

# Lindsey Vahl Dean Episode mixdown

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Illinois State University, Kinesiology and Recreation, Alumni Engagement, Career Exploration, Exercise Science, First-Generation College Student, Community Service, Time Management, Leadership Style, Collaborative Leadership, Alumni Association, Student Involvement, Financial Aid, Mentorship, Prioritization.

## SPEAKERS

Lindsay Vahl Dean, Kara Snyder

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Kara Snyder 00:00

Kara. Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to Lindsay Vahl Dean. Lindsay is an alum from the School of Kinesiology and Recreation, and is currently serving as the assistant vice president of alumni engagement at Northwestern University and the executive director of the northwestern Alumni Association. Welcome and thank you for being here.



Lindsay Vahl Dean 00:49

Thank you, Kara for inviting me.



Kara Snyder 00:51

Well, I would love to start at the beginning. Tell us. Why did you choose ISU, wow.

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 00:58

Well, this makes me take a truck back in time, because this is my 20th anniversary of when I graduated this spring. So a lot of nostalgia. When I was looking at colleges, I was trying to determine what was the best fit. How should I think about my major when I was in high school, I was really interested in accounting and business, and so I knew that the College of Business at Illinois State was really strong, and so I actually was an accounting major when I enrolled at the university. And I chose ISU because it was not too close and not too far from home. Originally from Aurora, Illinois, I had a lot of opportunity to think about where I wanted to go, and being two hours away was really appealing to me. Also, one of my siblings was at a school not too far away, so that allowed me to be in close proximity. And so I got here, and you know, I just loved it. The rest is history, as I like to say.

K

Kara Snyder 02:00

So tell me then about the hard pivot from accounting to Kinesiology and Recreation, because they're close together on the quad, but not mentally.

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 02:13

Yes, yes. So my choice of major was encouraged by some classes that I took in high school, and I also was a three sport athlete in high school, I was always connected to the athletic component of the work that was happening, and I really after my first semester, I was really perplexed at what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, as probably most 18 year olds are, and I was encouraged by my advisor from University College to take a class called career choice, which is an IDS class, or was an IDS class at the time. And so I enrolled in that course my second semester freshman year to really do some career exploration to figure out where was the intersectionality of what I like to do, what I could see myself doing long term. And so I went through a couple different iterations. And at the end, I was drawn to the College of Applied Science and Technology, specifically the School of Kinesiology and Recreation. And I was looking at athletic training and exercise science and fitness at the time. That's when Daphne Walker, my beloved advisor, started at Illinois State. And so I had a conversation with her, and she said, Well, you should probably like get some advice. So I went and observed what was happening in the different majors so and one of the components that really led me to look at exercise signs a little closer is athletic training was a little bit more intrusive as far as like time commitment, regarding the number of hours you had to do in order to reach your degree, as far as observation hours. And so I was like, do I really want to do that? Is exercise science more broad and wide? And so with that in consideration, I went with exercise science and fitness because I could do more things with that. And so that's how I landed in exercise science and fitness, and I wouldn't change it for the world. It really was a well rounded experience. And I had the opportunity to do some fascinating things, observing at the YMCA. I did my practicum work at donor health and wellness, and even in my current role or previous roles, I still utilize my degree, although my trajectory, career wise, has taken a different path.

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Kara Snyder 04:54

And what I love about your story is how it seems that is you created this really safe space. For you to explore. You know, you took this class, you had this advisor tell you to observe. You were really able to get a lot of information before committing to changing your major. And I think that's really interesting.

L

Lindsay Vahl Dean 05:14

Yeah, so I was very thankful when Daphne became advisor, and I had a like, I mentioned a University College Advisor previously, and so between those two people, they really were helpful in making sure that I was making the best decision for myself. It really was helpful to have cheerleaders and people that you knew you could lean into. And I probably would be remiss if I didn't mention like the importance of having representation, because having people that look like you or come from the same kind of backgrounds is important to see in the college campus. And so for me as a young black woman, it was important to see Daphne in that space. My undergraduate advisor from University College was Maggie m a Latina, and so that was really important to have to see the underrepresented folks in spaces leading and supporting the students.

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Kara Snyder 06:14

And I know Daphne has had such an impact on so many students during her time here, so it's so fun to hear that she was a part of your story at the beginning, and that now to see her retire, really just feels very full circle. So thank you for sharing that absolutely, absolutely and I'm looking at your bio and so your experiences at Illinois State did not end in the classroom by any means. You were super involved during your time on campus, so I would love if you would speak to what drove you to try all of those different activities.

