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Redbird Buzz Episode 10: Jeff Mavros, September 2022

John Twork Interviewer

Illinois State University, jdtwork@IllinoisState.edu

Jeff Mavros Interviewee

jmavros@IllinoisState.edu

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 10: Jeff Mavros

September 2022

John Twork 00:09

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm John Twork from University Marketing and Communications. Our guest today is Executive Director of Admissions at Illinois State University, Jeff Mavros. Since 2014, Jeff has managed the Redbird admissions team which consists of 30 people who work each year to help meet the university's enrollment goals. Jeff joins us today to talk about fall enrollment at Illinois State and the newest class of Redbirds who recently arrived on campus.

John Twork 00:45

It's my pleasure to welcome Executive Director of Admissions Jeff Mavros to Redbird Buzz. What's the word, Redbird? Walking around campus, there's an exciting vibe as we kick off the 2022-2023 academic year. Jeff, tell us about this year's historic class of incoming Redbirds.

Jeff Mavros 01:01

Happy to do that, John, and thanks so much for having me today. This has been a really cool project that you guys have put together, so I'm really pleased to join those who preceded me on the show. So you use the word "exciting," I think we would echo that, it's been a historic class. It's really a pretty incredible number for the for the university and I think when you measure any class the first thing that you look at in this competitive landscape currently is number of students. And so I'm really pleased to tell everybody this is the largest freshman class we've enrolled since 1986 as an institution, and we could talk about what that means for the university, but that's good news. With over 200 of them coming from right here in McLean County, so locally represented very well. More than one out of every four students in this class had a 4.0 GPA in their high school academic pursuits, and this is also the most diverse class, culturally and ethnically, that we've ever had here at the university in terms of incoming Redbirds. So there's a lot to be proud about here and, as you said, it's an exciting time, so we're just pleased to be a part of it.

John Twork 02:09

And with this incoming class, can you talk about where overall enrollment now stands here at Illinois State?

Jeff Mavros 02:14

Yeah, sure. So obviously, over the last couple of years, there have been some challenges that schools across the country have faced and, you know, our enrollment was able to hold relatively steady and we weathered the storm better than most, but we're really pleased to get our enrollment back up closer to that 21,000 mark, as opposed to that 20,000 mark, in that range is really where I think the university is

comfortable. So to be north of 20,500, 20,600, I mean in that area is where the university operates probably at its optimum, and so to be able to go from at about 20,200 from a year ago back up to where we are now is, it's a good thing for everybody involved.

John Twork 02:54

It's been an unprecedented, challenging past few years, we've heard those terms way too much, but that includes for folks who work in college admissions and for prospective students who've been in high school throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and I'm sure that has changed the admissions process for them, but over the, at least the course of the past year, was it more of a normal process and what worked well from a recruitment perspective?

Jeff Mavros 03:20

Yeah, I think it can't be overstated the way that the Pandemic changed the work that we do, but absolutely, this last year was a little bit more normal. And there's some things that we had to do to pivot and be more responsive to student needs over the course of the Pandemic, and yet there are some holdovers from those things where we made our process better, quite frankly, as a result, and maybe we're even more student-centered than we were prior to, and that's a good thing. But I think the biggest thing I can point to is the ability for students physically to be on campus and to experience Illinois State firsthand and that's something that we got back to fully in this most recent recruitment cycle. And, you know, I'll tell you, when you asked me what worked well, we do that piece, the visitor experience piece, better than almost any of our competitors. And when we think about competitive advantage, and really what - the work that we do is competitive. There are only so many students to go around and everybody wants them and so we've got to be distinctive in the marketplace. When we think about bringing students to campus, we do that part exceptionally well, and that's because, I tell you, I have a great team, I really do. I am so, you know, fortunate to head up my area with so many talented and creative and energetic and passionate people that love doing what they do. But we also have such an incredible campus community that's coalesced around the idea of being warm and welcoming and extending a hand to prospective Redbirds and so I love to bring people to campus. That's where I get my energy in the work that we do, I just, I really love interfacing with families and talking to students about the things that they ultimately want to do and I think that's shared across campus. And so that's a piece that's back in full force after, you know, having missed it in recent years, and I think it worked very much to our advantage this year.

John Twork 05:13

You mentioned Illinois State's competitor, so I, you know, I'm curious, it's been a great year for Illinois State's enrollment success, how does that compare with nationwide higher ed trends and why are students picking ISU over the competition?

