

Episode 64 - Rebekka Whitehead

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SPEAKERS

Rebekka Whitehead, Moira McCullough



Moira McCullough 00:00

Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. I'm your host, Moira McCullough and today we are talking with Rebekka Whitehead about how students can get ready for their next academic adventure.



Rebekka Whitehead 00:09

I help parents do that as well as you know, where do you want to be at the end of all of this? The messy middle, it's a lot of stress in between, but what success and what's the win.



Moira McCullough 00:25

This is the College Scoops podcast and I'm your host, Moira McCullough, we focus on everything college related from the admissions process to where to eat, stay and explore on and round campuses. Our guests include founders, educators, authors and experts in the college space. Join us as these experts share their knowledge, experiences and lessons learned to help you have stress free and formative and tasty college journeys. Whether it's your first or last child going to college, or you're just interested in going to a college town for a game or meal, we've got you covered. If you haven't already, please subscribe to the College Scoops podcast to get the inside scoop, send everything college related, and leave us a review. Thanks to all of our sponsors partners in the entire College Scoops

Ambassador team for helping us bring valuable content to our community. If you would like to support College Scoops as a sponsor, please head over to patreon@patreon.com/collegescoops and sign up as a sustaining listener, insider or Deluxe sponsor. We have exclusive benefits for our members free ebooks and even a College Scoops care package. Native Atlantan Rebekka Whitehead is a graduate of Oglethorpe University Rebekka's career in the educational field spans in and out of the classroom working within the accreditation learning support and curriculum development and implementation spaces. Rebekka has experience within the state national and global accreditation spheres to monitor Academic Resource support advisory groups college counseling, high quality mentoring, academic and life coaching and accountability, as well as auxiliary services to evaluate progress and overall improvement across corresponding curricular benchmarks. Rebekka is experiencing curriculum advisement led her to East Africa where she supervised the implementation of Upper School integrated curriculum, and authored K through 12 curriculum that is implemented worldwide. a lifelong learner Rebekka is a member of Project Zero at Harvard University, philanthropic educational organization, teachers without borders, international reading Association partnership of 21st century skills, Georgia Music Educators Association and women's Community Bible study, Rebekka resides in Buckhead with her husband Kirk. Rebekka, welcome to the College Scoops podcast. Thank you so much for joining us today.

 Rebekka Whitehead 02:40
Thanks, Moira. This is so fun.

 Moira McCullough 02:42
Well, we met through a mutual friend John Gregg, who has been such a strong supporter of College Scoops. And he immediately in our discussion mentioned what a great friend and person and expert that you are in your field, and we wanted to bring you on because we know it's a challenging time right now. And students are in the midst of receiving great news and other news about where their next academic adventure will be. And you are someone who works with students in the high school and college arena, and you have a great wealth of experience sharing your insights and advice. So that is why you are here today to talk with us.

 Rebekka Whitehead 03:26
Well, thanks again, for the opportunity. John is so kind, I loved partnering with the entire Gregg family, because that really is what it is. It's a partnership with the whole family, not

just with Matthew, who is now a thriving freshman at Boston College, but just coming alongside the parents and supporting them, especially this month. And next one, we're getting a lot of decisions, positive and negative and just you know, kind of where we can help support parents in that messy middle, because that's what it is going to be for the next four to six weeks.

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Moira McCullough 04:00

I'm a third time parent going through this. And I laughed because my husband said to my son the other day, who's a high school senior in that moment, and as I said, you know, that challenging interesting time to bond with your son or daughter? He said some open ended question, you know, like, you know, have you had any news lately? Is there anything you'd like me to help you with? And I looked at him and I thought stop, what are you asking those questions to sit and you know, decompress during this timeframe. So can you share a bit about yourself, first off, and then I read something in your bio as well that you were at some point in time you went over to East Africa and traveled and helped create a program launch a program over there is that right as well?

