

Evan Schneider:

Hey Jason, how are you today?

Jason Klugman:

I'm doing well, Evan. How are you?

Evan Schneider:

Good. Thanks so much for agreeing to come on our show.

Jason Klugman:

Absolutely. My pleasure.

Evan Schneider:

So a lot of your research focuses on college access and teaching and work through PUPP. What do you see as some of the biggest barriers to college access and what approach to intervention do you suggest?

Jason Klugman:

That's a great place to start the conversation. So we see large disparities in the information that is available to students, depending on where they're coming from. So students whose parents went to college, who are living in middle-class and upper-middle-class neighborhoods and going to those schools have great guidance around the college admissions process. They have access to test prep and tutoring and sometimes their families will hire a private counselor to help them through the process. They'll take them on a road trip to see colleges and universities and really design a whole college admissions search process as a family unit.

Jason Klugman:

So for low income students and for students who are the first in their family to aspire to go to college, most of those things are missing. They're typically in schools that lack a lot of the resources around sharing information about the college admissions process, about opportunities. They have fewer opportunities for test preparation. More often we see that students from low income backgrounds don't have the chance to go visit colleges or universities. All of that put together, makes the process really challenging, and it's challenging anyway.

Jason Klugman:

I mean, applying to college is a really stressful process. And so if you have a family that is working you through it, that's wonderful. That also leads to its own amount of stress in terms of families guiding you instead of allowing you to take the process off for yourself. But then if you're doing it all by yourself and you don't have any encouragement from family members or for from a teacher or a counselor, that makes it really, really hard.

Jason Klugman:

What we do at PUPP, which is our comprehensive college preparation program that Princeton runs, in collaboration with five local high schools in the Trenton-Princeton area is we work with students starting at the end of their ninth grade year. We do a really comprehensive six and a half weeks summer

Institute for three years, where we do all sorts of academic engagement. So courses in writing, math, literature, art, science. We have a whole college prep track so the students can do a session their first summer on personal development and think about what their interests are and what their personal strengths are and what their values are. And that starts to lead into that conversation about college.

Jason Klugman:

The second summer of PUPP, we do really targeted test preparation around the ACT, and that continues throughout junior year. And then we do college tours. The final summer of PUPP includes college Admissions 101 class, and so that walks the students through the college admissions process. We, of course, bring parents in along the way and help make sure that they're aware of the whole range and variation of possibilities in terms of college. What we need, of course, from parents when we're looking at financial aid applications and what the family can afford is really important.

Jason Klugman:

And so we worked through all of that in order to break down some of those barriers. Most of our families don't realize that there are some phenomenal colleges in the country that meet 100% of student financial need. And that's a huge, huge win. But that's a small percentage of colleges. So we find ourselves in a really competitive space. Typically it's only the top colleges and maybe some of the top 100 small liberal arts and national universities in the country that meet 100% or close to 100% of student financial need.

Jason Klugman:

And then the rest of the schools, it's a huge range of variation. So there are a lot of schools that have gone to instant decision days and really reducing the barriers. So they're not very competitive or not very selective. So schools that admit 50 to 75% of students that apply, And of course open-access institutions as well. But most of those places don't have the kind of financial resources to make it possible for a low income or first generation college student to really be successful as an undergraduate. So we're working through it from all sides of the problem.

Jason Klugman:

The one other thing that I would say in terms of intervention is really, I guess there's a couple of spaces to start. There's the intervention on the school side. So thinking about having more counselors available in school settings so that students can get information that is accurate and inspiring and supportive about the application process. Some schools have intervened by saying, "Let's just apply to lots and lots of schools and be really unstrategic and apply to 100 schools and it's all about the admissions and get as many scholarships as you can."

Jason Klugman:

And actually you can't get more than the cost of attendance in scholarship funds every year. So when you hear about the student who got \$4 million in scholarships, they can only go to one school. And so they can't actually use the \$4 million. There's only the cost of attendance.

