

Lessons Earned Podcast

Strada Education Network

S. 1, E. 2: Oren Cass, author of *The Once and Future Worker*

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 author of *The Once and Future Worker*, Oren Cass.

[audio clip](#)

Oren Cass

I think we've sent an extraordinarily strong message that essentially, you know, college is for winners and not going to college is for losers.

Ben

Welcome to *Lessons Earned: Putting education to work*.

[00:00:52] Today, we're sitting down with Oren Cass. Oren is a policy expert who served as domestic policy director for Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. He recently left his job as a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. And he's going to be starting a new organization whose mission is, in his words, to redefine the economic orthodoxy that guides the nation's politics and public policy. In 2018, he published his first book, which is called *The Once and Future Worker*. And in the book, he argues that public policy needs to restore the value of work and to destigmatize working-class jobs. And of course, education plays into this in a big way. Oren thinks that we need to stop steering so many people toward college and explore some alternative pathways, including more apprenticeships, that might just lead to more meaningful work for everyone. This is important and sometimes contentious stuff, and it should be a really great conversation. In the co-host chair today is my colleague Andrew Hanson. He's the director of research for Strada's Consumer Insights group.

[00:01:48] Welcome to *Lessons Earned*, Andrew.

Andrew Hanson, co-host

Hi, Ben. Great to be with you.

Ben

Let's get to it.

[00:01:58] Oren Cass, welcome to *Lessons Earned*.

Oren Cass

Thank you very much.

Ben

Let's talk about education and broadly speaking, when you look at post-secondary education in the United States, what would you say is working and what's not working?

Oren

[00:02:10] Well, I think one thing that's working quite well in higher education in the United States, is that, you know, at the highest level, we really still have really the highest quality education for people who are going down academically intensive tracks, moving into fields where they'll be researchers, professionals, lawyers, doctors, and so forth. Where I think the picture gets a lot less promising is as you start to move away from that very top end and see how the system is sort of serving your median student.

Ben

[00:02:47] Well, let's let's talk more about that in your book, *The Once and Future Worker*, you argue that the idea of "college for all" is counterproductive. And I wonder if you could tell us a bit about, how do you define college? Are you thinking about four-year BAs, bachelors degrees? Are you thinking more broadly of community college where people are perhaps getting associate's degrees or short-term certificates?

Oren[00:03:09] Well, I would certainly include both BAs and community colleges in that. I mean, I think community college is one of the places that, in a sense, is delivering the worst outcomes in our system. You know, completion rates are in the teens typically. The defense of the community college system is often well, it's an on-ramp or a feeder to people who might want to pursue BAs. And so whether you're looking at that as a stand-alone associate's degree or an on-ramp to then moving forward with the BA, I think you have the same problem, which is that, you know, a huge share of the folks who proceed down that track never actually complete their degree. And then you have a compounding problem, which is that if you even look at outcomes for people who do complete their degree, a very large share don't even move from there into a job that requires a degree.

Ben

[00:04:02] If college for all is a mistake, it's counterproductive, what should the objective of our education system be?

Oren

[00:04:09] Well, I think the objective of our education system should be to prepare young people for adulthood. So that means equipping them with the content, the knowledge and the skills. And then also equipping them on the softer side with the socialization and social skills and behaviors that they'll need to be productive adults.

[00:04:30] And I think we want to have a smooth transition where the end of your education transitions naturally into a next step, whether that next step is more education or training of some sort, obviously, they're going to be a lot of pathways, but you want to have a good transition at that point.

Ben

[00:04:51] So you you like multiple pathways. We love to hear that at Strada. That's something we talk about a lot. But you actually make some arguments that I found very striking about public policy. And you say that as a matter of public policy, there's a lot more that we could do in terms of funding streams, among other things, to level the playing field between college students and those who are not pursuing college. Can you tell us more about that?

Oren

[00:05:13] Well, if you look at what we do today, I think the ethos of our education system over the past generation has been this idea of college for all. To a significant extent, we have transformed our high schools into college prep schools. We've certainly defined how we measure success to a significant degree as moving on to college.

And then if you look at where we spend our money, we spend an extraordinary amount -- more than \$150 billion a year across state and federal governments -- subsidizing college. If you step back and say, OK, well, what about the other pathways, we have in general been cutting off and reducing investment in alternative pathways. And so the effect of that, I think, is that we are pushing people very aggressively in that direction in terms of the incentives we provide. But then also in the softer, more cultural sense, I think we've sent an extraordinarily strong message that essentially, you know, college is for winners and not going to college is for losers. And so all of that has led toward this pipeline where we try to push as many people through to come out the end as college graduates and sort of accept everybody who falls out of that pipeline along the way as kind of collateral damage. And the reality is that the vast majority of people are falling out along the way. Fewer than one in five are actually going smoothly from high school to college to career.

