TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

College Admissions Field Welcomes a New Leader, Dr. Angel B. Pérez, Who Sees Its Strengths and Faults

As a high school student, a college counselor created what Dr. Angel B. Pérez calls his "pivotal moment"—one that would set him on a path to college, a career in higher education, and now the chance to lead NACAC, the nation's largest organization of college admissions counselors. His path from the South Bronx to the academy is extraordinary as are the times in which he steps into this leadership role.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly, at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, it's a pleasure to welcome Dr. Angel B. Pérez, who has just been named the incoming CEO of NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. For the past five years, Dr. Pérez has been vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College. He was responsible for admissions, financial aid, Posse Scholars, career development, student retention, institutional research, and the Individualized Degree Program. At Trinity, he is credited with transforming enrollment by adopting a values-based, student-centered approach. Known as an advocate for test-optional policies, liberal arts, first-generation students, and internationalization, he has served on the New England Board of Higher Education and is chair of deans for the New England Small College Athletic Conference.

Dr. Pérez holds a BS from Skidmore College and an MA from Columbia University, and a PhD from Claremont Graduate University, and a Certification in Higher Education

Pedagogy from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University. Angel Pérez, welcome to Key Conversations.

Angel Pérez: Thank you for having me.

Lawrence: You have had a distinguished career as the head of admissions at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and you're about to become head of NACAC, as I said, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, which is the professional association of over something like 13,000 college and university undergraduate admissions counselors and directors, so I've got a lot of things I'd love to talk to you about about college admissions today. In particular, with what's going on with the COVID-19 pandemic, but before that, I do want to just do a little bit of your story and your path, so you were born in Puerto Rico, right?

Pérez: I was. Yes. In Ponce.

Lawrence: And found your way up to the South Bronx.

Pérez: I did, yeah. Just like many first-generation families, my parents moved to the mainland United States in search of a better life, and we ended up in the South Bronx. I actually like to say that New York is a suburb of San Juan, because there are more Puerto Ricans in New York than there are on the island.

Lawrence: And so, your parents came when you were still a pretty little boy. Do you have memories of growing up in Puerto Rico before that?

Pérez: I mean, I was pretty young, but I have memories. I grew up in Ponce, not too far from the water, and so I still remember just being able to walk outside my door, and a few blocks later be out near the beach, and I specifically remember when I moved to New York. I actually moved in the middle of the winter, and the next day there was a blizzard in New York, and it was the first-time feeling snow, and I was excited, but traumatized at the same time, because I'd never felt so cold in my life.

Lawrence: Not too many blizzards outside San Juan.

Pérez: None at all.

Lawrence: So, from the South Bronx, you're gonna go on to ultimately get a PhD, be a Fulbright Scholar. That's quite a path, so tell us a little bit about growing up in South Bronx, and how did you find your way from there on the route that's going to lead you to being the head of college admissions counselors for the United States.

Pérez: Yeah. It's actually quite an unusual story, but I guess I'll start with high school. Really, one of the reasons I do this work and have dedicated my life to it is because a high school counselor and an admissions officer really put me on an entirely different trajectory. I went to a low-income high school in the city of New York. The average high school counselor to student ratio was about 600 students to one, and it was actually a school counselor that was not my counselor who tapped me on the shoulder one day

when I was delivering a report to her, who said, “Young man, you are extraordinary. Have you ever thought about going to college?”

Lawrence: So, let me stop you there. So, what was that moment like, when that counselor said that?

Pérez: I call it my pivotal moment, because it just stopped me in my tracks, and I didn’t even know how to respond, because my only reference for going to college at the time was watching the Cosby Show, because I didn’t grow up in a neighborhood where people went to college, and I didn’t have those kinds of role models. And so, I think I had dreamed of going to college, but I didn’t even know that was a possibility, so it was an awe-enhancing moment, but I didn’t even know how to respond to her.

Lawrence: And that is ultimately gonna lead you to, of all places, Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, Upstate New York, right?

