many years. I'm honored to do it at an institution that genuinely cares about developing people holistically and helping them succeed in their careers. It has been a wonderful ride, and the career and professional development world is ever-complex and evolving. No two days are the same – it makes my job very, very fun.

Drumm McNaughton 02:40

Well, it certainly sounds like you enjoy what you're doing, and that's great, especially since you're wearing the VU shirt you've got on today. I'm guessing those are Villanova's colors?

Kevin Grubb 02:52

Yes, you are correct. We are darker navy blue, a little bit of a lighter Baby Blue, and white. I'm sure the names for these colors are much more complex than what I'm saying. Nevertheless, I am wearing Villanova colors today, and I am proud to represent it.

Drumm McNaughton 03:09

Thank you. We're going to talk about the college-to-career transition. Nowadays, there is so much negative perception about the lack of value in a college education. For example, students have difficulty finding a job after graduation. Although, new numbers recently came out and are much better than they used to be. Even so, there are things

colleges need to do. Before we get into those, what is it about Villanova that makes it and the work you guys do so special when it comes to graduating job-ready students?

Kevin Grubb 03:51

There are two primary components to it. The first is that career and professional development is embedded into the student experience. It's not something that students necessarily have to wait to get or find out about on their own. There's a culture of career preparedness and career readiness here. We have a curriculum that's designed and required for students to enroll in at some of our schools and colleges to make sure they are doing the things they need to do at developmentally appropriate times so they can be ready for opportunities as they come. So it's that culture and the embeddedness of what we do that help our students be prepared. Of course, we just built a platform. They jump and launch themselves. It's them doing the work, not us. But we ensure the resources and foundation are strong enough for them.

The second is keeping a robust network in place that can help inform us on how to make connections for students and keep the curriculum relevant when thinking about workforce trends. A lot of that is due to the incredible passion of the alum community at Villanova, with whom we keep active relationships and cultivate quite a bit. That's intentional. They're also very passionate people who care a lot about the institution. So, getting the desired effect from our network that we curate, staying involved, and, again, benefiting from the passion of our community are what make it possible. It's the culture of readiness, the connectivity, and our network that come together to make that happen.

Drumm McNaughton 05:35

Well, this is a fabulous thing that you guys are doing. But it wasn't always this way. The purpose of higher education has evolved from just helping train good citizens to including a more vocational experience. As we said before, it's not an either/or situation.

Kevin Grubb 05:57

Yes, we must avoid finding ourselves in a false dichotomy conversation of it's either about creating good citizenship and educated societies or providing vocational

programs and preparing people for the workforce. We are complex beings who are more than just being boiled down to either of these two things. Institutionally, we do much more than provide one or the other.

In some of the data, we see that more students of all ages and backgrounds think of education as a way to get a better job, especially since the Great Recession. The perception of the importance of the return on investment for education has continued to increase. But it's also important to consider making sure we leave the world a better place than where we found it.

Working at Villanova makes it pretty easy to keep those things together because of the foundation of our university's mission. So aligning this mission and rooting it in the Augustinian's mission and values keep these two things together and prevent us from seeing them as opposing forces.

Drumm McNaughton 07:10

What I'm hearing you say is that you're not only aligned with the institution's mission, but you're also providing a vocational value to prepare students to be both good citizens and good employees. Do I have that right?

Kevin Grubb 07:30

We're definitely thinking about both. It's indicative of how we measure the impact of the experience at the university. You can see data on outcomes on the university website, specifically career outcomes. There are many more internal metrics and ways we measure how we are doing. Are we living the mission the way we have written it? Are students feeling the impact of that? Do they feel like they have opportunities to advance the common good here? Do they feel prepared for their career and life after they finish? We're actively measuring and monitoring these things to ensure we are held accountable to our mission and the university's desire to be that place.

Drumm McNaughton 08:20

How do you measure these kinds of things? That's an interesting point. Of course, we all know that old saying, "You get what you measure."

Kevin Grubb 08:30

... or what's measured improves. Sometimes. Hopefully. So these are things that we're tracking on a sort of interim basis throughout the student experience. We provide surveys that students take upon completing their time here, where we ask about the overall impact of these things. We break it down by different categories of experiences and different kinds of people to see if the impact is the same across groups. If it's not, what's happening? Is the difference statistically significant? What does that mean? What do we need to be doing differently to make it happen?