R

Rebekka Whitehead 04:47

I did. I did. I'm passionate about education and I'm a teacher by training. I trained and taught lower school, middle school and Upper School actually all the way through in the Atlanta area. And while I was mostly in the Independent School space, I could really see that it's a broken system. It's not one size fits all. And I just saw time and time again, almost a misplacement of students in learning environments that were not setting them up to succeed, or thrive. And so I decided to take a step back from that and look at the big picture, what I could do systemically what I could learn where I could lean in. And that's what kind of launched me into curriculum design development. And that was a really fun opportunity, you know, before I got married, and, you know, I just decided I would lean into that adventure and partnered with a company based out of the UK, and we did a lot of curriculum implementation for schools in East Africa, and Kenya and Uganda specifically, but what was cool about that is that I actually had the opportunity to begin with the end in mind. And that was the first time I was introduced to that African proverb. And I really think that what, you know, almost guided the mission of what I do today, but in Africa, was dealing with the British schools, these American empathy schools, and also, you know, very, kind of that stereotypical schooling that everybody pictures when you talk about, you know, living in Nairobi, Kenya. And those students were so motivated, they were such hard workers, and they really wanted after Africa to have the optionality to attend a British American or African University. And so I got to sit down with kind of the supervisors there and leadership of those schools and really dig in and figure

out okay, now that we're beginning with that end in mind, how can we work backwards and support students when they're an upper school, so they can, you know, have the most positive trajectory as they can in the college year. So that was a really cool moment for me, because I felt like it became almost a guiding principle as I then launched my own ed consulting firm, and I do independent school admissions and college prep now. But we really do try to do that. And I help parents do that, as well, as you know, where do you want to be at the end of all of this? The messy middle, it's a lot of stress in between, but what success and what's the win? Well, I like that, too.

M

Moira McCullough 07:23

When you talk about, I think sometimes, we get stuck on names and categories. And at the end of the day, when you say what do you want it to look like? Like that? Zero to describe, you know, when when I said to my son, you know, where do you? Where do you want to be like, what do you enjoy, write down some of those ideas, those topics. And from there, you're going to distill like, a picture of where you might be happy. And at the end of the day, that's when you will thrive. And that's when you will do your best is when you're in an environment that you're comfortable with. But you're comfortable to get uncomfortable,

R

Rebekka Whitehead 07:58

Right? You're stretch your talents, you're encouraged. It's all those things. And it sounds like a magic formula. But it's really not. To your point, if we're if we're using that as our guiding principle, and it's not so distracting with names and procedure and rigor. It's really trying to find a place that can support a student academically, emotionally and socially.

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Moira McCullough 08:19

As you said, you work with a lot of high school students. And what are some of the common challenges or struggles that they have? And when you look back on it, and or if you ask them in college, like what do you wish you had done differently? or What do you wish your parents had done differently in supporting them through this exploration of their next college adventure?

R

Rebekka Whitehead 08:43

I mean, the teacher and me would be remiss to say, and really advise students that, you know, the earlier you start, the better. So that doesn't mean to a bunch of campuses in eighth grade. But that does mean, try to instill and foster an open meaningful dialogue

with your parents as early as possible. So we really try to get in there and partner with families as early as freshman year if, if the opportunity presents itself, with so much more opportunity to understand who they are as a learner, who they are the community contributor, where their passions are, where their strengths are, where their tension points are, where's the pain points. And that way, come junior senior year, we have a clear roadmap, and parents feel much more equipped to help support their student because they have a blueprint. And they've had these open discussions, you know, in some cases for two or three years.

M Moira McCullough 09:34

I think though sometimes I again, I always reflect back on my experience as a parent, my youngest, you know, you think, Oh, you've been through it twice. You know, this is a breeze. This should be I mean, I've done been there and done that. Some students are not ready. I think it's also maturity, where they, you know what they know what they should be doing. Or maybe they don't, and for for my son, it wasn't in the car. He wasn't ready, you know, and all of a sudden when he was ready COVID hit. So there you go my perfect example of you know, if you're driving through, I always say when we would take a vacation or just drive to the next town, it's take a look around you, what do you like? What do you don't like, on Drive Thru and explore different neighborhoods, college campuses on your way. Because you'll get a feel for what you like what you don't like, which is almost more important. So So in terms of working with students to kind of allow them to explore and kind of reflect back on what they think they like and where they want to be and how they can get there. In terms of parents, you know, advice, because I always say in your profession, it's you have two sets of clients. That's true.