Jason Klugman:

Granted, cost of attendance at a top expensive private institution is over \$300,000 4 years. So that there are some resources that we need, but we need to be strategic about that. So on the school side, having

better counseling available, more access to rigorous high school curriculum is important, more access to resources generally. That's a larger K-12 education issue. And then on the college side, I think colleges can continue to work to partner with schools to help provide some of that support and service. That's what I'm really proud of being able to do at Princeton.

Evan Schneider:

So if there are people listening who would be interested in learning more about PUPP, either younger junior high age kids or something, thinking about college access or a parent or something like that, is there a website you would point them to? And can you just very briefly kind of maybe go through what your process is for selecting the people who go through your program?

Jason Klugman:

Sure. Our program is very local, so that's the one thing I will say. Princeton University partners with five local school districts, so Trenton, Ewing, Lawrence, one high school in Hamilton, Knottingham High School, and Princeton High School. Those are our core partners. Our website's really easy, PUPP.Princeton.edu and so that's P-U-P-P dot Princeton dot edu. And that has information about our program and our process.

Jason Klugman:

There's also a really highly resourced and research evaluation of PUPP and a logic model that folks can look at. So our logic model is published so that any community, anywhere, that wants to start a similar college-access initiative can kind of take the lessons that we've learned. And we've made a lot of mistakes over the years. So the program's been around since 2001. And if we put that all together, other communities can also start those kinds of programs.

Jason Klugman:

There are also some great organizations that are National Consortia of College Access Programs. So the National College Access Network, NCAN, and their website is collegeaccess.org, I believe, and there's the National Partnership for Educational Access. So both of those organizations are great clearing houses for programs and local communities that do work with students strategically and invest in those students in order to develop them and their college [inaudible] potential.

Evan Schneider:

Thank you for that clarification. But also I know that that your program is a really helpful and vital resource to folks in the area, so thank you for providing that.

Jason Klugman:

One other thing I'll say is that there are a number of local and regional college access networks that have put together information and created space for organizations within a particular region to get together and share best practices. So we have one that we helped co-found in the Trenton area, that Trenton College Access Network, that we're partnering with a number of organizations that do youth development and college-access work in the area. We try to make sure that we're not getting each other's kids or having kids across multiple programs, so that we're being really strategic about how we engage with our students.

Jason Klugman:

But there are also networks across the country. So the National College Access Network has listings of regional groups, like the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable, the Southern California College Access Network, the Minnesota College Access Network, those kinds of organizations that bring together this information in a really good way. And some of the programs start in middle school, gear up programs that are funded by the federal government. There are talent search programs and upward bound programs, and then a lot of community based organizations and foundations that run programs for young people to help them prepare for the entirety of the college admissions process.

Evan Schneider:

So we are obviously seeing that COVID-19 is having a pretty massive and profound impact on education across the country. Parents are suddenly teachers. I think they're all, a lot of parents are still sort of shocked by this reality.

Jason Klugman:

Absolutely.

Evan Schneider:

And so from closing schools to budget crises, there's just a lot of uncertainty. So just wanted to ask you, how do you predict that this crisis will impact your work in the landscape of just college access in general?

Jason Klugman:

It's so hard to predict over the next six months and the next year or so. But there have been some really interesting outcomes already. There's been a long movement toward test-optional policies in college admissions and so I want to start there. So there's an organization called Fair Test that advocates for test optional, and really the elimination of standardized tests in the college admissions process.

Jason Klugman:

So one thing that's happened over the last few months is that the SAT and the ACT have had to cancel national testing dates for those two tests. And in response, a lot of colleges and universities have announced temporary and some permanent test optional policies. And it's been really interesting to see. So a lot of the top small liberal arts colleges have said they're going test optional either for a year or they're going to pilot it for two years or three years. One prediction that I might make is that once colleges go to test optional, it's going to be really hard for them to walk back into testing required. And so that's going to be really interesting to watch.

