

Doug Sprei:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and today, my colleague and ACTA's chief of staff, Armand Alacbay, interviews Dr. Lindsey Burke, Ph.D., the director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation. Dr. Burke is well known for her role overseeing Heritage's research and policy work on issues pertaining to higher education reform. In this conversation, she discusses higher ed leadership in light of her recent appointment to the George Mason University Board of Visitors where, it's safe to say, she'll have ample opportunities to apply her education policy research experience in a practical setting.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, Lindsay, welcome to Higher Ed Now. So glad you could join us.

Lindsey Burke:

Thank you for having me.

Armand Alacbay:

So... start at the beginning. You've been working in education policy as long as I've known you.

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

Why? What brought you here? What's the motivation? What do you see as your goals in pursuing this?

Lindsey Burke:

Well, to be honest, my original motivation for getting involved was my desire to work at the Heritage Foundation. That is actually really what motivated me, initially. I had been working on a Master's in education foreign language education at the University of Virginia and had done a brief stint as a long term substitute teacher in central Virginia. And a position had opened up at Heritage in the education policy department, and I thought to myself, "This is the perfect intersection of my work and my passion." And I decided to go for it. I ended up at Heritage and found that I really truly loved doing and still love doing education policy. And every day that goes by, it just gets more interesting to be involved in this issue area.

Armand Alacbay:

All right. You've been at Heritage since 2008.

Lindsey Burke:

Yes.

Armand Alacbay:

And so what's-

Lindsay Burke:

I cringe because I feel like you're dating me.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, what's changed. What's changed over the years as far as ed policy. It's gone through these different phases.

Lindsay Burke:

It has.

Armand Alacbay:

What have you seen?

Lindsay Burke:

Well, it's gone through a lot of phases in the 14 or so years that I've been doing it from my perch. What I've seen are some major inflection points over that time period. The first for me that I was really involved in the fight, the pushback against Common Core in the K12 space. That was a major inflection point for the education movement. It was a continuation of the debate around the efficacy of standard based reform that had long really dominated the K12 debate, but I think really came to a head with the push for Common Core. And in 2010, during the Obama years, that subsided and then it got interesting. That is because in 2011, 2011 became affectionately known to us as the year of school choice in the K12 space. And so we see states like Arizona adopt first in the nation education savings accounts, which have a higher ed tie-in because with an ESA, if you're familiar with it, you fund the student directly rather than the school.

You provide, in the case of Arizona, 90 percent of the money that would've been spent on the child and the public school directly to a parent, and then they can use it for any education related service or product or provider, and they can roll over unused funds from year to year and even roll that money into higher education savings. And so we have seen students who have graduated from high school in Arizona, they were using their ESA to customize their K12 experience, still having leftover money when they graduated high school, using that leftover money to go to a college, maybe not even within the same state out of Arizona and to pay for their higher education tuition with their leftover K12 per pupil funding. That's amazing, right?

Armand Alacbay:

Right.

Lindsay Burke:

If we take a step back and think this is how we should fund K12 education in particular, and if we reconceptualize how we fund it, that can even accrue to the benefit of higher education policy as well.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, we've worked together before on, speaking of funding of education, in the accreditation space in higher ed, right? Title IV and how institutions can become eligible for federal funds. What do you see as the next phase of accreditation? Why is that so important to the work you're doing as well?

Lindsay Burke:

Well, ironically, I think accreditation has a quality assurance problem, right? It was-

Armand Alacbay:

Oh, absolutely.

Lindsay Burke:

But I say ironically, because it was designed or intended to be a measure of quality assurance, right? We see in the mid 60's with all of the changes that happened as a result of the war on poverty, all of the increased federal intervention at every level of education, the federal government really becoming a gatekeeper through accreditation for student loans and grants and the federal government becoming a de facto system of accreditation, where you had Washington determining who could be an approved accreditor.

And then those accreditors being the gatekeepers for federal student loans and grants for institutions, and that has instead of creating quality assurance, it has instead created this system that is heavily regulated, that suppresses innovation, and that really keeps ossified practices in place. What we should think about is how do we move away from that system, this defacto federal system of accreditation, and put power in the hands of states and private industry, and start to devolve accreditation down to the state level so it does become a measure of quality assurance?

And there are a lot of proposals out there that would do that. The HERO Act is one example of that, that would allow any entity within a state to accredit and credential, not only colleges, but individual courses and courses of study, and then to allow your federal funds to follow you to those individual courses. And that not only in my mind would improve quality if you have industry intimately involved in determining quality assurance, but it also has the potential to reduce the cost to the student because the student would be able to make it through their requisite higher ed courses quicker than having to go through this traditional four year bachelor's degree model, no matter what you want to do long term.

