

## **“Lessons Earned” Podcast Strada Education Network**

**S. 3, E. 2: Michael Collins  
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### **TRANSCRIPT**

**Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network**

Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis, co-host and CEO, Braven**

And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis.

**Ben Wildavsky**

And this is “Lessons Earned.”

**Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:00:09]** Today, Vice President at Jobs for the Future Michael Collins.

[\(audio clip\)](#)

**Michael Collins:** I really would encourage us to not give up on low-income people, people of color, as if, like, we don't want to help them try to get to bachelor's degrees. I think that's a huge mistake.

**Ben Wildavsky [00:00:25]** From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

**Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:00:42]** Ben, we both know that the pandemic has disproportionately affected Black, Latinx, and Native Americans, both in terms of their health and within the labor market.

**Ben Wildavsky [00:00:53]** Yeah, that's right, Aimée. I mean, even before this terrible year, we knew there was a really pressing need to do a lot more to open up career paths for more people through education and training.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:04]** Yeah, all that to say, Michael Collins definitely has his work cut out for him. Michael's a VP at Jobs for the Future, an organization that's trying to create a more equitable education and workforce ecosystem. And he's taken the helm of a really, really important new initiative that's looking to develop policies that are specifically designed to help Black learners and workers.

**Ben Wildavsky [00:01:30]** He's also the editor of a new book which argues that colleges need to make the topic of work central to their curriculum. And, you know, whether it's through changing curricula or calling for more funding, Michael believes that really sweeping policy moves in this education-to-workforce ecosystem are going to play an important role in making this country more equitable.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:01:51] It's a fascinating and wide-ranging conversation about the deep challenges of addressing racial inequality in this country and how we might be able to build a better future. Here's Michael Collins.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:02:14] Michael Collins, welcome to "Lessons Earned."

**Michael Collins**

Terrific to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Ben Wildavsky** Well, I'm very glad to have the opportunity for this conversation and I thought I would just start a little bit on the personal front. I think that I saw in an interview you did with "Forbes" earlier this year, you mentioned that as a child, you were bussed from the inner city to a wealthy suburb. Can you tell me what that experience was like for you?

**Michael Collins** [00:02:37] I didn't realize that I said that. I'm glad I did. It was a fascinating experience, and I actually think it changed my life. I'm from Texas, but my mom was married to a minister. We moved around a lot, and we were living in Connecticut where his parish was. And we lived in inner-city Hartford and on the north end. And they got us into a program called Project Concern, and it bussed inner-city kids out to suburban schools. I ended up in a school in Farmington, Connecticut, which was a wealthy suburb. and to get off the bus that first day, I mean, I just, before I even got off the bus, I was like, where am I? Like, this is a completely different world. All the students were being dropped off by their parents in kind of late-model foreign cars, and there was all this Polo and Izod, stuff that was, just like, was totally different. And really kind of early on, the priorities were different. The learning was different. I just kind of wasn't aware of how different. And I think that it was a defining moment for me. I was like, why do I live where I live? And, you know, these people live where they live? Why is it so different? And, you know, it was a really eye-opening, kind of, a new world for me.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:03:56] Yeah. Well, you know, you have that experience. You then, of course, go into the classroom as an English teacher in San Antonio. But what motivated you to shift into this more, kind of, policy kind of work that you ended up doing?

**Michael Collins** [00:04:09] Part of the transition to policy really was my reaction to that social and economic condition of the students I was teaching. You know, so the majority of students were from Mexican-American backgrounds. They were very low-income. And I was very struck by, you know, their condition coming into the classroom, and what I essentially had to work with. I had students who, when I was teaching high school, when I was teaching high school juniors, I had students who said, "Hey, I'm having a problem kind of reading this paragraph." And I would try to pinpoint, you know, what they could and couldn't read. And I had one student who was like, "I can't read any of it," you know? I mean, so, like, so much had happened to them before they got to sophomore English class or junior English class, I became really curious about why the conditions were like they were. And I decided, like they're macro, there are broader issues happening here. Why do these students come in with just multiple accumulative conditions that really, I felt, threatened their chances at being successful? And so that really led me to policy. What is happening? How can we change this? And I had a sense, I had an inkling, that it had something to do with how we structure opportunity.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:05:30] So now you are a VP at Jobs for the Future. And I read that you've taken the helm of a new initiative that focuses on Black learners and workers. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Michael Collins** [00:05:43] You know, after the, I shouldn't say after, it's still happening, the pandemic, right, that looking at the disproportionate impact on communities of color and then the tragedy of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Aubrey, and it goes on and on and on. The organization really kind of did some soul-searching and said, you know, our mission is economic mobility for all, but like, have we done enough for the Black population as we are looking at kind of a reckoning that's happening across the country? The protests at the time were raging. And we decided that, you know, we are not clear that our strategies were robust enough, right, to reach that population and really lift them up. And so I think we have to be humble about this. Like we have been trying to create opportunity for a long time and we have had varying levels of success. And when I look at performance indicators for Black learners and workers, there's a lot of work to do and to name that is important. But to actually work, to change outcomes, is important. I do want to just add an aside.

[00:06:54] Naturally, the whole point of racial and economic justice is that everyone, everyone has an opportunity to succeed, so we absolutely care about the Latinx community, Native American learners and workers, right? So it is really, it's a broader strategy. But I think that what we're trying to do in this moment is to really reckon with whether or not we have done all that we could have done, and to be really honest, like in my work, you know, decadeslong work, a lot of the times I had to use terms like "people of color, students of color, low income." Right? I had to use all these euphemisms. So my role now gives me an opportunity to maybe be more direct and pointed around where we might be performing and where we are not right for this population and not have to do so many euphemisms and workarounds to try to get at, like, hey, what's happening with this population?

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:07:54] That's right. And Michael, you know, it seems like people are just beginning to realize that there are real huge economic consequences to inequality right now as well. I don't know if you caught the Citi report that found that racial inequality cost the economy \$16 trillion over the last two decades. You're clearly, in many ways, well into the work, but also at the beginning of the work. How are you thinking about addressing inequalities at that scale?

**Michael Collins** [00:08:23] You know, I think, one, I mean, I'm humbled by the challenge, right? The inequality — it's immense, right? So I try to be strategic about my lane.

[00:08:32] I think about the education and training system, and I think it's a very powerful lever for economic mobility, right? But at the same time, the gap you mentioned, we have seen Black learners and workers, Latinx learners and workers, go through our higher education system, earn credentials, only to earn less — across all credentials, all levels, right? So one of the things that I think is going kind of in our favor is, I think there is an increasing focus on the value of postsecondary credentials. But really, in honesty, why I say I'm humbled, I've looked at data that say that the wealth, the Black-white wealth gap is 1 to 10, right? So education and training is a part of that. But that gap, you know, I've seen data that talks about how long it would take to actually close that gap, right? I've actually seen that we're trending in the wrong direction and that the wealth gap actually is increasing rather than decreasing, which is challenging because more Black and Latinx people have earned credentials, right, but we still see that gap. So I don't have an answer

for that challenge of just that, you know, staggering inequality. But in terms of the levers that we have, even though our education and training systems have not been able to, in and of themselves, disrupt inequality, we do think that it's still a very powerful lever for economic opportunity and advancement. And I can't think of another lever that we have.

[00:10:10] Education and training could be so powerful in our disrupting, you know, kind of, income inequality.

[00:10:20] But we've got to do some things differently, right? Because even in our own system, there are, you know, structural elements that are problematic, right? Like the systems that are going to save us, if you will, themselves have some problematic characteristics, like when you look at the leadership in, whether it be nonprofit institutions, the executive directors of nonprofit institutions, like 80-some odd percent of them are white foundation directors, right? Executive directors, 92 percent of them are white, right? So you've got this sector, like these sectors that are leading the charge to disrupt inequality, and those sectors themselves look very much like our stratified hierarchical society. And so I think that some of the incremental results that we're seeing are probably not disconnected from, you know, kind of some of the structures and hierarchy that we see, and it's inescapable that some of that is racial.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis:** Yeah, I totally agree.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:11:16] Yeah. Let's talk about what you're looking really to achieve and what are the best ways to get there. Now I know that you've talked a lot, and JFF, of course, wants a more equitable labor market, as many people do. And I'm wondering if you can talk more. You know, I've heard you mention the need for solutions on both the supply side and the demand side. So I'm wondering if we could start with the supply side, which you've already been talking about, and a very potentially powerful tool, which is the education side. So what kind of policy moves should we be thinking about in the world of higher ed if we want more equitable outcomes?

**Michael Collins** [00:11:55] You know, there is no escaping that we spend more dollars on students who have more.

[00:12:04] So when we look at the patterns of more and more white students kind of going to four-year institutions, more selective institutions, and more and more people of color are going to open-access institutions and community colleges, and when you look at how those institutions or those sectors, if you will, are funded, the institutions that have low-income students, you know, their expenditures per student are much lower, right? So that definitely has implications on success outcomes. We know that, right?

[00:12:39] So, like in terms of policy, macro policy, I find it incredibly frustrating and puzzling that at a time where we very much need higher education to essentially survive in our economy, we appear to be continuing to decrease, right, to decrease our support for higher education. So the biggest policy lever, I think, we have to grapple with how we support institutions and how we support different kinds of institutions.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:13:12] Yeah, but, Michael, I want to talk about this issue that's really very current right now. I mean, you've talked about all of your concerns about funding inequities across the kinds of institutions.

[00:13:22] But I'm wondering what people should be working toward right now with the pandemic, with the recession, with all of the racial inequity that's built into both of those things, where should these students be going? And I'm wondering in particular what your thinking is on short-term programs that we hear a lot of talk about?

**Michael Collins** [00:13:40] Yeah, that's a great question. So I think for the now, I mean, just as humanists, right, we have to meet people where they are.

[00:13:49] If people aren't working, to talk to them about a bachelor's degree or graduate degree is ridiculous, right? Like we have to get people to work. At the same time, if we only focus on first-order effects like getting people into jobs and we're not considering second- and third-order effects, we could be perpetuating inequality. Because what we will do is if we get every Black and Latinx learner into a short-term training opportunity or a lifeboat job, that could solve our immediate problem, but it sets us up like that. There would be no difference. That's like saying bring them back to pre-COVID, right? They're working in food service. We get him another job in food service. Like what? What have we done, right? So yes, we want to get people employed. But I think that for equity, like this was part of what I was thinking about in the "Forbes" piece, for equity, we really have to do both, right?

We have to meet people where they are. But we have to acknowledge that the majority of Black and Latinx workers were low-wage workers. They were more likely to be essential workers, frontline workers. So there were vastly different ways that we were riding out kind of the pandemic. And it really mattered. Like it was around, kind of like, the people with bachelor's degrees and above really weathered this thing, right? Much different. And it was the same in the previous recession, right? It was the same. The people that weathered that recession better, they were people that had bachelor's and higher and even those with those bachelor's that lost their jobs, they got jobs first in the recovery. Right?

So I struggle a little bit with what seems to be almost like an inordinate kind of focus on skills for Black and Latinx people. And that makes people, like, I think that that's really important, but it can't be everything, right? It can't be everything. So for me to directly answer your question, I think we have to meet people where they are, which means in some cases, getting them into what Burning Glass calls a lifeboat job. Right? That's a job that's available now; they don't need a lot of skills and training. But to make that really work, we need to have transparency around how that lifeboat job could be attached to the next job, a higher-level job.

**Ben Wildavsky:** Like stackable credentials. Is that what you're thinking?

**Michael Collins:** Exactly right. But stackable in that, like, real stackable, right, like we talk about stackable all the time and not much stacks. So we need to do the work to build the learning, the infrastructure, right? That's stacking infrastructure to take those short-term opportunities, connect them to longer-term. And we need to help people see those connections, and that, I think, is kind of the best of both. I really feel like we're doing both. I feel like we're meeting people where they are, but we're also creating pathways to credentials. And I really would encourage us to not give up on low-income people and people of color, as if, like, we don't want to help them try to get to bachelor's degrees. I think that's a huge mistake. I think we want them to have skills. Yeah, yeah, go ahead.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:16:55] I'm sorry. I hear what you're saying. I want to just quickly get in this thought, though, on the same kind of thinking about the universe of options. If we decide, you know, for the reasons you described, short-term credentials alone could be a

dead-end, or could be a kind of second-class citizenship. Conversely, should we be pushing more people into four-year degrees, because we have this whole problem with credential inflation, which has a disproportionate impact on low-income non-white job seekers. So in other words, if you go to the other end of this.

**Michael Collins:** That's right.

**Ben Wildavsky:** That is it. Does that strike you as having some potential or a lot of pitfalls?

**Michael Collins** [00:17:32] It's a great — it's a great point. These are complex issues. So how I think about that, and you're spot-on, right? So let's just be really clear: Like, if employers are requiring bachelor's degrees for jobs that do not require bachelor's degrees, that is a problem, right? And those false requirements need to be eliminated, period. There's not much discussion there. But here's the other piece: There are jobs like the ones we just talked about that allow you to work from home, to have your 401K, right? And the fact of the matter is that many of those jobs require these longer-term credentials. Yes, we need to stop credential inflation. But I worry about the positioning that somehow skills in some ways is enough for people of color. But then when you look at enrollments in selective institutions, look at where the wealthy, look at the behavior of families in the top fifth of income, they're not backing off of four-year degrees, right? So it's really fascinating. So both of you will appreciate this: You know, when I wrote the “Forbes” piece, I heard from multiple people about the credential inflation and how it was all about skills.

[00:18:59] And I think pretty much all of them had Ph.Ds, not only Ph.Ds, but Ph.Ds from, like, the most selective institutions in the country, right?

**Ben Wildavsky:** It's college for me but not for thee.

**Michael Collins** [00:19:13] That's exactly what I worry about. I really worry about that. A lot of the people that are pushing skills are people who themselves are not only credentialed, but highly credentialed, from selective institutions. And I would wager that their children are also on track to be, right? So, like, I have a problem if we are saying skills is the ceiling for Black, Latinx, Native American people.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:19:41] I actually love how you're really talking about meeting them where they are. I would love to just shift a bit and go back into the university piece, given this great new book that you are the editor of called “Teaching Students About the World of Work” and the chapter that you wrote, you talked about the need to dispense with the college mobility narrative.