Jeff Mavros 05:28

Yeah, so I'm not going to single out individual schools but I would tell you it is not necessarily the norm that schools are bringing in their largest freshman classes in decades right now. You might be well aware that just from a demographic, census, college-bound volume kind of perspective, we're facing a trough here coming up very shortly, and it's been - we've seen a decline in the number of college-bound students over the last several years and so what it means is there are just fewer students out there to

be meeting our enrollment objectives. And there are schools that are certainly maybe adjusting their priorities, we're not one of them, we're, if anything, in growth mode here at the institution, and we're seeing enhancements all across the campus in the way of programmatic enhancements and academic programs, physical facilities, and, you know, so much that's going on on campus to make the experience for Redbirds that much better. So we're excited about what's going on here but we also need to continue to bring in students that want to be a part of it and so we're really fortunate that we've been as attractive to students as we have. And then when you ask me why students are choosing Illinois State, there are so many reasons for that, and I think, again, I'll give credit to my staff, I think we do what we do really well, because I've got an incredibly gifted and devoted staff that is very student-centered and is customer service oriented. We're in a service industry, period. But the other side of that is, and this is where I get myself into trouble, is starting to think about who I need to thank around campus, because I'll undoubtedly leave somebody out, but, you know, easy ones come to mind with Financial Aid, with Housing, with Event Management and Dining, Hospitality folks who work with us so closely, our academic partners from all across campus, this is where I'm going to stop because, again, I'm going to leave somebody out. But, you know, we're attractive to students because we treat them as human beings, we understand that this is an emotional process, can be anxiety-inducing, and we try to make the process comfortable, understandable, clear, and we, and frankly, we have a great product to sell. So, you know, as we're trying to make the process, from where we stand, make the process easier on students and their families, at the end of the day, we're attractive because we have incredible academic programs, we can talk about return on investment that's among the best schools across the country, we've got a beautiful campus in a great part of the state with a wonderful surrounding community, and there's just so much that goes into the experience right now for Redbirds. And so these large classes are great because it just means we get to provide hundreds more students with a kind of experience that's going to send them back home telling their friends, oh my gosh, you got to check out Illinois State, and so our job becomes easier with all the help we get from everybody around campus that makes the experience great.

John Twork 08:31

This is Redbird Buzz and we're speaking with Illinois State University Executive Director of Admissions Jeff Mavros.

Rachel Kobus 08:37

Mark your calendars for Illinois State's Homecoming October 10 through the 16th. This year we are celebrating red with events for every Redbird. Lace up for the town and gown 5k, check out the floats and fun at the parade, or head over to Hancock Stadium where Redbird football will take on South Dakota. Don't miss out on all the ISU fun, check out Homecoming.IllinoisState.edu or follow ISU_Homecoming on Twitter for more information.

John Twork 09:00

Our guest on Redbird Buzz is Jeff Mavros, Illinois State University Executive Director of Admissions. Jeff, for future prospective students and families, can you walk us through the admissions process and what they can expect from showing interest in Illinois State up until visiting campus and then ultimately applying? What does that process look like?

Jeff Mavros 09:20

Sure, so I'm not known for succinctness, let me do my best here, John. Students get to us in lots of ways in terms of how we end up on their radar and they on ours, but when we're aware of a student and we can record their information we'll start to get them in our regular communication flow and we do that pretty well from print pieces to social media outreach, to email communication, to texting to, you know, any manner of outreach. We do that part pretty well in getting our story out there to students and hopefully helping them find a fit at the institution. We spoke earlier about the impact that an on-campus experience has for students, and so we're, pre-application, really pushing students, encouraging students to come to campus and experience us firsthand because what's really important in this process is that students understand that this is either a fit for them or it's not. And it's not for every student and so we want students to apply that have genuine interest in the institution. And if a student comes in and finds out that for one reason or another this is not the right fit for them, then that's better for them to find out early as opposed to later on down the road. And so we really hope that they'll come make a visit, many do, and we do everything we can to show them what their life on campus might look like. And then really, next in the process comes that application, and this is definitely that time of year, it's application season, our application opened August 1st, and we'll expect large numbers of applicants between now and really the end of November, and we'll stay open throughout the spring and beyond likely, but as we talk about summer and fall 2023, you know, we're approaching a thousand applications already. And so, and tracking very closely to where we were a year ago, so that's really good news as well, so we're really excited about where things are. Students submit that application, we know, again, that we're in a service industry, so what we do is try to turn around an admission decision to them as quickly as possible. And we are poring over everything a student submits to us in their application so it does take a little bit of time, there's a human being looking over their materials, but we try to turn those decisions around as quickly as we can. And then comes all the fun stuff, thinking about housing, thinking about your meal plan, thinking about your preview orientation, or your transfer and registration and orientation day if you're a transfer, and all those next steps that really prepare you to enroll as a Redbird and be in this next incoming class. So that is a really brief look at all the touch points that we might have, but there's a lot that goes into it, there are a lot of moving pieces, and it's what keeps the job fun for us.