R Rebekka Whitehead 10:46

And one set is sometimes easier to work with than the other.

M Moira McCullough 10:49

What can I as a parent, and what can all parents do? Because sometimes we think we're helping and supporting our students, our son, our daughter, and we're not we're adding to that stress. So I always like to ask, you know, what is it that we can do better to support our students as they navigate during these uncertain times?

R Rebekka Whitehead 11:07

Yes, I think parents right now have a really unique opportunity. For some parents, for the first time in a long time, or in the first time in forever, they are a front, they have a front row seat to their students learning journey. Right? A lot of students are virtual, or even in a hybrid model, a lot of parents are certainly more dialed in to their child's educational experience. I think industry wide, this is going to be a gift, I think it's a blessing, we're gonna see this ripple effect long term. But on the flip side of that, sometimes with more information and equipped with much more content, parents feel like they are spiraling and they need to get in early on kind of like your anecdote at the beginning of our conversation, these open ended questions of What news? Where can I dig in? Where can I help and support you? What should we tackle this weekend, almost give students more anxiety than support. And that's no fault of the parent. That's just they don't know what questions to ask. And they don't know where to begin. And so, you know, kind of like you were describing just these opportunities to have some conversations of what's working for you right now, in your learning journey. You know, do you like virtual? Do you not do like the breakout, you know, group conversations and zoom? Or is that not helpful? Do you like working in your room? Do you like being downstairs in the kitchen when I'm cooking? And you know, your dad's on the phone? And do you like the activity and hustle bustle. And while that seems very foundational, and just very common sense. Sometimes we can frame that. And even without describing to our kids, we can frame that and try to mirror that in the next phase of education. So you know, if your child is an introvert, or if he is a auditory learner, or, you know, we kind of unpack some of those strengths and see what's working, what's not right now and this kind of new normal, and then we try to just see what that would look like in the next phase of college.

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Moira McCullough 13:06

Well, it's interesting, I said, even to my son the other day, he had a teacher who was virtual. And this is obviously a generational thing. I said, Oh, my, and he mentioned that the teacher is now back in the classroom, and so much easier. It's physics. I mean, like, how do you do that? And these kids, though some of them are comfortable with depending upon the subject matter, there's not really any difference. That's the point where here I'm thinking, Oh, virtual for me is not my best way to learn yet, right? certain students it is, Do you find that with students now that that they definitely are finding different ways to learn virtually?

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Rebekka Whitehead 13:46

Yes, I think now more than ever, we're seeing that students crave structure, developmentally in line, we need them as adults, our kids still need some sort of structure

or routine. So whatever construct we can put in to book in the day is really important, because we're showing kids that that's the routine that we can mirror and just have some continuity throughout the day. We're also finding that 10 to 15 minute break period in between classes is a great time to mentally decompress, mentally, close all the tabs in your mind. You know, just close the book on that chapter. And then class, that topic, physically get up, move around, clean off your desk, and then sit down and get ready for the next session. Which is tough if a high school senior just wants to scroll social media, but we're really seeing the research show that almost pomodoro effect in that technique that comes across in building long term memory and just strengthening recall. So I think that's really important. And then your point also, I would encourage parents to really think about, you know, what's the best learning habit or technique for their child. Just because it might not work for us as adults doesn't mean that their child Our little, you know, many versions of us that we sometimes think would be easier if they were but yeah, just kind of putting ourselves into the shoes of their children and just empathizing a little bit into, okay, you know, I might want to do it this way. But let's talk about why this other way might be more effective for you.