Andrew Hanson

[00:06:44] So Oren, I'm curious, I wonder if we can pin you down on some of the more promising alternatives to college that you think would be solid options for many of the folks who the college pathway is not working out for.

Oren

[00:07:00] The one thing I would emphasize is I think asking as alternatives to college is the wrong framing. I think one mistake that we make a lot of the time is to sort of start from an assumption that high school is going to look the way high school looks and then kind of after everyone marches off the other side of the stage with their high school diploma, now we now we start thinking about pathways and that just starts the alternative pathways at such an extraordinary disadvantage because we've just spent all of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade treating everyone as somebody who's going to go to college. And then if we turn around and say, oh, actually, a lot of you, that doesn't make sense. Well, that is a terrible use of the time building up to that moment.

Maybe what 12th grade should look like, if you're not planning to start freshman year of college the next year, is much more being in a workplace a significant share of the time. I'd like us to define what a relationship looks like, where someone who is a full-time employee, but is a trainee, meaning that a significant portion of their time is spent in formal training. You know, there are a lot of people who I think initially become very uncomfortable with this idea of kind of putting employers and colleges on an equal footing that way. It sounds strange to say, well, I'd rather give the money to a corporation than to a university. We think of these in very different ways. But if you actually step back and just ask what is the institution in our society that's best suited to help people make that

transition from the classroom into the workforce, into adulthood, I think for a huge share of our young people, the best institution for that is the employer. It's not a university.

Ben

[00:08:50] Well, it sounds like what you're describing is tracking. And I know you're very confident about the benefits of tracking. But I think, you know, some of us hear that word and get concerned about reducing opportunities for young people. You know, I think it evokes certain concerns about racial inequality, social inequities. I wonder if you can tell us, how do you think you can avoid those problems?

Oren

[00:09:12] Well, you know, I think that important point to start in the tracking conversation, to emphasize that any system of tracking should leave the decision with families, that we certainly don't want a system where it's the system that gets to decide what track somebody is on. The system you want is one where people who are likely to be successful in college are going to think that the college track is more attractive and people who are unlikely to be successful in college, are going to perceive an alternative track as more attractive.

[00:09:44] So I say that's sort of as a preamble to what I think is the most important point when we think about what tracking does to particularly folks coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds and what tracking does is give them a better option. The reality is that there is no such thing as a system without tracking, unless we're going to hire a tutor for every student. We are going to have tracks. We just right now only have one track, and it is the college track, and the people poorly served by a system that only has a college track are the people who are least likely to succeed in college. And so, you know, anybody who sort of gets on their high horse about the inequities of tracking, you know, I always respond to by just offering a hypothetical, which is, if we're really committed to this egalitarian idea that there should be no tracks or that we should only have one track, well then let's at least agree that we should design a track,

[00:10:46] our main track, for the median student and the median student in this country still doesn't earn even an associate's degree, which means that our single track will be a vocational track. And if that's what no tracking meant, then you can bet that all the people who are passionately against tracking would turn around in favor of tracking real quickly because they're only opposed to tracking as long as the one track is the one that's designed for them.

Ben

[00:11:11] Well, let me just push back a little on that. I mean, I think there are many people who would say, what about the late bloomers? You know, you've positioned this as one of choice and families having the option. But I think a lot of people, you know, certainly historically, are concerned that kids who may really have potential will be pushed into tracks that are likely to lead them into less-lucrative careers. A lot of people are just worried about this question of who makes that choice and are you going to create a second-class system?

Oren

[00:11:40] Well, whether or not it's a second-class system is a choice for policymakers in terms of its quality. Whether it's a second-class system in our society is a choice for our

culture. There is no reason to view a vocational track just in the abstract as second-class or frankly, less lucrative.

Andrew

[00:12:08] I want to ask a related question that connects this conversation to the broader dialog that we've been having about the future of work. So, many economists are arguing that that new technologies are specifically automating the job-related technical skills that are involved in work, and that the best preparation for the future of work is cultivating these human skills like communication, critical thinking, problem-solving that are associated with a liberal arts education, let's say. So how do you view the balance of cultivating these broad general skills and the job-related technical skills as we think about designing our education system?

Oren

[00:12:49] Well, I guess I would question both of the premises of the question. Sorry to be difficult.

Ben

Oh, no. We're smiling and enjoying it.

Oren

I would say first that I don't know that that description from the economists is correct. Certainly, as far as the labor market that we see today, I mean, among other things, we measure productivity very carefully to see how quickly we are automating. And productivity growth is pretty much at an all-time low across our economy. So we are actually automating and replacing people with technology more slowly than ever. And, you know, you see this in very concrete cases like self-driving cars, where for all of the grandiose rhetoric about it, it has turned out that actually replacing a human driver with a computer is exceptionally difficult. The second premise is, well, to the extent that we really need to equip people with soft skills and critical thinking and the human side of work and so forth, that a liberal arts college somehow helps to do that.

