

Strada Education Network

Lessons Earned Podcast

Season 1, Episode 1: Freeman Hrabowski

TRANSCRIPT

Ben Wildavsky, Host, *Lessons Earned*

From Strada Education Network, this is *Lessons Earned*.

(theme music)

I'm Ben Wildavsky, senior vice president of National Engagement at Strada.

In this podcast, we're talking to education leaders, entrepreneurs, authors, and policy thinkers -- people who are challenging the status quo and trying to improve education and career outcomes for students of all ages.

Today, the president of UMBC, Freeman Hrabowski.

(audio clip)

Freeman Hrabowski

We in higher education--must be willing to be empowered to look in the mirror and to say, what we do well, and, with honesty, where we need to improve. We have become much too comfortable with such a large percentage of our students not even graduating.

Ben

Welcome to *Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work*.

(theme music)

Today, we're speaking with Doctor Freeman Hrabowski. Freeman has been the president of UMBC -- the University of Maryland, Baltimore County -- since 1992. And over the course of nearly three decades, he's worked tirelessly to transform that institution. Under his leadership, UMBC now graduates more black PhD and MD-PhD holders than any other university in America. *U.S. News* consistently puts the school on its list of the "most innovative schools in the country." And in 2012, Freeman's work as a

higher ed reformer led to him being named one of *TIME Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People. He's also the co-author of the new book, *The Empowered University: Shared Leadership, Culture Change, and Academic Success*.

In addition to his work on improving academic success for low-income and minority students, we're also going to talk about his views on how we have to broaden our understanding of what college is for so we avoid the false choice between liberal arts education and career preparation.

But, before we dive in, I want to introduce my co-host, Andrew Hanson. Andrew is the director of research for Strada's Consumer Insights group and we're thrilled to have him on the show today. Welcome to *Lessons Learned*, Andrew.

Andrew

Thanks, Ben. It's great to be here.

Ben

Let's get started!

Morning. Good morning. How are you? How are you, Freeman? Nice to hear your voice.

Freeman

Thank you. Is this Ben?

Ben

Yes. That's right. Very good.

Freeman

Very good. Really appreciate it.

Ben

Yeah. I really appreciate you carving out a little time for us. I know you've got a lot going on always.

Freeman

Yeah. We're delighted to be doing this.

Andrew

Freeman I want to kick off with this: so you have had an incredible personal story growing up in Birmingham in the Civil Rights movement. Can you tell us just a little bit about, you know, what was it like going to school in that environment?

Freeman

I always tell people that I was one of the most fortunate children of color in America because my parents were educated. We never hear about middle-class black America during that period. But I grew up in a neighborhood that had everybody from Condi Rice to Angela Davis to Alma Vivian Powell. So we were very fortunate to have parents who were teachers. And yet we knew in many ways that we were considered second-class citizens from some books that were hand-me-down books from white schools to facilities that were not at the same level and from, quite frankly, looking at television and realizing there was nobody on TV in a positive way in the '50s, early '60s, that reflected middle-class black Birmingham or America. It was not a not a very positive message for children

But most important, our parents taught us the importance of reading and thinking. And because my mother had been both an English teacher and math teacher, I was working on both those things all the time. And that gave me a decided advantage.

Andrew

And eventually you decided that you wanted to work in education yourself. How did that come about?

Freeman

Well, remember, I was very fortunate to march with Dr. King in the children's march, to spend a horrific week in jail.

(audio clip of the march)

But that experience taught me that children could be empowered to envision the future and move in that direction in a positive way.

And I could appreciate the value of education in transforming lives.

Ben

And can you pinpoint the time when you realized that you wanted to be an educator yourself?

Freeman

When I was in kindergarten, and people only laugh at that. Yeah, I'd been in school a couple of years early, and somehow the teachers needed to keep me from running around and being rebellious. And so they gave me the chance to work with a couple of kids who were having more difficulty learning the material.

And it was the best experience I could have had. It taught me so much about how people think, about how we help children to be empowered, about how children who don't learn as quickly can feel very bad about themselves and that people learn in different ways. So I was always trying to figure out, how do we get people to love mathematics the way I do?

Ben

So there's a real straight line then to some of your big initiatives now in math and science.

Freeman

That's exactly right. From a nerdy kid to a nerdy president. Yeah. That's who I am.

Ben

Well, let me ask you about some of the big-picture questions.

I know that you think about a lot and are really in the middle of, as a university leader. When you think about higher education in the U.S. right now, what do you think are some of the central challenges that we're facing?

Freeman

Number one for me is that we are very rare among industrialized nations in that people of any race who are in that bottom category of the socio-economic categories in our country are very unlikely right now to graduate from college in six years. It's usually, we say, under 10 percent. That was that way back in the '60s and it's that way now.

And so while we are supposed to be a society that gives every child the opportunity to succeed and move into the middle class, that is just not the case. So the gaps that we talk about, the academic achievement gap, the health disparities gap, the income gap are very real and getting broader, wider all the time. The other big problem is that we are a divided society in so many ways when we complain about Congress.