Pérez: Yes, it did. So, this counselor walked me through the admissions process, and I ended up applying to and being admitted to Skidmore College in Upstate New York. A wonderful, small liberal arts college, and I was admitted through the Higher Education Opportunity Program, which is a New York state program for low-income students to get the opportunity to attend and afford a place like Skidmore.

Lawrence: So, tell us a little bit about that program. I mean, how did that raise the possibility and indeed the visibility of obtaining a college degree for you?

Pérez: I think for me, both Skidmore and the opportunity to attend through the HEOP program, that was really life changing. It put my life on an entirely different course. It would not have been possible for me to attend Skidmore without that program, because it really fully funded your education. Usually, someone like me, especially who didn’t really understand the financial aid process or the admissions process, wouldn’t have even applied to a school like Skidmore, because I would have looked at the price tag and run in the other direction. But what I realized after having applied to Skidmore, as well as the City University of New York and the State University of New York, is that in the end, Skidmore was actually more affordable for me, because of the fact that they were able to use their private funds, as well as this state grant, to fully fund my education.

Lawrence: So, what did these new classmates of yours make of you and what did you make of them?

Pérez: Well, you know, I think this is one of the reasons I’m so passionate about the small, residential, liberal arts experience, is the fact that you bring together all these students from all over the country, all over the world, who are really different, with different belief systems and backgrounds, and you almost socially engineer this experience where they have to interact and learn from each other. I immediately was placed with a roommate my first year who was also from New York City, but he was a white, wealthy young man. We’re actually still friends till this day, but he learned so much from me about growing up in a different part of New York City, about not being able to afford things. I learned so much from him, and his family, and his culture.

And so, for me, it was actually a really exciting experience, even though obviously it had its hardships, as well. At the time when I was at Skidmore, there were very few students of color, and so navigating that space in the beginning was challenging. But I started by really trying to work within students in my comfort zone, so other students of color, students from New York City, and once I got comfortable there, I began to expand my circle really across the entire campus by getting involved in organizations.

Lawrence: And what did you actually wind up focusing on in your studies at Skidmore?

Pérez: So, I ended up majoring in both social work and government, and interesting enough, it wasn't because I had an early particular passion in either of those, but it was because I was just so blown away by faculty in those different departments. So, I remember actually in that Liberal Studies 1 course, listening to a lecture by Pat Ferraioli, who was a government professor then, and just being really blown away by the way that she deconstructed government and systems for me. And I thought, "I want to take a course with her."

And next thing you knew, I had taken four courses with her, and found other fascinating, wonderful professors in that department. Same thing happened with both social work and sociology, that all of a sudden I was standing before these professors who were deconstructing social systems for me and I thought, "That's actually really fascinating." So, for me, I ended up majoring in two things that I couldn't have imagined, and it's one of the pieces of advice I give to students these days, that you have to go to college with the possibility and the open mindedness that you may fall in love with something you didn't even know exists before.

Lawrence: So, let's talk a little bit about the admissions world now. So, I can remember sitting down with my head of admissions, and we talked about the metrics of the class size we were looking for more or less, the quality, objective quality numbers of that class, the diversity numbers of that class, and then the net tuition revenue that we needed to yield from that class. How do you balance all those factors?

Pérez: Yeah, it's quite complicated. I always talk about it's a tricky balance. Admissions is an art, as well as a science, because you're really talking about the business of people. You're talking about the business of young people. But at the same time, colleges and universities have a bottom line, and so they really have to tread carefully around balancing institutional mission with revenue, and enrollment officers are on the front lines of those goals, and often contradictory goals every single year.

So, many colleges and universities, what they do is start out by obviously recruiting a class all over the country and all over the world, really trying to cast the net as wide as possible, do a lot of storytelling around the benefits of their institution. Then there's sort of a funnel that happens, where you actually have an applicant pool and you try to bring in the students that closest meet the kinds of goals that the institution is looking for, and then eventually you have the period that we're in right now, actually, which is called yield season, which is the students you admit, you try to convince to actually

enroll. And historically, it's become harder and harder to actually predict what that number is going to be, because of the changing landscape in higher education.