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Moira McCullough 15:18

Absolutely. And I think having some of those discussions in high school allows them to when they do move to college, because you, you continue to have a great relationship with many of your former, you know, students and carrying that mentorship role along which I have to say is a tribute to you as a person and and what you do, because it's not necessarily a fun time in the high school working to try to, you know, get your college application ready and find your passion and put together this package, you know, that will determine where you get into schools. So the fact that you have this great relationship and mentor students as they go to college is really a tribute to the connection and relationship you have with your students. So what are some of the things that you talk about with them in terms of some of those struggles or challenges or opportunities that they're excited about?

R

Rebekka Whitehead 16:13

That's kind of you to say, That's super generous. I think that's the most fun about this entire process, right that at the end of this, I have these now young adults that want to sit and have a cup of coffee with me at a Starbucks when they come home for summer break or over the holiday break. That's just really fun to see them grow and develop into the people they were designed to be. You know, overall, I'm hearing so important just to get those study habits already in and polished. The my, my kids that come back and talk about how excited they were that they knew how to study. And they weren't going through

these kind of, you know, trial and error. Efforts to figure out if flashcards work for them or podcast or re typing notes, they already kind of got that down. In high school. That's what I'm hearing is much more efficient when they get to college and the content is very demanding.

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Moira McCullough 17:15

Have you heard about Anchor, it is the easiest way to make a podcast and it's free. You can use their own creation tools to record and edit your podcast right from your phone. Anchor will distribute your podcast for you. So it can be heard on Spotify, Apple podcast, iTunes, and many more. You can make money from your podcast with no minimum listenership. If it sounds easy it is because it is here's how you do it. Download the free anchor app, or go to anchor.fm to get started. It is and I think that's what one thing we hear from our student ambassadors, they're always no matter what school you went to, if you challenge yourself in high school, a lot of our student ambassadors are saying, you know, you think you're prepared. But guess what college is really hard. And as you said that maybe that framework or the guidelines, or the structure that you had at home isn't so many students first time living away from home. I remember one of my kids called up when they were arrived Two weeks later, and they said, I don't know, what should I can you help me with this? And I thought, No, there are so many people, I always say you should find somebody at that college campus that you can ask for advice, whether you know, it's a dorm, a, an RA, an upperclassmen, a TA, somebody in that field, and you probably hear this more and more, you know, there's a lot of students who are struggling, you know, with depression and mentally and I always say if you have that contact at college, somebody there that you can ask, that should be a great resource. Obviously, I'm here for you if there's something really, really important, but for some of the how to register for classes are where to find where's the mini clinic, go ask your people,

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Rebekka Whitehead 18:58

Right leaning into your network, finding those resourceful people and just exerting that kind of self advocacy and resilience along the way. I think that's what's really exciting to to see a 17 year old, kind of figure that out, because that's what they're doing throughout the whole college application experience is stretching that muscle in a new and exciting way. And then really seeing that come into play freshman, sophomore, junior year of college. It's almost unrecognizable. And that's what's really fun to see because I have the opportunity to really have a front row seat into that growth.

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Moira McCullough 19:32

Well, you're that safe zone two, I said to one of our recent guests, how do you get the kids to talk to you? And he said they're not it's it's true. And I think that is the beauty of it because you asking a question. That's not my ask of my son, he'd probably open up the floodgates and tell you quite a bit more. And that's expected and we shouldn't be upset or disappointed at that. The fact that students are capable of asking and talking And searching out for mentors and coaches and teachers to help them as important. I love when you talk about to setting up knowing what your your strengths are in and outside of the classroom. And acting on that. I know with my kids, my younger son started school, he said, Well, tic tocs off, Snapchat is off, I've shut down everything I thought, right. And the other learning when you talk about other tools and resources, I'm somebody who's more visual. So one of my kids said, I learned a lot on YouTube. And I thought, oh, that didn't exist. When I was using that there's a lot of resources out there that will help students learn in different capacities.