There are several surveys that we continue to deploy and are fortunate to have high response rates. We have an institutional commitment to make sure we're doing these things right. So when we report, we have confidence in the numbers we're sharing, both externally and the numbers we're tracking internally, to make it clear to us how we are doing and where we can improve.

Drumm McNaughton 09:26

If I back this up, you are intentionally designing the student experience by having specific metrics in mind that you want to measure. Is that correct?

Kevin Grubb 09:45

That is correct. On our website, we have University Learning Goals that we measure every year to see how we're doing on making sure students learn those things. Our Office of Institutional Effectiveness does a fantastic job tracking those.

The teams I oversee measure more specific career outcomes to understand what's happening. Within even that survey, we are not simply asking, Do you have a job? What is your salary? Where are you? We certainly ask those questions, but we also ask other questions. For example, how successful do you feel in your first destination? Is this going to help you achieve your goals? Did your Villanova experience prepare you for your career and life? How was the professional development that we provided to you?

We also ask open-ended questions to find out more. What can we be doing differently, if anything? So the definition of success to us is broad. Success is defined differently

for each person and how they live their life. Those kinds of metrics matter to us very much.

Drumm McNaughton 10:57

Coming back to you get what you measure, you've designed this experience intentionally. So let's get into some of those things that you do. My sense is that this is going to start with recruitment or even before recruitment.

Kevin Grubb 11:15

We have a lot of connectivity between my role and the teams I oversee—including our enrollment management team and, specifically, our communication and admissions teams—to make sure everyone is informed of what is happening at the university, what kinds of career experiences people are having, and what happens when people graduate.

I was just with our admissions team. They had a retreat, and they had me and a colleague of mine present on career outcomes and experiences and some of the initiatives we've been working on. That way, they can speak to it with prospective students and families, knowing how important these questions are to them. So there's a tight communication loop out of the gate with these folks as they enter. We have a lot of materials we've produced that are transparent in terms of the data on outcomes.

I mentioned we have a website for this. I'll throw it out there for folks; it's outcomes.villanova.edu. That website has all of our career outcomes information for the past five years that's sortable and searchable. You can see what the outcomes were like by college and by major. You can even click further into our website from a link to find specific employer names and locations where our graduates have gone. This, therefore, becomes a way for prospective students and families to understand what some of the common pathways from Villanova are and that we might be carving new ones with newer students. So it's very much a part of the recruitment experience as well.

Drumm McNaughton 12:48

All this data you gather from alums, graduating and post-graduation, goes into this, does it not?

Kevin Grubb 12:57

Absolutely. All of this connects back to the experience of our admissions team and the prospective students and their families to ensure we're answering their questions and that they feel as informed as possible on what they might expect as an outcome when they decide to attend Villanova.

Drumm McNaughton 13:16

Your marketing team must love you now that you're gathering all the data they need for brand positioning and all these things. They must love you.

Kevin Grubb 13:26

I hope they do. As I'm sure some of them will be listening to this, they are an incredible team who challenges my thinking, too, so we create the best materials that support who Villanova is and the kinds of folks we hope will consider Villanova as their place to attend university. So, again, they're wonderful, too. If they love me, then I have to love them right back. No question.

Drumm McNaughton 13:52

I love it. No pun intended, of course. Before we get into some of the things you do in the program, the other piece is retention, helping students stay by giving them a roadmap for success. I imagine that's very important as well.

Kevin Grubb 14:15

Absolutely. As I mentioned, we see [Career Education and Professional Development](#) as part of the student experience. We recognize that by students feeling like they are on a path, can see themselves on a path, or are finding a path that feels meaningful to them, it's going to help them feel more motivated and feel that there's a reason they're here, more so than the one class they attend, or the one lunch they have, or the one meeting they go to. It's all tied to something more significant in the arc of their life.

By the way, each of those experiences I mentioned is important. Lunches are important. Classes are important. Meetings are important. But, again, they're all connected to this larger arc in their life and have a purpose. It's certainly a part of their well-being—how they feel successful and motivated. That is all part of the Villanova experience.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that our faculty do an incredible job of helping that arc continue. It's not just the career offices that do these things. It's part of the overall culture of the institution. So how we help students think deeply about their purpose allows them to feel like they're here for a reason and are ready to stay for that reason.

Drumm McNaughton 15:30

You build in these pieces throughout an entire program, and the program's design has to be a team effort and approached holistically.