Jason Klugman:

Top tier schools, the top national universities have not gone test optional. And what they've said is, "Look, typically students who are really gunning for top schools will take the test multiple times. So they'll prep for and take the SAT three or four times. They'll take the ACT three or four times." That that costs a lot of money. We don't advocate for that. We're able, with our program, to support two or three testing rounds for our students. But we also want to be strategic and say, "Hey, if you've achieved a certain score, then you don't have to test again. Let's take the pressure off."

Jason Klugman:

And a few months ago, the ACT announced that they were going to do subject-specific retesting. So the ACT is four subjects and you get a composite score. And once you've done that once, say your science score or your math score was lower than you expected, then you could retake just the math section at a future date and then they'll send that score in to colleges. So the SAT, which is run by the college board, and the ACT are kind of scrambling to figure out summer testing, fall testing, potentially at-home testing, which I think is really suspect for all sorts of reasons.

Jason Klugman:

And in reaction, colleges have said, "Look, to the class of 2021 and potentially the classes of 2022, the high school classes, we are going to be test optional. And we're going to look at your grades and we're going to holistically review your application." And some colleges are saying, "We're going to look at this process as maybe a permanent solution to equity issues that exist within the testing environment already." So that's been really interesting.

Jason Klugman:

The other big thing that's going to happen right now related to the college board is AP tests. So we have students across the country, millions of high school students, who are taking AP classes and have signed up for AP tests that traditionally happen in May. Those tests are traditionally three hours long and are given on a national timeline over two or three weeks. And what the college board has done is they've shifted all of those three hour tests to 45 minute tests, taken online at home. And for some folks, that's like, "Oh great instead of a three hour test, I have a 45 minute test."

Jason Klugman:

The college board has also announced that they're cutting the curriculum that's going to be covered within those tests. But what they've also announced is that the tests themselves are going to be more essay based. So there'll be one big question for AP English, one or two big questions, and students will have a set amount of time to log into a test, start working on that essay, and then submit their answer. And then the window will close for that.

Jason Klugman:

I think for students in middle income and upper income families that have resources in terms of the kids have a nice bedroom, they have a nice workspace, a nice desk, good internet access. They've been engaged with their teachers throughout this time where everyone's been out of school. Those students would probably do okay on those tests. But for low income students, students in rural communities, students in urban communities where they have more cramped living situations, maybe they're sharing a bedroom with a sibling or two or with a member of their extended family. Maybe they're working, they're doing all their homework on their phone, on their bed. Doing an AP test in that situation is going to be incredibly challenging.

Jason Klugman:

There's a lot of talk about what happens with that test score and potential college credit that will be assigned or not in the process. So I don't know what's going to happen with that. I think colleges are going to be stuck with trying to figure out what to do with a test score and assigning college credit. And

colleges might decide to do a placement test on top of the AP test, whether or not they accept credit from the AP score. So that's an area that we're really thinking about.

Jason Klugman:

There's also what to do with a GPA. So seniors and juniors, their semester right now, it's either their sixth or eighth semester of high school, might go pass/fail. And how would that impact GPA for a senior that's been admitted to college? Will pass/fail impact their matriculation into college? So will colleges look at a final transcript and say, "You didn't finish out your senior year strong. So we're going to rescind your admission." I don't think that that's going to happen, but it could. But for juniors and for sophomores that have a bunch of Ps, P for pass, on their transcript, how do we configure GPA and look at that situation in the holistic review of college admissions is going to be a challenge for for my colleagues in the admission side to really work through.

Jason Klugman:

I know that everyone's thinking about this. Everyone's trying to figure out. And everyday I think we learn something new about what's happening in schools and with stay-at-home orders and school closures. So I think college admissions deans are going to have a lot to work through and think about over the next couple of months and into next year's cycle.

Jason Klugman:

The other crisis that we're going to be really worried about is budgets and finances, both on colleges, so colleges are seeing already some significant financial impact of students not being on campus. So the colleges that refunded for room and board took a hit financially there. Many colleges are in challenging financial straits anyway. So this just magnifies that. A lot of colleges use their facilities in the summer to raise revenue by hosting academic programs and sports camps and conferences and all of that income is going to be gone.