John Twork 11:56

And along with bringing all those students in the university also prioritizes keeping them, student retention into the sophomore years is a priority and Illinois State is strong with that, over 80% of the retention rate into the sophomore year, which is well above the national average. Can you talk a little bit about some of the reasons for Illinois State's strong student retention?

Jeff Mavros 12:18

Yeah, I think this goes back a little bit to the question you asked me about the process and our interest in seeing students do research, because, again, it's about finding that fit and so we're very careful about - I mean, it's our job to promote the institution and we do it willingly because most of us have an Illinois State degree or two to our name, we very much believe in the product, but we try to be as transparent as we can as well in the process because, again, Illinois State, and no school in the country, for that matter, is the right fit for every student. And so what we're trying to do is portray the university certainly in a positive light but in a very accurate way, and so when students can experience

more and more of what life might be like as a Redbird we think they're going to be really equipped to come in and get involved right away and become part of our campus community and add to the fabric and bring their unique talents and abilities and all of that. And so I think if they do enough research throughout our process in the admissions world they're really prepared to understand very well what they're getting into and we just see them then take advantage of all those things that we've been talking to them about for months. And so I think the same things that attract them to the university, we've talked about our academic offerings and their extracurricular programming, and our beautiful hometown and campus community, etc., all of those things that are appealing to them in the process are those things that keep them here as well. And then you got to talk about all the very intentional retention work and student success work that is ongoing on campus and constantly being enhanced, so there are a lot of folks around campus to be credited for the work that continues to always dissect the students' experience throughout the span of that lifecycle, to say, where are we maybe finding students dropping out or where are we losing a student's interest? Where are we finding students are running into roadblocks and how can we alleviate some of those things for them? So it's an ongoing process, but we're just really fortunate to be in a place where students come, they do love it and they go tell their friends about it, so it's to our benefit.

John Twork 14:23

And it was fun walking around the quad during Festival ISU and seeing a number of new Redbirds finding their, you know, groups of people who share similar interests or perhaps, you know, finding an RSO that they didn't know they were interested in but maybe sparking a new curiosity. You know, as someone who is so involved in the admissions process, and you're already involved in bringing in next year's class of students, did you ever take a moment, maybe, you know, seeing all those students in the quad or maybe another moment, to just sort of reflect on, wow, look at all these Redbirds and they're finding their place here at ISU?

Jeff Mavros 15:02

Yeah, absolutely, I think, to answer your question directly, I spend about eight minutes going, whew, that was a great year, look at what they're going to be able to do, and then we start on the next class. But in truth, you know, when we're talking about 400+ student organizations around campus, that's one of the things that we talk to students about all the time is - what we need to remember is the priority certainly is academics, and ultimately, you know, what students want to go on to do with their lives professionally and in other ways, and so we talked about creating their legacy all the time, and we mean that, we want students to be here and start to really create who they're going to be, the ways that they're going to impact the world forever, you know, after their time with us. And so we're really excited about all the offerings that we do make available to students and students find things that they never even dreamed of and in the same way they continue with the things that made them really happy as high school students and that's an important thing, is you want to be certainly focused on your academics, but the things that are going to keep you happy, living your life day-to-day, I mean, you might spend two, three, four years here at the institution, it's important that you really love what you're doing and you are meeting people and you're getting connected and you feel plugged in and that sense of belonging really, really matters for students. But we do, we take great pride in bringing in the group and then, unfortunately for me, I really do change really quickly to, you know, we're back to zero students committed for summer/fall 2023 and that's my target is, we got to start this thing all over again

and so that's the fun that we have. But we do take a minute to also say, man, that was great. And then to watch the students that we did have a relationship with throughout the recruitment process get involved and do those things that we talked to them about doing and watch all that come to fruition, there's great pride in that. Every commencement day is a really bittersweet moment for us, and, you know, we're just so excited to see those students go on and do the things that they really wanted to be doing, so.

John Twork 16:56

We've talked a lot about the admission success that Illinois State's had this year. Can you talk about challenges, perhaps, that you and your staff face? And probably, you know, it's the same with all institutions of higher education, but what challenges are there and what opportunities are there also for potential continued success?

