

Lessons Earned Podcast
Strada Education Network

S. 1, E. 6: VAN TON QUINLIVAN

TRANSCRIPT

Ben Wildavsky, host, Strada Education Network

[00:00:01] From Strada Education Network, this is *Lessons Earned*. I'm Ben Wildavsky.

[00:00:08] In this podcast, we're speaking with system challengers, education leaders, entrepreneurs, authors, policy thinkers, people who are challenging the status quo and trying to improve education and career outcomes for students of all ages. Today, the CEO of Futuro Health, Van Ton Quinlivan.

[Audio clip](#)

Van Ton Quinlivan, CEO, Futuro Health

The real model -- the evolving model -- is one of education and training as a set of booster shots. We're going to have to get our booster shots early and frequently.

Ben

[00:00:41] Welcome to *Lessons Earned: Putting education to work*.

[00:00:51] Today we're chatting with Van Ton Quinlivan. Van is a triple threat across multiple sectors of workforce development. She's worked in the private sector and more recently, she was a key player in transforming California's community colleges. Now she's setting her sights on that state's health care system. Experts say California will have to add half a million healthcare workers to meet the demands of its aging population. Van is the CEO of a nonprofit called Futuro Health, which is a brand new collaboration between the healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente and a major union, SEIU United Healthcare Workers West. They're trying to fill this demand for healthcare workers by creating new pathways into these careers. My co-host today is my colleague Anna Gatlin Schilling. Anna is a fellow policy wonk who is deeply involved in Strada's education and workforce initiatives at the state level. Anna, welcome to *Lessons Earned*.

Anna Gatlin Schilling

[00:01:41] Thanks for having me, Ben

Ben

OK, let's dive in.

Anna

[00:01:52] Van, you've had such an interesting career path. You've worked in the private sector and the public sector, and now you're about to launch a new role with an education nonprofit focused on job placement. I want to explore how all those endeavors led you where you are now. But I'm wondering if we can start even further back than that. When you were 6 years old, your parents fled the Vietnam War and immigrated to the United States. How did your early years as a first-generation American influence your career path?

Van Ton Quinlivan

[00:02:17] So in 1975, my family escaped from the Vietnam War, and as you said, I was age 6. And thanks to a lot of supports that we had, ranging from lunch tokens to community health services, eventually my family was able to land on its feet. Now, you can imagine with that type of experience where my parents lost their living as well as lost their home, you would imagine that they would end up bitter. However, that was never the case. They were always grateful for the opportunity to start anew. And they passed on that appreciation to me. They actually said that, you know, we won't be able to give you stuff. However, we will give you your education because no one and no war can take that away from you. And so I feel ever since then, I've been working to pay it forward to others to make sure that others had the same opportunity that I had.

Anna

[00:03:18] It definitely sounds like the early exposure you had to the social safety net really influenced the way you think about the education system. Would you say that's really affected your career path and the way you've approached education, education policy?

Van

[00:03:31] Absolutely. I did not start my career in the education world. I actually started in telecommunications and high tech, then transferred into the energy sector. And while in the energy sector, I kept hearing this issue that the company faced that it couldn't find quality, diverse workers for these great jobs that they had. And I knew that diverse communities would be thrilled to get these roles. It's just that they didn't know how to prepare for them and weren't aware of them. So I challenged a company to work on fixing the issues that kept good candidates from our door.

Ben

[00:04:23] I wanted, of course, to ask you about your time at the California community colleges. You became vice chancellor of workforce and economic development in 2011. And I'm wondering, what drew you to work with the community colleges and whether there is a specific moment that sort of led you down that path?

Van

[00:04:39] Well, Ben, I mentioned to you that I feel like I've been paying for the opportunity that I had as a child. And I saw the opportunity with the community colleges

as a continuation of that work. The California Community College system represents roughly 2.3 million students with 115 institutions. It is the largest system of higher education in the nation. And I also knew that if you were diverse, it's most likely that you're going to start at community colleges.

Ben

[00:05:09] So didn't I read somewhere that you had some experience? Maybe you could just tell us this real quick. about walking into a classroom at De Anza College.

Van

[00:05:17] Oh, my gosh, Ben, you have such a good memory. Well, at one point, I was invited by a colleague who said, Van, you have been talking forever about going into education. Why don't you come to my class and teach? I had been unfamiliar with community colleges at that point, but when I entered his class to teach Introduction to Business, I was floored by the composition of the students. I had 50 students, of which only five were Caucasians. And so it occurred to me that this is the diversity of California and this is the future of the workforce. After that, I spent quite a bit of time just better understanding who is attending community colleges. What were barriers in the way? And then how do you work on unlocking some of those barriers, especially so that they could land successfully into a good career..