I say to college presidents all the time, those members of Congress are graduates of our institutions. And somehow in many cases, the question becomes, how do we figure out how to not simply try to win the argument, but rather to try to find the truth, to seek the truth. We are not emphasizing the importance of data, of evidence, and the truth. This is the role of universities.

Andrew

And how does the role of colleges and universities and in preparing students for careers come into play there? You know, you asked students and parents, that's a major reason that they decide to enroll in college programs. How do you see that aspect of the mission?

Freeman

You know, I talk a lot about something Jim Collins says: the genius of the "and" versus the tyranny of the "or." I think the broad liberal education prepares us to learn how to learn, because students will have a number of different types of jobs in their 40-, 50-year career.

And they need to know how to learn new things, how to ask good questions, how to work with different kinds of people.

At the same time, universities are understanding the importance of internships, co-op experiences. My students, thousands, are involved in co-op experiences, whether they're in a technology area or they enter humanities and they're preparing to work in marketing or to go into a field they've not even thought about. We are strong believers in the need to teach them to read and think and write and communicate effectively and at the same time to have experiences to learn more about what the job market is looking for, what kinds of skills and how you work effectively with other people. So we need both.

Ben

I wonder if I could jump in here just to say you've talked, I think when you were recognized, you had a big lifetime achievement award from the American Council on Education last year. One of the points you made was that while there's a lot of value to the traditional pathway, that we need to be thinking about alternatives and alternative credentials for people who may not want or need a BA, and I'm thinking, for example, of a conversation that we've had about your cybersecurity program. Can you talk about that and how that evolved and what sort of needs you think you're trying to fill there?

Freeman

I think we make a mistake when we try to push every child to want to go on and get a four-year degree immediately. People learn in different ways at different paces, different rates. And some students simply are not interested in sitting in courses to get a degree in the liberal arts, and we can force them to do it, but I often say, when we do that, that it reminds me of what T.S. Eliot said about a character: that the person had had the experience and missed the point.

I think it's a tragedy when we send a student through a four-year program in the humanities and the person comes out knowing nothing, having no sense of the importance of the humanities to our lives or in the arts. And so for some students who are not prepared academically or emotionally to go through that kind of program, we need options. And one of those options involves certificate programs. More and more, we'll be hearing about cert programs. And when people disagree with me, I tend to say that they're being much too narrow in their approach. If we look at other countries, we see that some of the countries we admire, we'll see that they have different pathways for different students at different points in their lives.

Ben

And I wonder if you could even extend that a little bit. You know, you mentioned the Jim Collins quote about the tyranny of the "or" and that we should be thinking in terms of "and." What about breaking down some of those barriers, even between the skills you get in a liberal arts education and the ones you might get in more of a technical or vocational program? Can you introduce some elements of soft skills?

Freeman

Yeah, sure, sure. No, no. Let me give you an example: A number of the students who are taking advantage of the British programs already have degrees in the humanities and they want to add on to their portfolio skills, and so they become very valuable. When you've got a degree in writing or English or literature and you've got a certificate in cyber, you've got even more opportunities.

Andrew

Freeman, In your speech at the 2018 ACE meeting, you said -- I'm not sure if you said exactly this; I'm quoting from the transcript here -- Quote, "We keep hearing about how expensive higher education is, about escalating costs, about questions of accessibility, about whether it's worth it and whether we as institutions are elitist and unable to understand the broader public. We must counter these perceptions by being able to effectively communicate the value of our institutions." So my question for you is this: how do we do this? How do you communicate the value of postsecondary institutions to us right now?

Freeman

You know, the first thing I say is, show me a family that has had experience in higher education with either parents or children graduating, I will show you a family that says, 'Yeah, I want the other members of my family to go to college.' Once you've had the experience and you see the skills you develop and the opportunities you get and the way you are able to take care of your family, you are hooked. What people don't realize is only about 30 percent of Americans have had someone graduate from four-year institutions. And so for a lot of people, they hear all of what we hear in the media about how expensive it is or they hear about people not graduating and they think, "It must not be for me."

But when students have gone through college and their parents see that or their grandparents see that, they become believers and there they are. There are many ways that we can demonstrate to people the importance of education: People are healthier when they graduate from college. They are much less likely to smoke cigarettes. They make much more money, about a million dollars more in their life. They get better jobs, more opportunities. And so we've got all these reasons and they tend to be more involved as leaders in their community in helping with service and with voting and those kinds of things. And so it does, college helps to produce very engaged leaders in communities who are broad thinkers and who, quite frankly, make more money and can take care of their families.

Ben

Now, of course, you know, there are people who will say, you know, economists use the term "signaling," that the degree is really just a piece of paper. It's just people also use the term "sheepskin effect." What do you think about that? I mean, how much of it is just the signal that you're sending that you have the kind of wherewithal to stick to it and get

through school? And how much of it is really the knowledge, you know, that you're that you're getting at school?

Freeman

The genius of the “and” versus the tyranny of the “or.” I go back to that. I really do. I wish I'd made it up. But it's so true. It is people in many jobs will say, the employers will say, college degree only because people who have graduated from college know that that degree means the person is a good thinker. The person is supposed to be able to write well and speak well and analyze data and most important, to stick to the initiative and solve the problem. These are the things that we think about when we think about college graduates. And it is true when we get them on those jobs, those are the skills they have now.