Kevin Grubb 15:47

Yes, it is a huge team effort. The idea is that the sum is greater than the whole of its parts. The more we work in unison, the better and more impactful the experiences are for students. So it absolutely is a team effort of not only the career and professional development teams, but our faculty, staff, colleagues, and other departments on campus to whom students ask career questions.

In our [Career Center](#), we just hosted a presentation on the outcomes of Villanova students to student life division leaders who do incredible work with our students and receive lots of questions during all hours of the day about this. We wanted to make sure we were providing them with the information that might inform them while also hearing from them. We asked them what they were hearing from students. What could we be doing better from your perspective? How can we help if you have questions? So we made sure that the relationship is tight. Of course, fellow students help each other. There's a great ecosystem of peer learning in peer sharing. The students, our alums, and even our parents and families get involved at the university. They do a lot to support us. So, yes, it is very much a team effort to make sure we are serving our students at the scale and with the level of personalization they hope to experience.

Drumm McNaughton 17:06

Give me an example of how you build these career skills into the educational experience (i.e., in the classroom with a student).

Kevin Grubb 17:18

In some of our schools and colleges, there is a required career and professional development class. When we have those experiences, we design things developmentally appropriate from start to finish. For instance, in the College of Engineering, every first-year student writes a resume. They all have some document that was probably used for their college application. It might have been a resume. They might have worked before at a place of employment. It might have been a list of all the activities they were involved in or their previous leadership positions. Whatever it is, we want them to translate that document into a new version now that they're at Villanova as they think about research opportunities they might apply for with faculty on campus or elsewhere, part-time jobs, or eventually internships.

So we provide some education on how to write a resume and what it is. Then they are individually reviewed by someone in our office in the first year to strengthen them so they feel more ready for an employer. That's a foundational step. Performing a resume review is not just one action because it also opens up a conversation. What did you do with this experience? What skills did you gain? What did you like about that? What didn't you like about that? This leads to a larger conversation where we get to know the person, what's important to them, and what they want to do next. It opens up more of a relationship with them that helps us build their purpose long-term.

Drumm McNaughton 18:48

It sounds like it's a prep for interviewing.

Kevin Grubb 18:51

Anytime we're talking about a resume, there is preparation, whether it is for an interview that's coming up or not for one of those conversations from employment-led booking. Speaking of interviewing, I'll share another example from our business school. They have a required class for every sophomore, and one of the things they require students to do in that class is complete a pre-recorded asynchronous interview.

Many employers have moved their interview model to some version of an asynchronous process, where it might be the first-round interview or another. The student logs into a system that pops up a question, and they answer it with their webcam and microphone. When the interview is done, the employer can watch the recording anytime.

So we have students practice that style of interview in that class. Then they receive feedback from their instructor on what happened during the interview, what was good, and what could be strengthened, in addition to some education. Usually, an employer talks about what they're looking for on the other side of those asynchronous video interviews. So, again, we're bringing in the ecosystem of people. We're giving them tools and knowledge to succeed in the process, as well as some questions that might help them think about themselves in a new way,

Drumm McNaughton 20:05

You're also teaching them how to network, are you not?

Kevin Grubb 20:09

Absolutely. Of course, some of those experiences I mentioned wind up being networking opportunities. But we have so many other opportunities for students to connect with employers, alums, and people within the industries they want to be in. What we want to accomplish with those kinds of environments is teach them about what networking gives in a low-stress environment, where the job or internship isn't on the line, and give them some practice on how to do it.

Even folks out of school or adults with many years of experience can feel uncomfortable in networking situations. Anyone getting that kind of support and education on how to network is usually very beneficial. We think of all of these things intentionally. How can we ensure that the next time the students out there have those conversations, they know what to do better than before?

Drumm McNaughton 21:05

And the other thing you do when building the curriculum and these types of programs is integrate internships into them. We had a great conversation about that. Are internships required for the majority of the programs there at Villanova?

Kevin Grubb 21:28

[Internships](#) are not required for the majority of the programs, but we have an incredibly high rate of student internship participation. By the time students can apply for an internship, we have talked a lot about the value of such an experience, and, frankly, more and more students enroll in school knowing they should be looking for an internship and are very savvy about it.

Once upon a time, internships were nice to have and provided a competitive advantage. Now they are, in many cases, the entry-level job in a profession.

Drumm McNaughton 22:03

What's the percentage of students at Villanova that go through internships? Is it 75%? 80%? More or less?