Lawrence: So, obviously we want to come to the particular year in a minute, but I still want to stay with your general approach and theory of admissions, so even before the current pandemic crisis that we're dealing with, you would say in the past years it's become more and more difficult to predict how that class is gonna fall, and who's actually gonna come and accept your offer?

Pérez: Yes, it is. And there are a lot of variables to it. I think a part of it is not only student behavior and student expectations have changed over time, but also the reality that there's been a demographic shift in this country. There are fewer students who can actually afford to pay high tuition, and many colleges and universities, particularly private colleges and universities, have really had increased tuition faster than inflation, and that's very, very difficult to keep up. But at the same time, there have been what I call marketing wars that have really exacerbated this. You have a common application, where students for the most part use one application to apply to potentially 10, 20, 30 schools if they would like.

And so, the levers that enrollment managers had in years past to be able to predict are actually becoming less useful over time.

Lawrence: So, how do you go about doing that? Take us through the process that you're going through. For most people among our listeners, they went through this process. Some of them went through it with their children, and it seems a little bit like a black box. They applied, they got yeses and nos from different schools, some wait lists in between, and then ultimately it shook down, they went to one school. But what does it look like from your side in terms of developing the kind of class that you want to see, and having it come out the other end with the people who actually matriculate come that fall?

Pérez: When students actually apply, the first part of the reader evaluation process I call reading your conscience, right? And that's really where the admissions counselors are reading hundreds, sometimes thousands of files, and I tell them this is the opportunity for you to read your conscience. To ask yourself the question, "Is this student a good fit for the institution? Is this student ready for the work at my institution? And does this student deserve a spot at the institution?" So, that's sort of the pure admissions process that most of us got into this business for. We absolutely love that piece of it.

But usually, particularly at selective institutions, you have more students in your pool that you can actually admit, so you have to start figuring out how to whittle down some of those applicants. And so, one of the things that comes into play, usually in the middle of the process, is what we call institutional priorities. And so, it might mean balancing how much revenue a particular class is going to bring in. You're also going to be asking yourself the question how much financial aid can we actually afford to give out to each of the students that are coming in? And then each institution has different priorities, whether it be priorities around a particular major that they might be trying to increase profile, or sometimes a school is trying to get more geographic diversity, or more

international students, so all of those factors come into play. And then at the very end of the process is when you really start doing the econometric modeling behind the scenes, where basically what you are doing is trying to predict based on behavior from previous classes, who will enroll and how much revenue will that actually bring the institution, so that the institution could meet its budget goals in the future?

Lawrence: So, you have been very involved in using the enrollment management system that is probably fairly opaque to many people who've been the recipients of that process or the participants in that process, but is now pretty established at most university and college admissions offices. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what that model works like?

Pérez: Sure. It's different at different institutions, and there's a whole industry that has actually been built around this now, because most admissions officers, they're not economists. They're not statisticians. And so, as you grow up in the profession, you certainly gain some skills, but sometimes you need help either from your own institution's institutional research and data offices, or you hire an external firm who is actually going to run all of your data for you and do the predictive modeling for you. But I don't know of any school around the country, or increasingly around the world, who would admit a class these days without some sort of predictive modeling.

Lawrence: At Trinity, that's what you did? You had someone doing that predictive modeling for you?

Pérez: We actually hired a firm to build a model and to run it every single year for us.

Lawrence: And how much of this is, as you say, art as opposed to science? Are there specific targets you're trying to hit, or is it more feel than that?

Pérez: The science is the econometric modeling and the targets. That's where you really have to get down to the data. But the reality of the matter is college admissions is still an art. You are talking about 17-year-old behavior. I actually joke with my friends that I must have been crazy to get into a business where my success relies on the whims of 17-year-olds. You know, and for my friends who have teenagers in their homes, they know exactly what I'm talking about.