**Michael Collins** [00:20:03] Yeah, the mobility narrative really, I think, is just that.

[00:20:08] It's that notion that if you go to college, everything's going to be OK, right? So it's not that college doesn't work. It's just that the variation in earnings is so dramatic and without knowledge of that and without knowledge of the connections that you really need to make to be able to have a leg up in the labor market, I think, you know, is where the narrative kind of falls down, I think.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:20:38] Yeah. So the main thrust of your book is really that we need to be teaching students about the world of work. Is that what you're really trying to get at?

**Michael Collins** [00:20:44] I mean, in this country, you go to college first, right? Then you work. And I think that for low-income people, for people of color who don't have a ton of experience with the world of work, they're not in those networks, they don't have the information that they need. And I think it costs them. And so part of what I'm arguing and Nancy Hoffman, the co-editor, is arguing, it's like you have postsecondary educators help students understand and navigate the world of work.

[00:21:16] It's real. It's happening. You can make decisions about where you want to end up, like we talk about the Ethnography of Work course at CUNY, at Guttman (Community) College. And it, really, it's designed to help people train students in ethnographic methods to go out and interview people in workplaces, to observe workplaces. And those students come back with, like, insights of what it's like to work in a bank or somewhere else, right? And these are insights that they would not have. They don't have these experiences. They don't have family members that, you know, can come home and say, "Hey, here's what it was like at the office." I think it's powerful to have those students understand and really plan for entering a world of work and employment, and I don't think that we do enough to help students understand that.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:22:07] Sure. Well, Michael, let's keep talking about the world of work, but this is actually a great transition to the employer side. So what are some of the solutions there are even before we say what are the solutions, what are employers doing right now that's making inequality worse? And how do we fix that?

**Michael Collins:** Inequality is, you know, it is multifaceted. It is a societal phenomenon. I don't want to put it all on corporations or employers, right? Like, you know, it's broad. But let me be really clear: This is, like, difficult to say. But, like, we have evidence, right?

[00:22:44] There is serious structural employment discrimination so that the call-back studies, where if you have an African-American sounding name, you're less likely to get a call back, even with an identical resume. That's a problem, right? That's a problem. You know, there are many ways, so the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, talks about, kind of, middle-class sociability. I think in many employers there is this sense of, like, how you should act. Right? Like, I worry a little bit about, we talk about soft skills, like there is this aesthetic of a workplace culture where essentially, you know, in some ways it's like white middle-class communication styles and sociability is kind of a default kind of expectation. I think that that puts people of color and people from different cultural backgrounds at a disadvantage. The final thing I'll say about the employers is, they could make a huge difference with regard to equity with fair wages.

[00:23:46] Right? So, like, fair wages, the gender gap, and racial gap in earnings for people with the same credential, is, it's just unacceptable. And corporations and employers, they can disrupt that. That is in their power to do.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:24:00] Yeah, that's absolutely true, Michael. I mean, clearly, we've got a lot of work ahead of us. What's at stake if we don't get this right, if we just keep clinging to the status quo?

**Michael Collins** [00:24:10] You mentioned earlier about kind of the economic impact, right? Like of, frankly, of not having all people being able to really leverage their talents. I think it hurts us economically. It hurts us socially, and it delays us. It delays us living into

our country's principles. Like when we go back to, like, how we were founded, there's a lot of rhetoric. How do we live into, how do we live into that?

[00:24:38] And I think that at least I'm hopeful that people, fellow Americans, that we believe in opportunity, like, we believe in opportunity. And I think for us to live into that, we actively have to dismantle the systems and policies that are in some ways, they're vestiges of our current system. But those vestiges, like, in some cases have contemporary effects. Right? And they're creating barriers, and we have to, I think, to live into our ideals as a nation, I think we have to eradicate those barriers. And I think that we're doing that work now. I think it'll be work that we'll be doing for a long time. But I do believe that we're doing the work.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:25:18] I mean, this is the land of equality of opportunity, and we need to make sure that we are really coming forth of those ideals. We just so appreciate you coming to spend time with us, Michael. This has just been a fascinating conversation.

**Michael Collins** [00:25:31] It's great. I mean, I appreciate being asked. I thought your questions are great, and I'm so grateful to just have this conversation.

[00:25:39] But I'm also, I'm more grateful that, like, there are people like, you know, like you guys that are also doing this work. And I think doing this work together is how we're going to do this. I'm really proud to be a part of the field right now that's really trying to work on solutions, so it's really terrific to connect with you on this.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:26:00] That was our conversation with Michael Collins. Thanks for joining us.

(voiceover)

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