Armand Alacbay:

I think people sometimes don't realize how much involvement the federal government has in American higher education given the fact that there's so many colleges and universities that are private.

Lindsay Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

Right? One of the things that ACTA has really fought for as far as accreditation form is freeing up governing boards, then giving them the ability to innovate and to really lead the institution. The governing boards are the ones who know best what should happen at the institutional level.

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

Speaking of which, you have been recently appointed by Governor Youngkin to the George Mason University Board of Visitors.

Lindsey Burke:

That's right.

Armand Alacbay:

Congratulations.

Lindsey Burke:

Thank you very much.

Armand Alacbay:

What brought you to accept this appointment?

Lindsey Burke:

Right.

Armand Alacbay:

And what do you see as your role with this?

Lindsey Burke:

Well, I was honored to be appointed by Governor Youngkin to the George Mason Board of Visitors and am particularly thrilled to be serving in this capacity because I did my doctoral work and I earned my PhD from George Mason.

Armand Alacbay:

That's right.

Lindsey Burke:

Really just near and dear to my heart and am thrilled to serve in this capacity. I think every higher ed institution right now suffers from its own unique challenges that maybe aren't so unique, right? If we look across the country, there are broad questions about cost and quality and access and free speech. I think Mason in particular has done a really good job on a lot of these factors. It has been an institution

that has generally kept costs low it's an institution that has grown and an institution that really does, I think, support the notion that free speech is important and integral to a well institution of higher education.

And I say that because they are an institution that did adopt the Chicago Statement when it was put out. I'm sure your listeners are familiar, but the Chicago principles around free speech are these well articulated principles that say that universities as these entities of free academic inquiry have to put free speech at the front and center. There's a great line from the Chicago Statement that says it is not the proper role of the university to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. And I think that's what it's all about at the end of the day is that competition of ideas elevates society broadly. It sharpens our thinking this competition of ideas. That really is the central purpose of a university, it's to foster free speech and freedom of academic expression and inquiry. I'm just thrilled to serve in this capacity. I know that maintaining free speech is something that is certainly important to me. I think it's important to the Youngkin Administration and something that I think is achievable and can be strengthened even further.

Armand Alacbay:

You alluded to this just a minute ago when you're talking about free speech or free inquiry being a central part of the academic mission.

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

And so the free speech thing, it was something so important to you that it was one of the first things you mentioned in the announcements, when you were appointed. Question is for our listeners, what is it about free inquiry that makes it a board level issue? Trustees or visitors are usually there. Oh, they're usually looked to be the corporate stewards or the institution, but they're more than that. How do you view your role in terms of upholding the intellectual integrity and the academic mission of the institution?

Lindsey Burke:

Well, you're right. I think for the most part, it is that day-to-day management. But it's so much more than that because I think it really is as a trustee, it's about the culture of the institution. And if a university doesn't have a robust culture of free speech, that's a problem. This is what universities are designed to do. We should have rigorous debate among students. We should welcome all voices at any institution of higher education and have this robust debate of ideas. Invite speakers from every walk of life, to a university, to have their perspective out there, to have students hearing from as many perspectives as possible. I really do think that is just critical to the culture of university and a board certainly is invested in seeing that culture fostered.

Armand Alacbay:

Right. What are the challenge that you see ahead for higher ed and just maybe as a sector, as a whole, or even as they pertain to public universities?

Lindsay Burke:

How much time do we have?

Armand Alacbay:

Yeah.

Lindsay Burke:

There are so many issues right now in higher education, but there are a couple to my mind that really do rise to the top. The first, it's free speech. Not to stay on the free speech topic too long, but I do think this is a challenge that is really a top tier challenge for a lot of institutions that illiberal practices like free speech zones and campus shout downs of speakers, censorship, this general rejection of free speech, that this, as my colleague Jonathan butcher says, these are students quote, "Living out the worldview of critical theory." Students view everything in public and private life as the result of power imbalances. And I think that's a really good encapsulation of how practices that are antithetical to fostering free speech manifests themselves on college campuses.

That's certainly a top challenge in my mind. Costs of course, are another challenge that come to mind. Although I will say if you graduate today, and if you look at median debt loads, not average, right? Because if we look at average debt loads, they get thrown off by grad borrowing. But if you look at the median debt load for an undergrad borrower, that monthly payment is about \$222 a month. Now for many people who graduate college and who enter the workforce and get a job in their field of study, that's a manageable payment for them \$222 a month. I point that out because there is appropriate concern about aggregate debt. We all know the numbers, \$1.7 trillion.

Armand Alacbay:

\$1.7 trillion.

Lindsay Burke:

Right. An outstanding student loan debt. But I think we should look at the individual level too and recognize that for a lot of people, it's actually pretty manageable. And if it's not, there are already programs in place that can assist you. But college costs are a problem. If you look overall at university costs and price, we know that the cost has more than doubled in real terms since 1991. In real terms, again, inflation adjusted dollars. That's from about \$4,100 dollars and 1991 to about \$10,700 today. That's just for tuition. If you factor in room and board, of course, those numbers go way up from about \$10,791 to about \$22,600 per year today. And again, for many people that is a worthwhile investment. If you graduate with a bachelor's degree and four years, which is rare, but if you do that, if you enter the workforce in your field of study, that's all the ideal outcome. But unfortunately that's just not the reality today for statistically speaking most borrowers. We know most students are graduating not in four years, but in six years, if they graduate at all.

Armand Alacbay:

Right.

Lindsey Burke:

Illiberal policies, cost. And I would say the third and final thing would be just the lack of efficacy in general, with higher education today. We know that employers report that graduates are often not prepared to succeed in the workplace once they're hired, that their courses don't tend to prepare them well to enter their workforce. And so that's a big problem as well. And yet, even though the efficacy of higher ed may be in question, in some instances for some students, we still have this mentality generally that you have to go to college. That it's your only way to climb the ladder of upward economic mobility in America.

And I think we have to expand our thinking. Support not only traditional four year institutions and traditional bachelor's degree route, but also apprenticeships and just alternatives altogether to college that might not even include apprenticeships. And so I think we just really need to broaden our thinking. And I think from policy perspective, things like accreditation reform help support a lot of what we need in order to get there long term to help students craft a really customized higher ed experience for them that would get them into the workforce quicker without some of the superfluous courses that a bachelor's degree might require and all of the attendant expenses that go along with it.

Armand Alacbay:

In a lot of the policy research that you've done, you've talked a lot about the goal being to raise the level of quality, keep costs low or reduce costs if possible.

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

Now putting your sitting on an institutional board hat, institutional leadership hat, what are some lessons that I think boards today can take from the research practices that you've done on policy wonk side, so to speak?

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah, this is something a couple of years ago, Heidi Ganahl and I, she's in Colorado, thought through this. And one thing that we thought deeply about was the role of boards in program quality within institutions, and really thinking about are the programs that an institution offers, what is needed what's in demand? Are there more that the institution could be offering or are there some programs that maybe have outlived their usefulness for students or outlived their utility in the market? And so I think that review of program offerings is an important function.

I also think there are things such as reviewing what an institution does that could potentially be outsourced to private providers. I'm thinking specifically about things like housing management on campus, food service production, janitorial work. Are there things that are currently being done in house that could be done by an external provider more effectively and for a better price? I think we have to get creative and think really about the big picture of what encompasses higher ed today. Because as you know, a college incorporates so many aspects. It's the student life side of it. It's housing, it's sports. There really is, I think from just a board perspective, a lot for members to think through when they are

thinking about what the future of their particular institution looks like and whether or not it's serving students in the best way it possibly can.

Armand Alacbay:

As someone who's been an educator before, how would you respond to folks that want to say that the board should stay out of the academic side of the house? And you talked about that boards have a role in program prioritization or program review. Where's that line between being a good and effective and engaged board member and micromanaging?

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah. Well, look, I think it is a conversation that happens, the program prioritization conversation that happens in conjunction with faculty. But really importantly, I think most importantly, in conjunction with students, right? If you have a program that isn't attracting students, or it has very few and students don't seem to be clamoring for a particular program, it's a conversation worth having. Does that program need to be reshaped in some format? It's an informed conversation between all actors on a campus, the board faculty, students, et cetera.

Armand Alacbay:

You mentioned a wide swath of constituents on campus. How do you get that information from students? Do you walk the campus? Walk me through the nuts and bolts of what information gathering looks like?

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah. I think it takes the form of survey work of students. There are institutions in Virginia in particular where I sit, that we're talking about large scale institutions and that survey work can be really powerful when you're talking about tens of thousands of students on a college campus. It is having open office hours with, I think, administrators at the university and students to elicit that information from them. And I think it's just a general overview of course enrollments, and just gauging where there is an appetite for particular programs and where the appetite seems to have dropped off a little bit.

Armand Alacbay:

You're going to have to put your time traveler machine hat on. You're entering a board service at a time when you have a skeptical public with this \$1.7 trillion student debt issue. And also these changing demographics over the next five to 10 plus years, so revenue challenges there as well. How should boards start approaching these kind of enterprise risk questions?