Jeff Mavros 17:18

Yeah, challenges, there are many, but we've done a pretty good job of rising to those challenges as an institution and I think our track record shows that, because there has been no lack of external forces that could have negatively impacted our enrollment over the last, I mean, gosh, you can even talk about going over the last decade, I could put my finger on a number of things that really could have had enrollment go sideways, but again, we're, I'm just really fortunate to work at an institution that gets it, from leadership to, you know, everybody across the campus is kind of committed to the student experience. And that means recruitment, but then also the retention of students once they're here. But, you know, we talked about demographic shifts, we've talked about the decline in a college-going population. You know, when you think about the sources of funding for the institution and some of the financial support we get from the state and the federal government, there have over the years been challenges there, just in terms of helping families make ends meet, we all know that higher education is an investment, right, and so we try to remain accessible and affordable to every family. In some cases, we can't make that happen. So there are several challenges and at the same time it's what we do, it's why we wake up in the morning, it's the thing that we, that energizes us. And I think the opportunity, honestly, is to be better than the competition in answering the bell. And there, I have peers, counterparts in my position at institutions across the state, all across the country, that are incredible people, that are equally student-centered as we, and are doing really good work on behalf of students, but I still want to outsmart them, end of the day. And we just try to be creative, we try to evoke emotion, I think we understand the psychology behind recruiting new students and new families, because it's about recruiting the family, and so it's always trying to maybe just do what we do a little bit better. And honestly, the formula doesn't change dramatically from year to year but there's, we're always assessing what we do, we're always picking apart anything that can get just that much better. And then we're always trying to throw in some new wrinkles because you kind of have to stay ahead of the game when you're talking to 17- and 18-year-old students whose preferences and tastes and interests change seemingly every year, probably more often than that, but again, that's the fun of the work that we do. So a lot of challenges but tons of opportunities and I think we've got to stay focused on the opportunities to be successful.

John Twork 19:47

You probably know more about Tiktok than you thought you would at this stage in your career, huh?

Jeff Mavros 19:50

Yeah, and probably because I have three kids at home so I - there are things I know about Tiktok that I wish I didn't, but yeah, you learn as you go.

John Twork 19:58

Yeah, all right. We've talked, you know, about the impressive number of students and some of their impressive accolades, and you've also mentioned, you know, how personalized this process is, and you literally get to know these individual students who apply and make up this amazing class that's come in. Last question: can you tell us a little bit more about some of the individuals, sort of a lightning round, if you will, of the incoming class of Redbirds here at Illinois State?

Jeff Mavros 20:26

Yeah, you know, I'm glad you asked that question, John, because we do try to get to know our students on an individual level, we talk about this a lot this time of year, it's easy to say 4000 students this, 500 students that, and to really look at the aggregate and say, oh my gosh, 20,000+. And we always kind of recenter ourselves around every single student. I mean, again, we said we're at zero now for fall/summer 2023. Every single student's going to make their own individual decision now and they're with their family and sitting across the kitchen table maybe eight months from now and going, what's the best fit for me, right? And so we really need to stay focused and, as you know, personal attention is a core value of the institution's and I feel like if we're not providing some of that personal attention on the way in we're not really living the values of the institution. So we do a lot of this, I brought a little bit of information to this end, actually, we ask questions on our application of students that are completely optional for them if they'd like to answer, but we've got some fun facts from students and we know things like Taylor Swift is the most listened to band or artist of this incoming class, at least those who are brave enough to answer that question on the application. They love Twix apparently, that's their favorite candy, but things like extracurriculars, volunteering and community service far and away exceeds any of the others that were listed by this incoming class. Clubs and organizations, academic and pre-professional, we talked about the academic preparedness of these students and the fact that, you know, what we're really trying to do is enroll future graduates, and so I think this class is exceptionally equipped to do great things. But we even ask them, as we get into the spring and we're talking about yield season, we get students to campus and we're talking mostly with admitted students at that point, we try to ask them about themselves as much as we can and we sometimes get some funny bits of info backs, so I've brought a couple of these too and these are a couple of my favorites from the group that we talked to this year, but one student told us, "I flew a plane when I was seven," yeah, another student said, "the first person I met leaving the hospital when I was born was Barack Obama," all the way to things like people telling us, "I have crooked pinkies." So, you know, how that will benefit that student here at Illinois State remains to be seen, but I'm sure they will use the most of their talents and gifts. But it is a fun process and the personal piece to this is what I think really energizes my staff day in, day out and year after year, because it's the personal connections that make it all matter.

John Twork 22:53

So if you're driving around campus and you hear someone blaring some Taylor Swift or you stop at the gas station and they're out of Twix bars, we know it's this incoming class of Redbirds.

Jeff Mavros 23:02

It's probably this class, that's right. So I'm sorry to the, to anybody listening to this, if we've created a, there's some break in the ecosystem, but this is who they are.

John Twork 23:11

But there's also a lot of scholars and a lot of students who are committed to community service at the same time, so that's great. Jeff, thank you so much for your time and we're excited for this class to be on campus and we can't wait to have you on again maybe to talk about next year's class that you're working so hard to get the right students here for.

Jeff Mavros 23:30

I appreciate the opportunity and I look forward to it. Let's hope that we're having a similar conversation a year from now.

John Twork 23:35

That was Illinois State University Executive Director of Admissions Jeff Mavros. If you or someone you know would like to apply to or schedule a visit to Illinois State, visit IllinoisState.edu/Admissions. I'm John Twork, thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and be sure to tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.