Jason Klugman:

A place like Princeton is really, really fortunate because of the strength of our endowment and the commitment that the University has made to our students in the community. We're probably going to increase our financial aid budget to to acknowledge the impact on families that are coming to Princeton, sending students to Princeton. Most colleges don't have that kind of resource. Some will be able to make commitments to students and keep the financial aid budgets where they are, but many colleges are going to struggle. And so that's another area where we might see colleges closing, colleges merging. We just don't know. That's going to be a big area of impact.

Jason Klugman:

The last thing that I'll say, and I know this is kind of a long winded answer to a big question, is that for programs that do college access, a lot of our work is in person, in community, with our scholars, in our case, with our teaching fellows, with our staff. That's all been disrupted. So just as schools have been disrupted and teachers are learning how to be teachers at home and manage home while they're managing Google classroom or Zoom conversations or any number of new technology, whether that's turning their bathroom into a dry erase board to do math on the marker board that that bathroom, the shower can be a dry erase board in some showers. Some of those shower fitters that actually work as bathroom fitters, becomes a dry erase board.

Jason Klugman:

How do we do all of that in a space where we're typically in really close contact with our students and how do we continue to nurture the communities that we have has been a conversation that all of us are having and some with just our own teams and some across these networks to try to share best practices in this moment.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Well, you're right. That was a really complicated question. And you did say a lot. But I kind of get the feeling that we could go down rabbit holes in every single one of those answers and we'll be thinking about this and the impacts of all of this on education for decades, really.

Jason Klugman:

I agree.

Evan Schneider:

Like you said, so many institutions are financially strapped going into this and may not survive independently on the backside. So I think we'll have some major, major ramifications and disruptions.

Jason Klugman:

Yeah. Just on that point of disruptions. I mean for again, I mean I think what we're seeing is the inequalities that are in our system are just being magnified in really crucial and critical ways. So a family that has some resources, whether one of the parents is not working because they're able to not work, and so there's two parents in the home and a parent can manage education for their children and there's enough space and resources for education to continue, there won't be significant disruption.

Jason Klugman:

But for families that are low income, where both parents are working outside the home, where parents have lost jobs, so they're in the home, but there's all sorts of financial insecurity and food insecurity, that's going to be really, really challenging. And it goes from pre-K all the way up. So I'm a family that relies on a preschool for their child to learn basic skills of reading and writing and probably not writing, probably not reading at preschool, but basic skills and socialization. But coming through kindergarten and first grade to suddenly become a kindergarten or first grade teacher or a second grade teacher is incredibly challenging, while also managing everything else in the home. So we're going to see all sorts of impacts I think from that.

Evan Schneider:

So you work closely with high school teachers, administrators, and students in the greater Trenton area, as you said. So what are some challenges and strengths particular to that educational landscape, both generally and in the face of this crisis? And then what do you see as sort of Princeton's role in all of that?

Jason Klugman:

Sure. Well, I think we're seeing both, in the Trenton region and across the country, we're seeing an extraordinary amount of creativity among our teachers and school administrators to try to reach and stay connected with their students and to make sure that what they're providing their students is as, let's call it up-to-par as possible, but also recognizing with compassion the new reality that their

students are facing. So that's the balance that we have to create. And all sorts of the challenges around access to technology. Are we doing homework on our phones? Do we have a Chromebook? Are we sharing a Chromebook among three members of a family? What's the internet access like at home? All of those are questions that our teachers have had to face. And then we're kind of watching what's happening, but also trying to engage.

Jason Klugman:

So one of the teachers that we work with in Trenton, her students have TI-84 Plus calculators, but not everybody has a charger because they charge them at school. So can we order chargers and send them home with the students? Trenton ordered a large purchase ... they did a large purchasing of Chromebooks. And right when this was happening, so some districts that we work with, Lawrence Public School, they have a one-to-one Chromebook policy already. So all of those students already have Chromebooks, which is great. They might not all have access to internet. So one of the things that the school district has done through its foundation and finding resources in its budget is purchasing hotspots and helping students access the internet.