Lindsey Burke:

Yeah. Well, I think first it is taking a big step back. To me, it does come back to program offerings a lot, but looking holistically at athletics programs, housing, everything that an institution offers. Are those offerings being maximized in a way that they are bringing a good ROI with them, that they're benefiting students, that they're good stewards of resources, both institutional resources and taxpayer investment? It is the taxpayer investment part in general, just speaking as a public policy person, the taxpayer investment in higher ed is tremendous. Student loans and grants get a lot of attention, but I think the taxpayer voice is often significantly overlooked, particularly when we think about things like loan forgiveness proposals that are being floated today. But we have seen since 1991, a 295% increase

in student aid over that period.

If we wonder why cost have risen, I would argue that's a big piece of the puzzle. We have created for higher ed broadly speaking, really open ended access to federal subsidies. And many universities have decided that they will capture those resources in a way that ultimately increases cost long term. There was a study that came out a few years ago from the New York federal reserve bank. And they found that for every additional dollar in subsidized student loans, universities raised tuition .63 cents on the dollar. And so from a student perspective, that means the university's capturing a lot of that money and raising tuition and raising prices for students, certainly not passing along any savings. The taxpayer investment side of higher ed again, I think is often overlooked, but is the main reason we see increases in price over time.

I think the conversation needs to be broad. It has to be how are we good stewards as an institution of resources, both student resources and taxpayer resources? As federal policy people, how do we think about how public policy may lead to increases in cost over time? And then also in the public policy sphere, what are those larger levers of reform that we can push on like accreditation reform that could put some downward pressure long term on college price? It really is I think an all of the above strategy when it comes to institutional integrity, improving quality, and driving down price for students.

Armand Alacbay:

I have one more question that's related here. Here ACTA, when we look at some of these broad national federal proposals like student loan forgiveness, or even some of the state legislation out there, our first thought is success of higher education has to start at the institutional level.

Lindsay Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

It has to involve engaged institutional leadership, governing boards, its trustees. However, you have the benefit of looking at this holistically from just studying this professionally for a career. If you could wave a magic wand, what would be maybe the first thing that would help alleviate these issues that are restricted quality and keeping these costs up, how would you reverse the trend?

Lindsay Burke:

Well, if I could wave my magic wand twice, if I can have that leeway.

Armand Alacbay:

Sure.

Lindsay Burke:

First I would wave in say, accreditation reform, right? If we actually want to move toward quality assurance, need to bring in industry into that conversation. We need to push that level of governance down from the federal level where it currently resides to states and ultimately local communities who are invested in the institutions that are in their community. Accreditation reform, but also we have to reform student loans and grants. That is non-negotiable from a public policy perspective. If we want to

drive down cost, having open-ended access virtually and talking here really about PLUS loans, if we're being honest, right? It is those grad PLUS loans where you can borrow up to the cost of attendance. And if we're talking about somebody attending law school or medical school, we can talk about something like \$200,000 and borrowing through the PLUS loan program.

Lindsay Burke:

We have to think about either caps on some of those programs, or really just limiting the amount of subsidy that's out there so that we can make space for a private market in lending to reemerge. It used to be the case that private lenders made the majority of student loans, today it is 93% of the loan market. 93% of the loans originate in service at the federal level. And so that means for taxpayers across the country, when a student defaults or when there are loan forgiveness proposals floated out there that the taxpayer picks up the tab. And I find that incredibly unfair for the majority, by the way of Americans who did not earn a bachelor's degree for whatever reason. Either they couldn't attend college, maybe they decided it wasn't a good value proposition for them in terms of what they wanted to do long term.

Maybe they worked really hard while they were an undergrad student so that they wouldn't have to take on student loan debt. Maybe they joined the armed services so that they could benefit from the GI bill, literally put their lives on the line, so they wouldn't have student loan debt. And now the sudden through these loan forgiveness proposals, we are asking somebody else who didn't take out a loan to pay for somebody else's college degree, their student loan. And I think that's incredibly unfair and we know empirically that it's incredibly regressive as well. If I could weigh my magic wand a third time, I would say ...

Armand Alacbay:

Go for it. We're not counting here.

Lindsay Burke:

No forgiveness. We have to end this push toward student loan forgiveness.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, one of the things that is beautiful about the American higher education system is that it's not a system. Obviously there's a lot to unpack and process, but really the key here is engage institutional governance. We need higher education leaders to step up in and recognize that these are things that aren't going to be solved overnight. We don't have magic wands available.

Lindsay Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

It'll take that hard work from some very knowledgeable and wise leaders from all sectors.

Lindsay Burke:

Yeah.

Armand Alacbay:

Thank you, Lindsey, for joining us today. Best of luck with your service, thank you for your service on the GMU board. And I'll look forward to catching up again soon.

Lindsay Burke:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.