[00:13:59] I don't think that's true at all. And again, for most jobs, I would say what you actually need to learn to do that kind of problem solving is to be in the job market and doing the work and getting the support on the job.

Ben

[00:14:14] So I want to go back to this big-picture question about the economic value of postsecondary education. You know, we in the colonial period, we had a very tiny system of colleges for a very select few people. But we've expanded a lot. We had the Land Grant Acts in the 19th century. We had the GI Bill after World War II. We had the community college movement. I think there's been a real recognition that you can really substantially improve economic and social mobility for a lot of Americans when you open up the doors of higher education. Now we have about a third of Americans with bachelor's degrees. It was only 11 percent in 1970. And the economic payoff to those degrees is higher than it's ever been. So why shouldn't we encourage more students to go to college?

Oren

[00:14:56] Well, I guess, sorry, I guess this is my thing, I will challenge a lot of those premises again. I mean, it's a little bit like weighting the dice to say after 40 years of investing only in a college pathway and really ignoring anybody who is not on the college

pathway, it turns out that the college pathway delivers a better result than nothing. And so I think we have to keep that in mind as well when we're making the comparison.

Ben

[00:15:26] So you're suggesting that a hypothetical alternative set of policy options would have led to less of a difference between the economic payoff to college?

Oren

[00:15:37] I mean, it would be extraordinary if what we spend, if \$150 billion a year that we spend on college did not produce some return over the virtually nothing we spend on not college. The second thing I think is really important to emphasize is, when we talk about the massification of college, we've really seen sharply diminishing returns over the past 40 or 50 years. You know, it's true, as you said, that you see that kind of 11 percent in 1970, up to more like a third today with a BA. But we are finding that that percentage is incredibly resistant to increase. And even if you could do much, much better than you're doing today and you know, wow, what if all of a sudden we got that up to 50 percent, you'd still only be talking about 50 percent. And by the way, you're talking about a cohort that when they graduate, 40 percent of those graduates don't even go into a job that required a degree. So it's not as if the labor market is actually screaming, we need more college graduates because it's not actually making use of a lot of the ones that we produce.

Andrew

[00:16:48] If, you know, you could change one or two things, let's say, about our education system overnight, what would those be and what's at stake if we don't make these changes?

Oren

[00:17:01] The first thing I would change is, is just stop funding college at the level we do. You know, what we call the student loan crisis is really a dropout crisis. What we have is a problem of a huge share of the population that is taking on those loans, not getting the value from them, and now has the debt and not the earnings.

[00:17:23] And so moving to a system in which college is something you do because you think it is going to make economic sense and have a repayment, I think would certainly put downward pressure on the cost of college and really encourage people for whom it is not going to be a good choice to think more carefully about how best to use their time and their money.

Ben

[00:17:49] Let me just jump in on the value question, because when you actually talk about what's happening within postsecondary institutions, you know, you highlight the fact that college presidents see higher ed as being about creating educated citizens, lifelong learners and so forth. And then students are very much focused on jobs. But I guess what I would ask you is, does it have to be such a stark tradeoff? You know, can't we both improve connections between college and the workforce, but also not give up on college as a place where you develop broad thinking skills, even the kinds of skills you need to be a good citizen?

Oren

[00:18:21] I think it's terrific if college provides those skills. I'm not sure that it does that especially well for most people today. I'm also not sure why college as opposed to high school is the place where we focus on that.

Ben

[00:18:34] Oren, I want to close with this question: We know that most college graduates tend to want their children to follow the same path they did. Your three kids are very young now, but if they end up choosing to skip college and do something more vocational, would you be OK with that?

Oren

[00:18:48] It's something that I'm very conscious of, and I think it's really important to emphasize to them whenever those kinds of topics come up, that there's college. But that's a decision they'll have to make as they're moving through high school about what they want to do next. But I do want to take the time between to emphasize something, and I think it's a real problem in our in our discussion of this topic, which is that for a variety of mostly good reasons, the folks who are talking about education policy all day, every day are folks who certainly themselves went to college and in a lot of cases are going to find their own kids on a college track. And there's a very strange sensitivity where we shouldn't talk about alternative tracks or, you know, we should be asking this question, well, what about *your* kids? And I think, well, what about your kids is one of the worst questions we can ask in education policy debates, because it's not *about* your kids. It's not about any particular kid. It's about the actual kids we have in this country and the outcomes that they're experiencing.

Ben

[00:20:00] Well, thank you. This has been really fascinating. I really appreciate you carving out some time to talk to us.

Oren

[00:20:07] I really appreciate you guys having me on, and thank you so much for the discussion.

Ben [00:20:15] And that was Oren Cass. Andrew, thanks very much for being my partner in crime today

Andrew

Thank you, Ben

Ben

Thanks to our audience for joining us for *Lessons Earned*.

[voiceover](#)

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