L

**Lindsay Vahl Dean 06:48**

I'm one of those people that doesn't say no. I think I really got the bug when I was younger. I was in Girl Scouts when I was in elementary school, and so through that vehicle. I just had so many opportunities to learn about different cultures, different people, different careers, how to work with people. So I lean into the Girl Scout experience that really allowed me to think about how I wanted to be engaged. I saw that through my high school experience, and then when I came to Illinois State, my extracurricular time looked very different, and so I was exploring, what can I do to make the best use of my time and experience while I'm here, I know that this is a short four year experience, and how can I take advantage of as many things as possible? So I actually came in a little early to become part of the big red marching machine, and that really was a great space to meet, primarily a group of women, because I was in the color guard. And so you're you have this time with just that group on a couple days a week, and then you come together with a larger band, and it was just really a great space to have community before school even started. And as a first generation college student, those are things that are scary. It's really scary. First of all, taking the leap of faith of going to college and not having too many people in your close circle that have done those things and can tell you how to navigate spaces. So that community really allowed me to do that. And then I was like, hey, what else do I want to get involved in? One of my friends that I met within the first few weeks of school invited me to a meeting. Sometimes you don't even know where you're going, because they're like, oh, just come along. And so with some now, who I would call friends, learned about they were trying to reestablish a group that had previously kind of gone to the wayside as a RSO on campus, and so they were trying to figure out how to intersect various components of the pieces they thought were missing for students, and This registered student organization became what's known as profound pioneers Entertainment Group, which started in the the fall of 2002 and so through that, we created a space for community, for entertainment, for open mic nights, and really allowing people to show their creative side. And that was something that was missing in the community that was identified, and then from there, just kind of if there was something that scratched an itch for me, I said yes. And so that's how I kind of started to get more and more involved in the campus community. After my first semester, I did consider not continuing. At ISU for financial reasons, and so one of my mentors in the Office of Admissions said, first, you need to go talk to your financial aid advisor, and second, you should apply for a job in the Office of Admissions, we have a few positions open. So I started working in the office of admissions, doing data entry, which then transformed into an opportunity to become an admissions Ambassador the next the following year. So I feel like my steps were already ordered, and it was just up to me to walk in that space.

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**Kara Snyder 10:37**

So tell us then, what did that teach you as far as time management. What did you learn during that time? Because you're balancing a job, you're balancing activities, you're balancing time in the classroom. How did that become, then, a transferable skill that has helped you today?

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**Lindsay Vahl Dean 10:56**

Wow. What it really taught me is that you can really make a lot of things happen in short order. And it's about the prioritization. Prioritization about what it means to people externally from you, and what the prioritization is for you. And sometimes you wish those things were congruent. They're not always congruent. And so you have to figure out what you have to what you have to put your time and effort in on the front end, or what you can kind of let go, because time management was a struggle for me. I can remember it might have been my junior year. I went to the Career Center and I said, Hey, I need some help with my time management. I've over committed. So I will, I will say that I was stretched pretty thin and because I didn't know how to say no. And they were like, well, you need to give something up. And then it was like crickets for me, and I'm like, Hmm, do I want to give something of or do I need to figure out how to balance within the space that I'm currently committing to? And so I just had to rethink how I had to position things to be successful, because I am a person that is extensively motivated, and so because I get my energy from people, I'm involved in a lot of activities, I need to think about, how do I balance those pieces to be as successful as possible? So I did take a step back in some instances. I also had to have three jobs when I was on campus, because I was first in my family to go to school. And I also had to think about how to pay for some things. And so I had three part time jobs, and so this was part of the whole balancing act. And so the nice thing is, is that when you work on campus, if you're done with the work that you've been given, and there's nothing else going on, typically you can then work on schoolwork or whatever else is going on in your personal life. And so that is a nice balance of having an on campus job is that you you have to figure out how you can multitask in some spaces. And then also think about, Do I need to be doing all these things all at the same time? And so in some instances, when maybe sorority stuff was really busy, I would let other things not be as much of a time suck for me. So it was all about, you know, picking and choosing. And I really think in my professional career now, when I'm balancing so many different constituencies, it really helps, because you're like, I've been here before, it just looks different. The set of circumstances are a little different, but you're still figuring out how to leverage what the priorities are, well.

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**Kara Snyder 13:50**

And one of the reasons I was so excited to talk to you today is that you really continue that theme by being very involved and active outside of your time at work still today, and that includes several service roles, and I think that's so important because we have a lot of students now that are, you know, prepping for graduation, focused on getting that job, but really being it's what you do outside of work and building that community that helps make you who you are. So can you tell us, how do you seek out ways to be involved in and create that community for yourself. If you have any of those experiences you'd like to share, sure.

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 14:28

So currently, I prioritize my time to give back directly through the Boys and Girls Club. I'm active as a council member of the Jordan Club of Chicago, and it is an opportunity for me to give back directly to the community. I've also been a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated since the spring of 2004 and so while I'm not as involved in my sorority work currently, the work that I'm doing within the Boys and Girls Club, and creating spaces for service is meaningful for me. Someone has invested their time, their efforts. When I was younger, I used to go to the summer camps at the YMCA, I was doing Girl Scouts. So I've always grown up in a space of service. So I also understand what it means to give back, what it means to give back with your time and in alumni engagement, we talk about a lot of times. You might hear time, talent and treasure, and those change depending on what you have going on during your life stage. So right now I have some time to give. I can definitely give my talent, and I'm looking for ways that, how do I engage with my treasure that will make an impact in the communities that I feel is important to my well being and can be the well being for others.