Jason Klugman:

It's been great to see a number of our internet providers offering free service for two months, is what the initial thing, it was 60 days from a lot of folks. I think that will be extended for folks doing internet essentials and other similar access to connectivity. We're seeing that. So there's that side of the technology and how we're teaching.

Jason Klugman:

Schools also provide all sorts of additional resources to students. So counseling, support, food, a place for community development and leadership and extracurriculars and sports. So we're trying to be creative in mitigating the impact of the current crisis by creating some regularity with those kinds of activities. But it's really challenging. I think we're seeing in some schools and districts that there's a certain percent of students that they're just not in touch with, despite all of these efforts. So that's really worrisome. But the students that are participating and engaging, that are checking in every day on Google classroom and turning in assignments, I think that there is a level of continuity that's really great.

Jason Klugman:

The other thing I'll just throw out is that something that we want to be thoughtful about is students with special needs. Families that have students with special needs rely on schools for all sorts of, not just the daily interaction of school, but sometimes that extends throughout the summer. Students with special needs are often in classes with a number of support staff, and so to have to do all of that at home is a significant impact on the families.

Jason Klugman:

So what Princeton can do is a range of things. I mean, Princeton has been really focused on making sure that our community, our student community, our staff, our faculty are safe, are well cared for, have the resources that they need in terms of hotspots and laptops and textbooks and things like that. And I think we can start, now that we're in a steady state, we only have a few weeks left of the semester, we can start thinking about turning that service locally, both in the Mercer County region, but also where our students are.

Jason Klugman:

So what do you have at home that you may be able to donate to a community center, to a youth-serving organization. Maybe there's an old computer and instead of sending it out to be recycled, maybe there's a way of resetting that computer so it can be used by a family that doesn't have technology.

Jason Klugman:

What we've been doing with PUPP is we have a set of old surface tablets that we don't use anymore. We transitioned to giving all of our scholars Chromebooks last year. But for folks that have three or four siblings in the home and they're all sharing the same piece of technology, we've distributed our old surface tablets and our old Dell laptops to the community members. To say, "They're not doing anything in our closets. So let's get them out in the world so that folks can use them."

Jason Klugman:

But even other resources that families might need for education, so old textbooks, for younger children, coloring books, pencils, start a reading club on YouTube and read books and put it out there to a teacher that you're available to read, to do a reading hour. Teachers are doing a lot of this work and it's a lot for them to do. So if they can have some classroom aides that are remote and willing to engage in a way that is strategic and meaningful and safe, I think that's also something that we could be doing.

Evan Schneider:

I actually have a daughter who has special needs and we're in Hopewell Township School District. Actually, we just had an IEP meeting on, I think it was Monday. We were so effusive in our appreciation because we know the challenges of doing this stuff remotely, because we're trying to do it ourselves and our own work. And we feel really appreciative of the support that we're getting, but also see the real challenges of getting our daughter the support that she needs.

Evan Schneider:

Luckily we have in-home nursing. So that really helps a lot because it's the same nurse every day and she went to school with our daughter, so she's very familiar with all these things and can kind of supplement. But yeah, those challenges are real.

Evan Schneider:

The other thing I was going to say is I'm on the Urban Ministry Cabinet at Princeton Theological Seminary. And I know one of the things that they are supporting are additional food for families that had kids that they were getting their breakfasts and lunches at school. And now they're not. And so I know that a lot of people have done a lot of work to fill the gap there. But it's an ongoing need, because obviously the food gets eaten so you have to replace it.

Jason Klugman:

Yeah. We have to be thinking about how we sustain those programs for the long haul. Right? So to do something two weeks in an emergency is one thing. To do it for two months is another. And then we're thinking about summer. So in summer, we might have a different configuration of where students are going on a daily basis. But no one's going to be going to summer camp this summer because, particularly in the state of New Jersey, I don't think that we're going to have camps open. And so how are we supporting everyone in this situation, our abnormal times? That's going to be a real challenge.