Ben

[00:06:14] Well, you know, let's talk about some of those big structural barriers. When you arrived at the California Community College system what were the big issues that you took on?

Van

When I started, it was in the worst of times. It was in the middle of the recession.

[00:06:29] So we were not getting any new monies. We were also faced with having some of our funds cut in half. And the foundations had walked away from California because it was so complicated a state to get anything done. And what happened was that the legislature and the governor asked me to consolidate two apprenticeship programs into the one. And if I could do that, they would add more money. So I said yes. And they asked me then, well, could you take our two systems of adult education and integrate them into one so that we have more social mobility? And I said yes. And they did add more money. And then I offered to regionalize our career technical education program so that we could be more connected to regional economies and their need for skilled workers. And they said yes. And they added more money. And by the time I left, we had over a billion dollars of state funds invested in these workforce programs.

Anna

[00:07:32] That's really incredible, especially in the midst of a recession. How did you really utilize metrics in making that case for this funding shift? Was there any way you kind of tapped into that data to really make your case?

Van

[00:07:45] So, Anna, you know that what you measure is what counts. Most systems have metrics that are more about completion of certificates and degrees and then are students ready to transfer into four-year programs. So those are traditional higher education metrics.

Our colleges said you need to also add metrics that showed, hey, did we do a good job at breaking regional living wage? You know, that's a social mobility metric. Did students have a significant increase in earnings from before compared to after they completed the program? So that's a wage gain. Did students get jobs in the field that they studied?

Now, what did that do? You began to have conversations in the colleges that sounded something like this: They would look at the data and a faculty would say, my gosh, we did such a good job filling that class. Our enrollment is great. And they would pat themselves on the back and then they would look at the completion rate and say, wow, we did a great job. Everybody completed and they would pat themselves on the back, but then they would look at the workforce outcome data points and they would raise the question, well, why didn't any of our students get a job? You know, that's exactly the right conversation we wanted them to have, which is to rethink why students weren't ending in the workforce successfully.

Ben

[00:09:14] So metrics and data really can drive outcomes if you take them seriously.

Van

[00:09:19] Absolutely. And the other element of the data tool was that colleges could see themselves in the context of the regional economy. So, for example, in the Bay Area right here, we have 24 community colleges, which is a lot of capacity. And each college would produce administration of justice graduates. Well, if each of those colleges produced 200 students, are we over supplying or under supplying? And so one of the things we did was mapped the supply of students to the demand. What are the jobs that hired, you know, from those programs in the region? And then the colleges can see right there. Are they over supplying or under supplying? And that way they can recalibrate their investments.

Anna

[00:10:02] Most are really curious about your time as chief learning officer at the SEIU, the United Healthcare Workers West Union of about 150,000 healthcare workers. I have to ask, why does a union need a chief learning officer?

Van

[00:10:16] Well, this union is very interested in solving the healthcare worker shortage issue. In California alone, we're projected to have roughly 500,000 new positions open up in the next five years. And the production rate of workers is nowhere near where it needs to be. And this union is interested in solving that problem, but solving it in a novel way.

They were interested in sort of a two-part problem to be solved, which is how do you get more people credentialed and ready for allied health careers in California? And then secondly, how do we help them land in a worker's co-op so that the worker co-op can be their employer of record so that they can get benefit? In a way, they were thinking about what's happening in the gig economy, how many workers don't have benefits, they don't have education benefits, they don't have healthcare insurance. We're clearly creating a lot of work, but that work is asset poor. And so how do you find an antidote to that? Because otherwise we're just introducing more fragility into our communities.

Ben

[00:11:32] How do some of these stakeholders end up partnering together? You know, we often hear about tensions between new unions and employers. In this case, the unions are partnering with the employers with an education provider to try and provide something better. And can you just help us understand in very simple terms how that works, how they came together and what are the benefits going to be?

Van

[00:11:55] Well, I greatly appreciate those organizations that are willing to look at these signals in the future and figure out, you know, where's the puck going to go and how do we get ready to be in the right place at the right time. The United Health Workers have been very proactive at looking at these trends that we have talked about, including the gigification, really the fragmentation, of jobs and how people are losing access to assets like, you know, insurance and healthcare and asking the question, well, what would it look like? So that you can have the right social structures, really that could be some of the antidotes to sort of the downsides of the gig economy.