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Kara Snyder 15:56

Thank you so much for sharing. I love that perspective, so in your role, I would love if you would share with us what is a day in the life like for you?

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 16:06

Well, no two days look exactly the same, which is probably one of the things that I enjoy most about the work that I do in alumni engagement. I'd like to say my role sits at the intersection of strategy relationships and then seeing things through the execution. So on any given day, I might be partnering with colleagues across the university. I might be helping to advance priorities for the association itself. I might be preparing for meetings with alumni or various constituencies, or thinking through with my team on how a program or initiative can better serve the greater alumni community. And so I think a big part of my day is thinking about people and ideas and making sure that the right stakeholders are at the table. I do a lot of work with alignments and helping move important work forward. So I think I spend a lot of my day problem solving and thinking about how we continuously improve alumni experiences and how they connect back to their alma mater, which I am so passionate about, Illinois State. So I utilize my own experience with Illinois State to leverage that for those who are at Northwestern are alumni of Northwestern.

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Kara Snyder 17:27

And I know you said that one of your favorite things about your job is that every day is a little bit different, which I love. What would you say the most challenging thing about your job is,

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 17:38

well, I think one of the greatest challenges is there's always more ideas and opportunities than time and resources to pursue all of the great thought partnership that's happening. This work is complex, although we are not you know, we're not solving in the any worldly problems, necessarily, but the expectations are high, both from alumni and from within the institution, so a big part of the challenge is again, thinking about how to prioritize effectively, making sure we're in alignment with various stakeholders, and thinking about what does have the greatest impact, whether that be on programming or Getting volunteers connected to the university, or deepening and widening the alumni who are taking advantage of what the university has to offer them. So it does require a lot of balance and strategic thinking with that practical use case and execution.

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Kara Snyder 18:36

How would you describe your leadership style?

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Lindsay Vahl Dean 18:38

I would like to say that my leadership style is collaborative, and I like to drive that idea through the values, the values of me as an individual, the values of the institution and the division as well as I'm representing a consistency that is over 260,000 people. So I want to think about the best outcomes, and what happens when people feel heard, they feel like they're respected and they are empowered to contribute in a meaningful way. So I do try to also lead with accountability. I'm a leader, but I'm also human, so that does leave space for mistakes. No one is perfect, but when that does happen, how do I clarify? How do I make sure that people know that I want to do things with the utmost integrity? And so that means having conversations around alignment on goals and expectations, and also creating a space for creativity growth and having a space where people feel safe. I think that's really important in any workspace, is that people will say, if they feel like they are giving something back, that they are accountable and that they are appreciated, and so at the end of the day, I want people to know that they're supportive. And challenge in a good way, and that we are all proud of the work that we're accomplishing together, because together, we're stronger.

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Kara Snyder 20:08

Together, we are stronger. I love that. Well, Lindsay, we are going to finish with a speed round, so I want you to just go with your first instinct on these questions. Okay, texting or talking depends.

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 20:20  
Depends on the experience talking, because I think that provides some clarity.

K Kara Snyder 20:26  
Morning person or night owl.

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 20:29  
Morning person, 430

K Kara Snyder 20:31  
I love that I'm right there with you. There's not many of us, so I hear you get more done. If you have a free Saturday? How are you spending it?

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 20:43  
I'm probably starting early with a workout. I am probably going grocery shopping and maybe getting a little TV, time in and time with my friends and family.

K Kara Snyder 20:53  
Speaking of grocery shopping, what is your go to? Easy dinner?

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 20:58  
Probably chicken tacos.

K Kara Snyder 21:01  
What's the best trip you've ever taken?

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 21:04

Ooh, last year I went to Europe, and I also went to Paris for the Olympics. So I would say my European travels have really, all together, been an amazing experience, or set of experiences.

K Kara Snyder 21:19

Oh, that sounds so fun. And I ask every alum that comes on the podcast Avantis gondola or pub, two cheese balls.

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 21:28

Interesting. Good choices. Both good choices, I would probably say cheese balls.

K Kara Snyder 21:35

All right. And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 21:43

I would say, take advantage of the space that Illinois State provides regarding an opportunity to learn and grow, take chances, make mistakes, because the mistakes are a little bit different when you're in a more supportive environment than when you are in the real world, per se, and so I would say, take a chance on yourself, and all you can do is be great.

K Kara Snyder 22:10

Thank you for that advice, and thanks again for being here with us.

L Lindsay Vahl Dean 22:13

Lindsay, you're welcome. Thank you. Thank you so much for inviting me.



Kara Snyder 22:18

That was Lindsay Vahl Dean, the assistant vice president of alumni engagement at Northwestern University and the executive director of the northwestern Alumni Association. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast, alumni foreign