So, a lot of this is also really about not only running numbers in a model, but really understanding teenagers, understanding marketplace, understanding pressure points around finances that families may be feeling, understanding what stories resonate with families around your particular institution. So, it is an art and a science all at the same time.

Lawrence: So, let's talk about cost a little bit. You very rarely get more than a sentence or two into any discussion with a person about higher education without cost coming up, questions about whether there should be free public education available to people, questions about whether colleges and universities can continue the cost that they have, so what do you think the future is from someone who's involved on the admissions side of the issue of cost in higher education in America?

Pérez: I think cost is actually one of the most important conversations that we need to have nationally. I do think that one of the opportunities that COVID-19 is going to present to us is maybe the opportunity to rethink how higher education is funded. The reality of the matter is higher education is a public good, but the way that we fund it really leans towards a private good. So, if you go to college, and you get an education, and you do well, that's a private good and you're the benefit. But the reality is that there are all these signs, and data, and research that show that higher education does contribute to a more positive society.

However, a big reason why higher education is so expensive is because it is a very expensive operation. In the case of Trinity College, I usually say to my colleagues we run a city 24 hours a day. We house students, we feed them, we entertain them, we provide them with education, and we also hire a very talented and educated workforce, and that is not inexpensive. However, this example I used a couple of years ago when I was on the local NPR station that at my institution, 3% of my financial aid budget comes from the federal government, and .03% comes from the state of Connecticut. And so, the rest of our financial aid is actually subsidized, 97%, by the college. That is not a long-term sustainable model, and so really what we need to be having is not just a conversation about how can colleges cut costs to make it more affordable to students, but how can the United States step up to subsidize education, so that we can remain competitive in the world's workforce?

Lawrence: We have one really good experiment for massive federal involvement in that, and I'm not actually referring to the 1965 Higher Education Act and all that came with that. I'm referring to the GI Bill, where we had an entire generation come back from serving in Europe and in the Pacific, and get their educations, and that generation transformed America in some ways. Would you see us moving back towards some kind of a model of some kind of service, whether it's literally serving in the Armed Services, or something else, that is then rewarded by subsidized or indeed free college tuition?

Pérez: I would absolutely welcome any other model that thinks creatively about how we might be able to fund students, whether that's service, and then students have to spend time doing things that are going to help them to subsidize the finances of their education. We do have the opportunity to change course and to really think about the future of higher education. Right now, in the COVID-19 crisis, I've been thinking deeply about this, because I think we need higher education now more than ever. If you think about all of the people on the front lines, and all of the people trying to solve this problem right now, they all needed higher education, and the people who are going to actually solve the problems of the future will need to go through substantial higher education training. And so, this is really an opportunity for us to rethink the entire system.

Lawrence: The person who's going to be treating you in the hospital, the person who's going to be searching for a cure to this dreaded disease, is somebody who went in all likelihood through the American higher education system. We'll all be the beneficiaries of that.

Pérez: Absolutely.

Lawrence: So, you're almost done with your tenure at Trinity, so it's not quite fair to ask this question yet, but as you look back on it, as you anticipate looking back on it, what would you say is the biggest success of your time at Trinity, and what would you say is the biggest challenge that is the one you never quite got the way you wanted to?

Pérez: Wow. That's a great question. I actually haven't taken time to think about that. But I guess I'll start by saying Trinity has been an extraordinary experience and I've loved being there for the past five years. I worked for an extraordinary president and board and that makes all of the difference, and I was there through a time of extraordinary change. And so, as a higher education professional, to be at an institution that is making extraordinary changes after an almost 200-year history was actually quite exciting and quite an honor. I think the things I'm most proud of are the way that we've been able to diversify the student body, to increase funds for financial aid, to really create more access to the kind of education that I think is extraordinary, because I had access to that kind of education.