Kevin Grubb 22:11

For those looking for an internship, somewhere between 91% and 94% do at least one. And about half do two or more. So it is quite high. We know it's important. We know it's where they gain practical experience, make connections, and learn that experiential learning matters a lot. So the rate of participation and internships is extremely high here.

Drumm McNaughton 22:43

I've not heard one that high before. Commendations for that! So here's an interesting one. In the past, students generally did not have paid internships. I know the trend is moving toward there being more paid internships. What's the percentage of paid internships that students have there?

Kevin Grubb 23:07

That is a great question, and I am going to answer it by telling you something else. Different industries have different rates of paid and unpaid internships. It depends on

the type of industry. The student is entering the likelihood with which they would be in a paid or unpaid experience.

I should clarify that at the university, we typically encourage employers to pay their interns because they are usually doing work that has value. They are advancing the business or organization. It is a tricky subject. You will also get a better application pool when you pay your interns. So from an equity perspective and from a volume of applicant perspective, it's much better to pay. That said, we recognize that every organization may not be in a space where they can. So when we advise an employer or a student about entering an unpaid internship, what we really want to talk about is who's primarily benefiting from this experience. It is hopefully the student who does. For the student, it's important for them to learn something from this experience and to walk away with added value to their application for whatever comes afterward.

Drumm McNaughton 24:23

This goes onto that resume that you started in your freshman year.

Kevin Grubb

Exactly.

Drumm McNaughton

I'm curious. Do you train people or help them understand the various skills they're gaining through their courses and internships?

Kevin Grubb 24:39

Yes. In an environment where more organizations are thinking about skills-based hiring, that is very important for us to be mindful of. As students reflect on their learning, pulling out and articulating those skills is important. One of the ways we do that most frequently is when a student talks with us about the type of opportunity they might want to pursue. We'll analyze that job description with them and ask, "What are the skills that this position most likely needs to succeed?" That could come from the qualification section or from the description of what that person is expected to do.

Then we break it down. So where might you have learned those skills? It could be from courses and group projects. It could be from an internship. It could be from a research experience. It could be that you were engaging in intercultural communication while studying abroad. So, with the student, we dissect that and put it into a context that might be relevant to them. That way, they know how to highlight those things to make it shine. So we're absolutely talking about that.

We have a subscription to LinkedIn Learning at the university for undergraduate and graduate students. So if there are skills students feel they need to learn or the employer is now saying they're using this coding language, students can go onto LinkedIn Learning and hopefully upskill quite quickly at no cost. That way, they'll become an even more competitive applicant for that opportunity.

Drumm McNaughton 26:10

To sum it up, it's a holistic approach to ensuring students are good citizens when they graduate and have job skills.

Kevin Grubb 26:25

It's a both/and type of situation. It's ensuring they feel ready to succeed in the environments they will enter. And, also, again, to that Augustinian Catholic mission, that they are contributing to the common good and are holistically supported. We look at the development of the whole person.

Drumm McNaughton 26:44

If you had one thing you could change about your program to make it better, what would it be?

Kevin Grubb 26:53

That is a great question. I'd love to see a great way for us to continue cultivating mentoring relationships among students and alums. We have systems and supports to do those things, and when we strike the right chord and find the right match, that kind of relationship can be transformative. It requires both parties to be ready to commit to something significant. But it does make a big impact when we can have people learn both ways. The mentor can help the mentee feel guided in some way. But also the

mentee can teach the mentor something, too. So, I want to elevate that and have more people participate in that kind of enriching relationship.

Drumm McNaughton 27:39

There's one thing I'd like to add, if I may interject. I recently interviewed [Madeline Atkins](#) from Lucy Cavendish College at the University of Cambridge. They have upped their recruiting to 90% from public institutions, which is amazing for a place like Cambridge. One of the things they do, which may be of interest to you guys, is they have their orientation week where students come, but then for the folks who are coming in that need it, they have another week ahead of that to help with belonging. It helps to make sure students are ready for the college-level experience. It's a fascinating way of doing things.

I thought about it from the US perspective. Yes, you have to invest more time into that student. But it helps them feel like they truly belong here. That's especially important for first-gen students. I mean, I'm sure the stories we could tell about this are just amazing. But it may be something that helps. You could start to introduce these concepts about the resume and networking before they even get into classes so that everything can be reinforced and focus more on the learning and the student. I don't know if that would work or not.

Kevin Grubb 29:24

I'd love to comment on that if you wouldn't mind. I have two thoughts on that. The first is something you just mentioned right at the end, essentially, the idea of taking away the stress of the career part so you can focus on learning. That is very important, too, and something I love to emphasize as much as I can, especially with our faculty partners getting away from that either/or type of thinking and getting into the both/and mindset.

I do not want the career learning experience to be a distraction from what they're learning in the academic environment. I also recognize how significantly de-stressing it can be for students to wonder if they're going in the right direction and if things are lining up in a way that will help them feel like they succeeded when they finish. Certainly, the same can be said for first-gen who wonder if they'll have enough

potential income or status or if they'll feel like it was worth it to make that sacrifice for this experience. So it's important to remember that this doesn't have to come at the sacrifice of the learning experiences. It can help relieve stress that might make the learning work. They might be able to engage more and have more fun with it because they feel like this is covered. Knowing they're on a path and have support can feel good.

The second thing about starting this before they even get to classes is that I would be very sensitive to that. As I mentioned, this generation of students is very motivated to find practical experience. They know about internships. They know the importance of these things holistically and at large. And it's also okay if they don't know it all. It's also okay if you just have fun.

Drumm McNaughton 31:02

Fun? College, fun? Come on! What a concept.

Kevin Grubb 31:06

Have fun. Even that summer after your first year, if you don't have an internship, and most students don't, that's okay. Have fun. So we're also trying to take some of the pressure off of the situation. If we introduce some of these things too fast and too soon, it does make students feel like, "Oh, no. I'm already behind." So that's something that we also want to address. We want to take some of the heat off so they can enjoy the experience and their lives.

Drumm McNaughton 31:33

Sure. That makes perfect sense. Well, we are at the end of our time, which doesn't surprise me. But please, Kevin, share with us for presidents and boards three key takeaways about building a program like this.

Kevin Grubb 31:52

For each institution, your culture is going to be slightly different. So the first one is to think about what's already working in your culture. Think about where this might already have fertile ground to grow and fit it inside your institution's culture. If you're thinking about embedding something like this, again, think about where it has the

ground to grow because that will be important for you to feel like you're making progress and having success in this specific context.

The second is to recognize the importance of this subject to students. It doesn't have to be an either/or, and feeling strongly supported in this area can also elevate their curiosity and academic learning. Making sure this is a part of the experience can help take everything to the next level. When students feel supported, they feel like there's more room for curiosity.

The third is to recognize your external partners and community. Listen to them. A lot has shifted about what is expected of students for them to get a great job or if they lead in with a great graduate program or professional school after graduation. Knowing those expectations will help you build something into the experience that will be timed right and developmentally done right, so students don't wind up missing something or getting to an interest too late in the process. That's because some of these pipelines start earlier now. So getting that external perspective on things you might build into the program or do is important.

Drumm McNaughton 33:31

Those are three great takeaways. Thank you, Kevin. What's next for you? What's next for Villanova?

Kevin Grubb 33:38

We have some exciting things coming up in our area. We have a university strategic plan that has been underway for a while. A lot is happening on that front, specifically around research infrastructure; our diversity, equity, and inclusion goals; and career and professional development as part of the strategic plan. So there's a lot we're working on in those areas.

One thing I'm excited about getting to do more of in the near future is providing even more opportunities for education around financial wellness for students and recognizing the significance of that in knowing how to manage money. It's really, really important for their long-term life and career to be able to do that well. So that's something that I'm excited to do. We're starting to dive into that more. So stay tuned.

Drumm McNaughton 34:26

That sounds great. Well, Kevin, thank you so much for being on the show. I really enjoyed our conversation. I look forward to chatting with you in the future.

Kevin Grubb 34:34

Take care. You too.

Drumm McNaughton 34:38

Thanks for listening today. I want to give a special thank you to Kevin Grubb for sharing his thoughts on how to create career- and job-ready graduates.

Our next guest is Jeff Schauer, author of the recently released book *Inside The Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship*. Liberal education has been called into question in today's push for STEM graduates, despite what employers say they want from graduates (i.e., AAC&U's new study, which found that what they want is the ability to work in teams, think critically, and analyze and interpret data. There's a case to be made for liberal education, and Jeff will join us to talk about that and more to help presidents and provost graduate career- and job-ready graduates.

35:30

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