Yeah, a lot of our public policies are structured based on an old paradigm of education and training, which is one of education and training as a one-time inoculation. You'd get as much as you can upfront in your life and hopefully that carries you through and everything. And our public policy is structured to support you like financially through that. However, you know, like if you're following anything that is happening in technology and how often the rate of change is occurring and it's affecting, you know, ability of workers to keep up. The real model, the evolving model is one of education and training as a set of booster shots. We're gonna have to get our booster shots early and often and frequently. Well, it raises the question, well, who pays for the booster shot? Because public systems can barely afford the first model of having a one-time inoculation. And so kudos to Kaiser and United Healthcare Worker for stepping forth and putting monies on the table to really begin answering this question of who pays,

right? And then what are the social structures to support people to get their continuous booster shots of education and training?

Ben

[00:14:00] Yeah. Well, help us understand this new from the point of view of a worker. Let's just say you're your woman in Sacramento. You're a I'm not sure what the entry level position is, but you're a nurse's aide or a nursing assistant at a Kaiser hospital in Sacramento. You're a member of the SEIU of the Service Employees Union. And lo and behold, there's this great new nonprofit Futuro Health comes along. What can you do for that person? Is it gonna be about guiding them into taking classes to get a credential that already exists that will help them get a better job? Or is it also about creating new kinds of credentials to you? Just walk us through that at the most basic level.

Van [00:14:41] Sure. So, for example, if you want to be a licensed vocational nurse right now, there are so few seats available in the low-cost alternative, which is the community colleges. You know, most community colleges have like one class of maybe 20 to 30 students. So there are long waiting lists for those programs. And those are very affordable programs.

So if you really want to get going, then you have to turn to the private preparatory schools and those tend to charge somewhere between \$25,000-35,000. Now, that's an incredible amount of debt for a student to take on. So part of the work that we have to do at Futuro Health is that we have to work on increasing the capacity of lower-cost programs so that getting onto the education pathway is more affordable to individuals and then supporting them through.

Now there are so many careers in allied health. At most dinner tables, you will talk about the nurses, the doctors, the policemen, the athlete, but nobody talks about, hey, I really want to be a medical sonographer or radiology technician. Right? These are very nuanced occupations that our communities don't know are good jobs, family-sustaining jobs. And so the members of the United Healthcare Worker intend to organize and mobilize and go out into the community and more deeply inform people about these opportunities and to do scouting and recruiting, but also sponsoring candidates through these education pathways so that they can get their credential. In a way, I think we all wish that we had a career fairy godmother who can help us, you know, get clarity on what career we should do that's a good fit for us. And what we have with the United Healthcare Workers is that we have all these folks who are successful in health care careers being willing to pay it forward and reach out to others to bring them into these careers.

Anna

[00:16:53] And I'm also assuming that a lot of education for them, for the workers, is essential as well.

Van

[00:16:59] Yes. And the employers are particularly excited about the people skill component of the approach that we're thinking, you know, to make a quality in a skilled worker, it's not just your technical skills, it's the technical skill combined with your people skill. So we're going to be doing a lot of investment in terms of simulation and practice around what I call the high-touch healthcare skills to pair that with the technical skills that they're getting through these education pathways.

Anna

[00:17:30] Really interesting. Do you think this can actually scale to other industries? We've talked a lot about health care, but do you think this is an applicable model for other industries?

Van

[00:17:39] If you boil down what we're doing, it's really the three-legged stool, again, which is involving the employer to articulate what they need, to engage in the community to get deeper into outreach, and then working with education institutions to redesign the way that they educate and train. So we're talking about the same workforce development components being applied to the allied health field, and most certainly it could be used in other industries just like it was relevant in the energy sector.

Anna

[00:18:14] That's great. What's really at stake if we're unable to build a system that effectively upskills workers, raises wages, etc.?

Van

[00:18:23] Well, Ben and Anna, let me let me ask you this question: Would you like to be in that community that doesn't have its fair share of health care workers, especially as you get older? Well, you know, I've talked to a few people along the way, and I tell you, there's nobody that wants to be on the short end of that equation. A big determinant, especially for hard to serve communities, is whether they can get the workers who are willing to live in those communities. You know, the tagline of Futuro Health is "where the future of care begins" and it begins with people and where they live and whether or not they come from the communities that need to be served.

Ben

[00:19:12] That was our conversation with Van Ton Quinlivan. Thanks to Anna for being my co-host, and thanks for joining us on *Lessons Earned*.

voice over

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