Jason Klugman:

One of the things I was also thinking about prior to us getting on the phone today or on Zoom today was that also just the sense of being kind, stay home and follow the rules when your governor is giving some advice and when the CDC is giving you advice about what's happening in your community, really taking a minute to think about, "Okay, what is happening in my community and how might I be helpful in this moment, despite the challenges that I'm facing?" So I'm facing my own challenges. Maybe I need to get out and get some fresh air and take a walk. Okay, let's do that. How can we do that safely? But there are other things that we're just going to have to put off for awhile until we get through this particular crisis.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, there's a lot of people making a lot of sacrifices and it's both inspiring and challenging and infuriating at times too. And I think it's an opportunity to practice community care and have patience with each other, but also have appreciation.

Jason Klugman:

Yeah. And then I'll share one of the things that we did with PUPP. So we have, throughout the academic year, regular afterschool sessions with our scholars. So we have graduate students who serve as teaching fellows and they meet weekly with our students at the local schools. And so of course, immediately we replaced those sessions with Zoom meetings. So the expectation is we still have this time. It's still your PUPP time and we're going to continue with our academic work in this time.

Jason Klugman:

We might create some space for everyone to introduce your pets because your cat is going to walk through the screen or to make a CD cover of a song that you've decided represents how you're feeling during the stay at home time. So we've taken a little bit off of the rigor, the academic rigor. Not too much, because the scholars actually enjoy the expectation and getting it. So they're having debates and they're writing papers and they're making speeches and they're engaging. They're watching clips from YouTube, TED Talks and, and other kinds of media.

Jason Klugman:

We're trying to figure out how to have our theater excursions just like we would during the school year because those were canceled. We would've gone to the opera today, this Wednesday, April 22nd. We were supposed to see a final dress rehearsal of Madame Butterfly at Opera Philadelphia. We decided that we're not going to do the opera. It's available from the Met online. We could watch opera together on Zoom. But we did watch the musical Memphis together, in kind of a Zoom meeting, a shared experience.

Jason Klugman:

And as much as we can do that to sort of create some sense of that normalcy in this abnormal time is also important. So creating community, it is about celebrating and preparing. We're preparing for college. We're celebrating the admission of our senior cohort and where they're going to college. We're also recognizing that this is an abnormal time, but we want to create some normalcy around it as well.

Evan Schneider:

So we like to end our interviews, Jason, with an opportunity for our guests to talk a little bit, maybe share a story or two about what's giving you hope right now.

Jason Klugman:

So I think for me, the creativity that I'm seeing from my colleagues as we work through this moment, it really gives me hope. It's interesting to see how we've innovated as a team. So the PUPP team, we meet three days a week. We're actually using FaceTime because we get Zoomed out and it's just fun to use a different technology. So my team is awesome. And we're maintaining our recruitment process of ninth graders right now. That's all become a virtual process. Instead of doing interviews, we've had students submit videos. We gave them a series of questions and some directions, how to upload a video.

Jason Klugman:

So that's really, I mean, the fact that students have been doing that gives me hope, that they're still interested in participating in our program and thinking about their educational future really gives me hope, so that creativity and innovation. I've always been a huge fan of the arts. The arts are critically important to my own life and my wellness and how I engage with the world. And we do a lot of arts enrichment with the Princeton University Preparatory Program as well.

Jason Klugman:

So we're in the summer going to art museums and during the school year we're seeing theatrical performances, musicals, plays, opera. And so we're finding some stuff online and it is definitely not the same as being in the audience in person. But it is a way to laugh and to cry and to enjoy and experience something that you wouldn't normally do. So the more that we see, whether it's the Zoom concerts that are popping up to raise money for folks, or the release of recorded Broadway productions or local productions of plays, we're trying to explore those as best we can. And so that is keeping me grounded and keeping me hopeful right now.

Evan Schneider:

Jason, thank you so much for your time. This has been really interesting. A little bit overwhelming, I think, just in terms of education is such a huge topic, obviously. There's so many different aspects to it. But I think we really benefited from your expertise and knowledge and helping to break down the different pieces and think about it comprehensively. So thank you so much.

Jason Klugman:

It's been my pleasure. Thanks for having me.