My colleagues and I have just written a new book entitled *The Empowered University*, and that the subtitle is *A Shared Leadership, Culture Change, and Academic Success*. And what we say is that we in higher education and each university, starting with us here at UMBC, must be willing to be empowered to look in the mirror and to say what we do well, but also to say, with honesty, where we need to improve.

A part of our challenge in higher education is that we have become much too comfortable with such a large percentage of our students not even graduating. You know, we say it's about 50 percent graduate. But if you break that down, I'm in mathematics. I want to see just how bimodal that is. That is, the wealthier institutions, private and some public, will have graduation rates who put that at 90 percent. But when you get to middle class and working class public institutions and some private, you'll see I mean, regardless of race, across the races, you see large numbers with graduation rates that are below 40 percent, even below 30 percent. So millions of Americans have gotten more into debt as a result of going to college, but they don't have a degree to show for it. That's one issue.

And then the other is, are we convinced that the product, that our graduates, are able to demonstrate what we say they can demonstrate? And I think that's a constant challenge for all of us. Do we know that they write well, that they speak well, that they know how to work with other people effectively, that they are problem-solvers, that they are good listeners, that they can find the common ground? These things sound obvious, but I think institutions need to be empowered to look at what they do, how they do it, and (look at) their graduates to determine how successful they really are.

Ben

You know, our podcast is really about system challengers and a lot of them are operating outside the system, you know, entrepreneurs, people coming up with new ways of testing skills or new pathways that are outside the traditional college or university system. And in some ways, that's a way where you're kind of inherently challenging the status quo. And what I know you'll see, we'll all sort of circle back to how I think this might relate to your upbringing. But I wonder if you can talk about the

challenges and also the merits of trying to make change within the system. That's really what you do, you know, and I think, of course, you'll see the analogy I think I'm talking about with the civil rights movement and different kinds of thinking about how much can you work within the system for change and how much do you have to maybe be a little more radical and go outside?

Freeman

Sure. I appreciate that. The last book we wrote was on [Holding Fast to Dreams](#), on going from the civil rights movement to STEM achievement. And I make the statement that as a child, at 12, listening to Dr. King in church as he was talking about a protest, I had always assumed that I'd get hand-me-down books from white kids. I'd always assumed I'd be in class only with blacks and live in a black neighborhood and not be able to go to the movies and not be able to go drink out of the water fountain because nobody had said, "Tomorrow can be much better than today and America should be better than it is." And it was, it opened my mind to the possibilities. And it is. And it taught me I, even as a child, I could be involved in changing the way our society thinks about little black children and that motivating factor, that approach, has guided my work, but it guides our work at UMBC. We made a decision to my colleagues that we wanted to make sure that young people, and not so young of all races, those who are first-generation college -- and at least 30 percent of my students, I'm very proud of that and who are on the Pell Grant -- can do as well as anybody else.

And we have worked through analytics, through the group work, through the support systems that we have, to change the culture of this university so that we could become a national model for people of color and low-income people and middle-class people and whites who go on to complete graduate and professional degrees, but also in the other areas. And what I'm saying is that we can show on our campuses that people from all kinds of backgrounds can do many things that people would assume we cannot do.

Andrew

So I'd like to end on this question: You know, thinking big picture in terms of our broad postsecondary education system, what are one or two of the most important things that we might think about changing if we could do that overnight? What are the big levers that you see in improving the delivery of higher education in America?

Freeman

Now we have to find ways of changing the culture of our institutions to not be satisfied with so many students who are not succeeding, or with students who want to major in one area and somehow have to leave it within a year or two. And as I say in this new book, we talk about the fact that culture change is really hard. Because if we are doing OK ourselves, we asked the question, why must we change? You see? And yet the world is changing dramatically because of the demographic changes and because of the unbelievable impact of technology on what we do academically and administratively. And we will need to find ways of connecting technology to everything that we do, even

as we continue to insist upon the importance of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The genius of the “and” versus the tyranny of the “or.”

Ben

Even though we really are wrapping up, I promise we'll get you back to your day, but I do want to ask one of the things that I know I've heard over the years, but I don't know if I know the full story, is that you have made your chess team tremendously successful. And it's become sort of emblematic of some of what's happened to UMBC and I believe, at one point, you brought in cheerleaders for the chess team. Have I got that right?

Freeman

We have done that. We really have. It does well, it has, some years it's been national champions. It's always in the Top 10 or so. When we were fortunate to win that UVA basketball game that made history, as a really nerdy place. It's so, UMBC makes history. It was a big deal. But when reporters asked the students, “What are you gonna do now?” One kid said, one student said, “Got to go back to my room and study.” We liked that. We really did. And that was on the night of the win. But the other one said, with great sincerity -- this was a basketball player, having beaten UVA -- he said, “We stand on the shoulders of the chess team.” It doesn't get any better than that, huh?

Theme music

Ben

That was our conversation with Freeman Hrabowski. Thanks for joining us on *Lessons Earned*. And thanks, Andrew, for being my co-host.

Andrew

It's been great to be with you.