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Rebekka Whitehead 20:40

Right, right. And it's just that self awareness piece, right, and then the advocacy portion of really acting on that. So like you said, you know, leaning into the ways that you learn best. And that's what I want to help parents learn how to do is identify what's strong, not what's wrong. And just leaning into this strength based coaching model is where we see the most growth, and just the most opportunity, because students have been designed to thrive in that zone, when they're in their lane of strength, you were going to see some magical things happen. And unfortunately, sometimes the school environment isn't set up necessarily to support students and their strengths. And college is opportunity to do that. That's why I think it's such a pivotal time developmentally, intellectually, because we can really help guide students into their strengths, and where are they going to thrive? Where are they going to have that passion and purpose collide every day, because they really are leaning into who they were designed to be. And I think that's such an exciting opportunity to be a part of the families advocacy team, because that's really what it is. I mean, there's nothing, nothing special to have kids open up to me, like you said, I'm just a part of their Parent Advisory Board. And that's a cool a really cool opportunity.

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Moira McCullough 21:55

I like that the Parent Advisory Board! Some of us would be thrown off the board very quickly and allowed to come. So you've mentioned a couple tips for high school students how to make their environment one that they can thrive in and know the resources and tools that are available. You've mentioned some of the things that parents can do to help

support their students, both in high school and I think that transfers over into college too, I think you have to let them learn to learn and advocate for themselves, because it's so easy to jump in and just do it. But we don't want to be doing it at 30. So I think there's you know, it's hard because here we are trying to instill all these skill sets and confidence. And by helping too often we kind of take away that confidence and break it down where that student is thinking, well, if they want to help me all the time, maybe I'm not capable of it. So I think probably that's maybe a discussion that you probably are involved in as well, a lot.

R

Rebekka Whitehead 23:02

Yes, I think it's an ongoing conversation, right? Because, you know, in every instance and in every admission cycle, parents hearts are in the right place, they just want to help their kids succeed. They want to help their kid meet every deadline, check every box and in every doc. So it's coming from a good place, coming from an organized, systematic, effective, efficient place. But at the same time, it's almost misguided, because we want to help students find who they are, their capability, their potential, and their confidence that they can do this, I can do this themselves. And they've got it, we have a safety net, if they need to lean in that. But you know, for the most part, they're confident and competent. And we need to let them take control of this.

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Moira McCullough 23:47

So you have a coffee with my son, I need to go off to college, three tips that you would pieces of advice that you would give them, what would they be?

R

Rebekka Whitehead 23:57

Three tips that they get - One, I would say get to know your professor. And the one that would really advise getting to the professor that first day your virtual you send him a quick email. You know, enjoy your class, I'm excited to learn about XYZ. Just to be top of mind, I think that rapport is really important. I would get to know your janitorial staff, get to know the people serving you food, I get to know the people cleaning. You know, I think that that really shows you as a leader and a community member and that's what those people are on campus is everybody is part of a larger family. And then I would lean into some social outlets that might be a little bit outside of your comfort zone, be them athletic, extracurricular academic. You never know what kind of people you're going to meet or what kind of ways you're going to stretch yourself. And I have heard from students that have come back college kids that have come back and met with me and said, I never

thought I was a drama kid and I you know, stepped on the stage and It was really fun, or I tried out for this club team, I didn't think at any hand eye coordination. And suddenly my most, you know, look forward to evening with all my friends playing, you know, I don't know, adult dodgeball or whatever they're playing. So it's, it's really kind of fun. Where else do you get to have this opportunity to lean into some new pursuit? So yeah, those would be my top three tips,

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Moira McCullough 25:22

I think. Right, especially number two, because I know that having worked throughout college, and worked in the service industry for many years, in restaurants, always To this day, whenever we go into a restaurant and always being very kind, caring, and helpful, because you know, how hard it is to work in those particular industries. And, Jay, to your point, those are the people that are ensuring your success by making you thrive from all other aspects and taking away some of the angst of food. You know, what's in Korea? Is our the hallway bathroom is clean today. I mean, my daughter said she's in this in this sorority hasn't she said, I've never had a cleaner bathroom in my entire life I have so much every day so amazing. We are grateful and thankful for that. And you let them know, because without that, there'd be stress in your life, you know, for that. So, right. That's wonderful. We always love to ask our guests, what do you wish you knew, when you attended college?