Lawrence: You certainly picked an interesting time to be coming to NACAC, the Association for College Admission Counseling. It is an extraordinarily complex time for higher education. So what happens in the United States if a large number of colleges cannot open in the fall for live classes? What does that do to the higher education sector?

Pérez: I think it's going to be really challenging for higher education if a large number of campuses cannot open in the fall. I think a part of it is because if you don't open in the fall, even if you're online, you can't charge what you normally would charge for your tuition, and for residential colleges, obviously room and board, as well, so it really is going to accelerate some of the pressures that colleges and universities were facing around their finances.

There may be colleges and universities that close. Those institutions were probably on their way there, but the pandemic has accelerated that process. I also worry a little bit about the most vulnerable student populations. There was a report that came out last week that showed that over 250,000 of the lowest-income students in America did not renew their FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid this year. That in itself is a crisis. The fact that we have the potential of over 250,000 low-income students not returning to college in the fall, because without the FAFSA, you're not gonna get the aid, which means you're not going to return. And so, it's not even just about whether or not colleges are open and online, but also this entire pandemic has the potential to really create serious inequity issues in higher education moving forward.

I actually tweeted that story when it came out, and I said there's still time to change this, and I heard from several public high school counselors who saw my tweet, and they said that they believe that a big reason why this is happening is that usually when school is in session, low-income schools would do these massive FAFSA workshops, where they would sit students down and their families at the computer, and they would actually help them to fill this out. So much of the college admissions process and financial aid process, particularly for low-income students, takes a lot of handholding, because they don't necessarily have experience. They're first generation, they don't have parents who

went to college, and so I think what it's going to take is a massive communications effort, not just from colleges and universities, but also from high schools, even if it's virtual, to really help students understand the implications of something that might seem small, like not filling out a FAFSA, to what that trickle down effect could actually be.

Lawrence: One of the questions that people are talking about in so many different areas of our society right now, higher education no exception, what do you imagine when you think about admissions and financial aid and access to higher education in America?

Pérez: I think there's an incredible opportunity for change here. I have been in awe of how quickly institutions are pivoting and changing their admissions process. I mean, in the last few months, many, many, colleges and universities have dropped testing requirements. They're going test optional. Some are going test blind. Others are dropping other kinds of requirements that seemed cumbersome and bureaucratic. Some colleges and universities are dropping things like enrollment deposits or requiring less paperwork in order to qualify for financial aid. Really, what I would love to see on the other side of this is for colleges and universities to really ask themselves, "Did we really need that information in the first place? Is there an opportunity here to simplify this process, so that we actually make it easier to apply to college?"

There's data out there that shows that there are many, many students every single year in this country who start the FAFSA, which is really a pipeline to college, and they just never finish the FAFSA, and part of it is because it's so cumbersome, over 100 questions. If you're applying to a private school that also requires the CSS Profile, there is the potential that you could be answering up to 300 questions, and so it's no wonder that many students just give up.

And so, for me, one of the things that I think is a great opportunity is right now, colleges are testing the waters of what would an admissions process look like with less information, and it may be a wonderful opportunity to make those kinds of changes permanent.

Lawrence: Those of us in the higher education sector based here in Washington, D.C. are anxiously awaiting your arrival to take over NACAC. Angel, you and I will both be part of something called the Washington Higher Education Secretariat, a group that meets on a monthly basis to talk about issues of higher education. As you undoubtedly know, that group has now gone to weekly phone calls. The issues have never been greater, the challenges have never been greater, and it sounds to me as if you are arriving just in time. We're looking forward to welcoming you to Washington, D.C. Thanks for being with me on Key Conversations today.

Pérez: Thanks for having me and I'm looking forward to working with you and all my colleagues in the Higher Education Secretariat.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams &Co. Cedric Wilson mixed it. Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer on the show, and our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To

learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholars program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "*College Admissions Field Welcomes a New Leader, Dr. Angel B. Pérez, Who Sees Its Strengths and Faults." Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa,* The Phi Beta Kappa Society, June 26, 2020. www.pbk.org.

Produced by: