

Speaker 1: Hello, and welcome to the Decipher Podcast. This podcast is hosted by William & Mary staff members who are committed to student success. We all know that this year has been unlike any other. And our hope is that this podcast provides a fresh perspective on the challenges our students are facing.

Heather Deere: Navigating college life is no walk in the park and being a William & Mary student in 2020 is no different. Join experts from around campus as they discuss ways to decipher common college experiences.

Lauren Garrett: [00:00:30] Hello everyone. Welcome back to the Decipher Podcast. You are listening to the second in our series of two webisodes, episodes, podcastisodes.

Heather Deere: I think episodes is the correct terminology.

Lauren Garrett: All right, I'll back up.

Heather Deere: No, we should keep that, [00:01:00] our listeners will enjoy it.

Lauren Garrett: Authentically human.

Heather Deere: Yes.

Lauren Garrett: Well, welcome to our second episode around the winter break here at William & Mary I'm Lauren Garrett with first year experience.

Heather Deere: And I am Heather Deere, the Assistant Director of Parent & Family Programs.

Lauren Garrett: And if you happen to catch our first episode, [00:01:30] we were talking a little bit about the logistics around winter break and the departure from campus. If your student is, or if you or your student are here in Williamsburg with us. This week, we're going to take a little bit of a different approach and talk about the transition back into home or family life, depending on, of course, on your unique circumstance. Some of these things might be applicable and others might not. [00:02:00] But the transition from campus and into the family or living arrangement prior to the campus arrival often is one that we hear a lot of students and families talk through, especially around some lessons learned, as well as opportunities for improvement around future vacation or break plans. And I think it's just safest to [00:02:30] start off by saying that this break is going to look a little bit different than some of the others. Traditionally, in our fall semester, we have a brief Thanksgiving break, three or four days, where students and families have an opportunity to test out the college student return home transition experience.

And then they return to campus for finals and then head back for two to three weeks for winter break. And I think the fact that we have [00:03:00] seven, eight weeks ahead of us, is looking a little daunting for some students and their families. And from the student side, I can tell you that we have some students

that are a little bit nervous about how do I spend all that time. I want to feel productive, but I also know that I need to take some time for me. And then there's also the nervousness about not meeting family expectations about being part of, or as [00:03:30] engaged as families might expect them to be around the dinner table for holiday get togethers. Heather, what concerns are you hearing from the family side of things?

Heather Deere: I think top of mind right now is excitement. I think families are excited to see their students because many of them have made the choice that we're not going to travel to Williamsburg. You're not going to travel from Williamsburg until you come home for this extended break. And so [00:04:00] I'm thinking, especially for our families, the first time in college students, that this is going to be the first time they're seeing their student potentially since August. And so I think initially right now there's a lot of excitement and really looking forward to the next chunk of time with their student and wanting it to be perfect, right. Wanting that time when the student comes home to be just like that Hallmark Movie experience of baking gingerbread cookies and all the things [00:04:30] that typically happen in that picture perfect scenario, and really hoping that they can fulfill that for their student. I think too, I think some of our upper-class families are thinking their gears are already turning for the spring semester in the summer and into next fall and job searching and internship searching.

And where do you want to study abroad and lots of really big questions that they're ready to ask their student and really ready to be engaged in those conversations. And I think it's interesting to counteract [00:05:00] that with the perspective of the student of, they're not ready to jump head first into those conversations. If I know anything about our students, their primary concern is going to be sleep, binge watching the things on Netflix that came out this semester that they weren't able to catch up on while they were studying. There are going to be some priorities there they're a little bit different. So I'm hearing excitement, I'm hearing some strategic thinking. I'm hearing some nervousness of what if this break doesn't go incredibly [00:05:30] well, what if this isn't everything that we dreamed that it's going to be? What if my student is different and things are different for us as a family. So I think those are all things that I'm hearing.

Lauren Garrett: I think that idea of difference is definitely top of mind for students. I think there are a lot of traditions that families have held near and dear around this season that students are wrapping their heads around the fact [00:06:00] that things may not be as they always have been. And sometimes that consistency, that tradition is what they cling to in times of change. We know that we see that a lot when we talk about about the general coming to college experience, that transition, and where do students go what's the safe space. And consistency is one of those structure, or those big things that students really gravitate towards. And so [00:06:30] I'm curious to see how families and students create for one another, some structure and some consistency as they move forward. I know something that I've been really clear with, some of our students have

been a little bit nervous about heading home and meeting expectations and not having some of those tried and true things in place is the importance of communication and transparency.

And being really honest with your [00:07:00] significant others, being really honest with your family, being really honest with your friends about where your priorities are at different points in time. So your priority when you first get home, might look a little bit different once you're two weeks in, and being really honest about how you plan to spend your time and not feeling like you need to put on a show. And then yet there's still a little bit of FOMO, there's still a little bit of the fear of missing out [00:07:30] in terms of what if there are some things that we can still do, and I just don't know them yet. So being open to perhaps something new or something different and not shutting yourself down or shutting yourself off for fear of not knowing the exact correct next answer or right answer. So that communication, I think, is going to be really key for a lot of students and making sure that they're feeling good and [00:08:00] confident in whatever winter break brings for them.

Heather Deere:

Can I encourage that too, with our families? If any families are listening to us with this conversation of, if your student doesn't take the first step in communicating what their preferences are for winter break or what their needs are, it's okay to ask those open-ended questions of how can I support you as you transition back home? How can I help you unwind or restore and ask some of those open-ended questions to help get the ball rolling in terms [00:08:30] of communication. Understanding that you're probably coming into the conversation with some preferences of what your student's time looks like, maybe some ground rules that you want to set as a family. And it's okay to sit down and have that conversation in a way that allows you to arrive at mutual expectations for one another. And I recently had a conversation with Kelly Crace about this topic with families. And so even I would highly encourage the students, listen to it also. [00:09:00] It's on the parent family programs, webinars, webpage.

And basically he shied away from the term expectation, which is something I really appreciated because I know that a lot of frustration arises from unmet expectations and expectations can feel a little bit rigid. That me as a family member, you're saying, I expect you to do X, Y, Z. And as a student saying, I expect to receive X, Y, Z can be a little bit rigid. And if there's anything that we've learned from 2020, it's that flexibility really is [00:09:30] critical. And maybe we settle on preferences. I would prefer that as a family, we have a few opportunities to do things together. I would prefer that I'm able to sleep in until 10:30 in the morning, this first three weeks that I'm back from Williamsburg. And so I think those are, it's just the way you frame the conversation, right? When you approach a conversation and it's a two sided conversation and you want to meet somewhere in the middle, understanding that there's going to be [00:10:00] some give and take there, but ultimately you'll reach something that works out as a family.

Lauren Garrett: I'll be curious to see how for those students who have created or found internships, externships, who have made the decision already to be employed over winter break, how they find their time away from campus, if it feels rejuvenating, or if it feels [00:10:30] refreshing by the time the winter break is over. So many students use the break to reconnect and to make a little bit of money and to prepare for the spring semester. I do think that my preference would be that students use the time to rejuvenate and to refocus. And if having an internship or an externship helps them dig a little bit deeper and [00:11:00] perhaps come out with a clearer sense of self or values on the other side. So when they return for spring semester, they have a good sense of direction. That's great, but I would prefer that students and families not feel like that is a has to, it's a must, especially with, I think the longer break there's a lot of feeling of, we need to fill some time.

And I go back to again, Dr. [00:11:30] Kelly Crace and in orientation, he talks about the fact that it's okay to just sit and be. And we're already so over-programmed, between social media and even Zooms. And look at us, we're even creating a podcast that you can listen to as you walk from point A to point B. I mean, we found ways to fill our time and never just sit and be. I know that I am struggling with trying [00:12:00] to find ways to balance my fear of my preference of not being over-programmed over break and give myself some of that space. And I'm wondering where some of our students and families will head down break as well. But I know that that's something that I have some trepidation around and I'm hearing some students also have some of that trepidation. So I think that preference idea is a really great conversation starter [00:12:30] and definitely opens and invites people into a conversation versus sets up sides. Again, Dr. Kelly Crace.

Heather Deere: I know really phenomenal colleagues that we have on our campus. And something you said actually reminded me of another part of Kelly's conversation and the fact that you have to own whose stress it is, right? So some of our families are really worried about their students securing an internship or really thinking long-term about career. [00:13:00] Thinking about our graduating students, if they're going to focus on the job search over winter break, but understanding who is carrying that stress, is it the stress that I'm feeling as a family member because I want my student to do well and be successful? And if me as a student is like, oh, I got this, I have a plan in place, I'm a successful student, I'm not really going to worry about this right now. I think that's also an important facet of the conversation is coming to the table with a recognition that this is [00:13:30] my stress as a family member. And this is why I want to have a conversation with you about it, because it's important to me and framing it in that way, rather than placing those stressors on the student during this long break.

But something you said earlier, really, I wanted to circle back to it because this is the weirdest winter break our students are probably ever going to have during their university life. For some of our upper-class students, this break is going to

be completely [00:14:00] new territory because they're coming off such a grueling semester, straight into, for some, a major holiday and really no time to just sit and be. And I think for some of our new students, hopefully they never experience a break like this one again, where they're just coming off, such a grueling condensed semester pace. I think it's really important to acknowledge [00:14:30] that I don't really expect a ton of productivity in the first week, two weeks after students get back. And I think that's something that always takes families by surprise is how long their student can sleep. And the way their behaviors might manifest a little bit differently during those first two weeks. But truly they need to sleep and they need to recover from what just happened this semester, because it's been a lot [00:15:00] mentally, physically.

And I think that's just really important to acknowledge. And I think it's okay if students need to take that time just to hibernate in their room from being quite honest.

Lauren Garrett: I'm giggling on my side of the podcast, dear listeners, because I think back to my own university experience and how there were definitely some days during break where I would get the knock on the door [00:15:30] and my parents would ask if I was ever emerging from my room. And when you have a roommate and you feel like you're constantly on, especially if you have a lot of folks living in your community areas, you can feel like I just need some solitude and I just need some peace. And it was always very interesting to try to explain that to my parental units. And now they get [00:16:00] it. Now that I'm in this field and we talk about what I see on a daily basis and reflect on that in my experience, it's so interesting to hear their take on it as family members. And so I would also encourage some crowdsourcing to an appropriate, healthy level is students do a lot of peer connecting to make sure, to tone set and to make sure that things are feeling " [00:16:30] normal" and I hesitate to use the word normal.

But I think that students do use one another's experiences as the litmus. Like this is what I did, how did you handle it? And so I would encourage our families to be doing that as well. Obviously we know that there are resources for students and families as we enter this break. And as we start to even think about the transition into spring semester, but I would start to utilize and lean on some of those resources [00:17:00] that you've created through informal interactions. Whether it's the family that you met during the moving process albeit briefly, or it's perhaps folks that you've met through some of our regional events hosted by parent family council folks. However that works, or even alums in your area to get a sense of that, the typical versus atypical that even might be helpful just to talk it through. Because again, [00:17:30] it goes back to the communication. Sometimes if you don't get it off your chest and you let it ruminate, it can become a much bigger deal than what it actually is. So finding those appropriate outlets and resources is a really good thing to be doing.

The other thing that comes to mind for me, Heather, as you were talking is the fact that there will be, I anticipate [00:18:00] because of the longer extended period of time that folks are away from campus, that the urgency to come back or to transition for some will feel like I can't wait to get back. And for others, it might feel a little bit more like a sense of dread because of this past semester. And so I think, again, being honest with ourselves about how we're feeling and the concerns that we might be having [00:18:30] is going to be really important to help us process those. We know that for the spring semester, we're keeping the academic schedule as it was originally intended for this spring in terms of start and end dates. And we built in some spring break days throughout the course of the semester, both for health and safety, but also to provide some well-needed and much deserved downtime. That our faculty will be working to make sure that [00:19:00] they create a syllabus and course curriculum that recognize those days and give students to break off as well.

So I think we have to be mindful that spring semester probably won't look traditional in all senses, but hopefully will feel much more in line with what academically we all expected or have come to expect from that traditional university experience. But I know that already [00:19:30] students are talking about, "I'm going to be ready to come back by middle of January, I don't know what I'm going to do." And I would just encourage folks to enjoy the time while you have it and just to enjoy the company. And I know that there's still concerns out there in communities around the Corona virus and COVID and all of those sorts of things. And I know that there's still a lot of [00:20:00] unrest and people are not necessarily always in a great or not in a good space physically or emotionally, mentally. But to really use this time for ourselves, to take care of ourselves and to of course, keep checking your William & Mary email. Because as things change and ebb and flow, that's how we're going to be communicating with students and families about what's going on and what can be expected for the spring semester.

[00:20:30] It's going to be a really interesting break, I think for all of us, even for those still in Williamsburg and still with the faculty staff side.

Heather Deere: I agree. Something that you mentioned that I haven't really thought about before, that's very unique to this semester and to 2020 is our students have done such a fantastic job at keeping the community safe by adhering to mask wearing [00:21:00] policies, physical distancing, and really taking that seriously to keep one another safe. But in many cases, our William & Mary campus has stricter policies and guidelines than many of the policies and guidelines in their home State, in their home communities and maybe even under the roof that they're returning to. So I'm really interested to see how students navigate that. That's going to be an interesting [00:21:30] conversation to have as a family of what are our safety expectations for one another. I think in a normal winter break, students would be excited to go out and see their peers, maybe from high school or people in their community that they're excited to see, maybe

going to visit grandparents or aunts and uncles and excited to have that time with family.

But that's not really something that students are probably thinking about because they have been really used to [00:22:00] seeing very limited numbers of people in person and maintaining a distance and wearing a mask at all times. So have you heard anything about that from students, Lauren? What is your perspective there on how students can maybe navigate those conversations?

Lauren Garrett:

I was actually just talking about this with students on Friday because students were talking about going to the local amusement park here [00:22:30] in Williamsburg. And some students were very much for it because there were certain parameters in place and others were very cautious about it. And it came back to the conversation that we had, albeit a brief conversation, but one that I think is really important. And that's a conversation around the numbers and where you are on that COVID scale. That one to five, it was an article that was written by, I believe it was Carrie Dolan [00:23:00] from William & Mary faculty about knowing your number in the sense of what your comfort level is. And I think because we've stayed in, I call it our William & Mary bubble, in terms of health and safety and community oriented action, taking that a lot of students are realizing now when they visit a local grocery store or they've gone home, or they're talking to their friends and family [00:23:30] about their everyday actions, that they're realizing perhaps how sheltered they are living here on campus.

For those that might be tuning in who are remote and who have been home this entire time, or have been away from campus, it may be surprising to hear that some of the peers, some of your peers, who've been on campus all semester, haven't gone into a retail shop unless it's been alongside Richmond Road or down off of Duke of Gloucester street. [00:24:00] There just hasn't been that push to be out and about in the greater retail community. And there hasn't, for some people, been a need. And so there've been a lot of conversations about how students have said, "I'm having to think about how do I frame what am I comfortable with, what am I not comfortable with?" Some students who've completed the survey to sign up for an exit test have done so being mindful of [00:24:30] family members or friends who might be compromised or might be in higher risk areas. And other students have said that they're not being tested because that's not a concern that their family has based off of the way that they're operating.

And so I think the students who've expressed some disconnect with perhaps how others are interacting with one another have said they've already started to plant seeds of conversations about what they're comfortable with and what [00:25:00] they're not. And in a lot of cases, it's come back down to that communication. And it's not a one-way street in terms of communication. I think sometimes we just don't know what the others have experienced because we haven't been there and we haven't seen it. And so what might seem scary

for some might not be for others. And what's top of mind for me here in Williamsburg might not be top of mind for you back in [00:25:30] the tri-state or even the DC Metro area. And so I think, again, it's about listening for understanding versus listening for your response. Because I think that that's what needs to be happening is we need to understand the why behind the actions that folks are taking or the potential risk that they're putting themselves in.