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Rebekka Whitehead 26:27

I wish I had the confidence in the beginning to lean into what I was good at, and what I really enjoyed, and not really worry about the end goal, or the prestige that much. And I really wish I had leaned into electives and classes that filled me up and had a good opportunity to do that. I mean, it all worked out. In the end, I did change majors as I don't know, I heard 70% of people do now. And still graduated on time. And but it made for a long summer, you know, sophomore junior year. But yeah, I would wish I had the confidence and just that the advocacy team to say, Hey, this is what you're good at. Let's chase that.

M

Moira McCullough 27:15

I am collecting all the responses. Because I think if we had one podcast just with those, it's every I love that one is so wonderful. And I I too agree with exactly what you said. I thought if I could go back to school and take away all that stress and judgment that I put on myself, a met what I could have done, not that I didn't do well. But imagine it would

have been so much less stressful and more fun. If I had the confidence to just go for it.

R Rebekka Whitehead 27:47

Right? So much more fun. I know things we wish we would have known at 18.

M Moira McCullough 27:52

I keep on saying that I get it only and then and then it's very hard as a parent, I have to hang back and say you know what, that's part of the growing the learning. Yeah, you know, we try to help as much as we can. But I'm trying to hear your words in Rebecca my head when I talk to my kids. I'm a sweet person. But do you have a favorite food place on a college campus that you would recommend if a student was visiting,

R Rebekka Whitehead 28:13

I love coffee shops. I love this, the more monpa little tucked in hidden gem the better bonus of they have books there too and just see walk in and this whole sensation from smelling the books and the coffee and then just is this warm, inviting place. So that would be my sweet spot to grab a coffee with a friend, a professor or mentor or even just sitting steady as they look for the cop show. I love that

M Moira McCullough 28:40

Is there one that on a particular campus that comes to mind at all, just out of curiosity.

R Rebekka Whitehead 28:46

USC (Southern California) has a really cute one trying to remember they've changed name so many times, but it is so darling. And they have just walls and walls. I've used books, and every books \$1 which college kids love. You grab a book and you grab a coffee and you just sit and curl up on campus that it was my favorite. My favorite college coffee shop to visit.

M Moira McCullough 29:08

I'm surprised that we wouldn't run into each other because I love bookshops. So you and I will have to look out for each other forever on a college campus and we're in a local

coffee bookstore. We may run into each other.

 Rebekka Whitehead 29:20
Well I would love that.

 Moira McCullough 29:23
Rebekka, thank you so much for coming on our show today and sharing your expertise and thoughts and advice for students and parents.

 Rebekka Whitehead 29:30
Thanks so much more. I appreciate it was so much fun. Thanks for all that you do.

 Moira McCullough 29:36
Thank you, Rebekka for joining us today to discuss how students can better prepare themselves for the next academic adventure and how we as parents can support them as they navigate the college admissions process. fostering an open and meaningful dialogue with your son or daughter early on is important. helpful tips for students include starting to think about the different learning styles or learning environments where you learn best when you start your college. Search. When you arrive on campus, get to know your professors early on and engage with the community members. They are there to support you and they will help you thrive both in and outside of the classroom. You can find all of our show notes and links to the helpful resources mentioned throughout our conversation on our website and college scoops.com slash podcast. You can learn more about Rebekka and Whitehead Learning Group on their website or on Facebook. Please take a couple of minutes to rate review and subscribe to College Scoops. Thank you for listening to our College Scoops podcast. Our entire College Scoops team strives to make the college journey a little bit easier, less stressful, fun and tasty by sharing all the inside scoops we have curated along the way. We would love to hear from you about topics to cover and your ideas and everything college related. Reach out to us at collegescoops.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.