And again, we recognize that not everyone at our community necessarily [00:26:00] agrees with wearing a mask a hundred percent of the time, but they're abiding by it on our campus because they know that ultimately the strength of the community is at stake. And so what happens when you go home or go back into your home communities, we're going to hope that you make decisions that are good for you and good for your family and good for your friends and good for wherever that place is. And then when you [00:26:30] return to us that you'll understand that perhaps we're going to do things a little bit differently based off of the fact that everybody has been in a very, it's been in varied locales, for the past seven to eight weeks, and we have to readjust to being back together once again. Goes back to the communication, goes back to what you said about the owning, a little bit of the owning your own take in your own opinion versus projecting on others and [00:27:00] the listening.

I can't get past that one, it's about the listening and actually opening your ears and hearing what people have to say instead of shutting them down. And just assuming that you're always correct, that's a hard thing, but it's a good thing to do.

Heather Deere:

And I think framing it and the conversation of know your number by Kerry, I think that's a great way to have the conversation if you're a little bit fearful about maybe having the conversation. [00:27:30] And I think too, it's about sitting down to have that conversation with the understanding that you're going to learn from the person that you're having the conversation with. And that if your goal really is to have a conversation and a dialogue and a discussion that you're not sitting down to the table to have that conversation wanting to assert your perspective. And I think that's just important to understand as many families have been operating on so many different state, local, federal [00:28:00] policies related to COVID-19 and it's always changing. We were having, as we're recording this, the governor of Virginia established new guidelines, not two, three days ago. And I think that's going to be true across many States as we continue to move through winter and temperatures get colder.

People are gathering for the holidays, this has been a really long year and we're getting tired. So I think [00:28:30] that's just something to keep in mind is that it's going to be changing and we might need to revisit this conversation as things change. But I think that's a component that we would be remiss not to talk about because it's so unique to this winter break.

Lauren Garrett: Well, I think suffice to say, Heather, there are so many things still up in the air when it comes to what 2021 has in store for us. And we know that the fall 2020 semester [00:29:00] has had its ups and it's had its downs, but we know that we have definitely been stronger together as a community. And we know that William & Mary will continue its path forward together being mindful of both the little C community and the big C community, that happens on campus and across the greater Williamsburg area. And we hope of course, that those that are listening, that you do find time for yourselves. [00:29:30] You do take time for yourself to reconnect with those that perhaps you haven't been able to stay in touch with as deeply or have missed out on visiting or connecting with due to the compressed semester. But given this time of year, it's a good time to think back and reflect and find ways that you are going to make 2021 a better year or perhaps even your best year yet.

And [00:30:00] know that those of us who work on the Decipher Podcast, that we are here for you on that journey and look forward to being part of your journey moving forward as well. Heather, any final words before we wrap up today's episode?

Heather Deere: I think final words for me, I'm thankful that as a community, we were able to reach this point in the semester and we owe all of that success to our students for really being intentional about [00:30:30] safeguarding the health of one another and being committed to a condensed semester, which was very difficult. So I mirror your sentiment and that I hope that they can find time for themselves. And I hope that it's truly a restorative break.

Lauren Garrett: Absolutely. And with that, we wish you all the best that this upcoming break and season has to offer and look forward to having you join us on our next podcast episode. Where we actually will be joined by [00:31:00] Shelly Laurenzo, our Associate Director for Academic Advising. As we talk about spring registration. It's hard to believe that also will be happening just around the corner, but look forward to talking with her a little bit more about what students can expect. Not just in terms of the academic course delivery in the spring semester, but what we can expect through the registration process and timeline. So with that, be well, be good. And we'll talk to you soon.

Speaker 1: Thank [00:31:30] you so much for tuning in. To check out our show notes, please visit our website decipher.blogs.wm.edu. Take care.