

## Lessons Earned Podcast Strada Education Network

### S. 3, E. 1: Jeff Selingo

#### TRANSCRIPT

**Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network**

[00:00:00] Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

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

And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis, and this is “Lessons Earned.”

[00:00:09] Today, author Jeff Selingo.

(Audio clip)

**Jeff Selingo**

They don't want you to see inside that box because there are too many contradictions in it and they don't want you to say, “Wait a second. You just told me to do these 12 things. I did them and I was still denied.”

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:00:22] From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting education to work.”

[00:00:35] Welcome to our third season of “Lessons Earned” and welcome to my co-host, Aimée Eubanks Davis. Hi, Aimée.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:00:41] Hi, Ben. I'm so excited to be here this season with you.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:00:45] Well, we're really happy to have you. And you all may remember Aimée joined us as a guest previously to talk about her incredible work at Braven. And this season, I'm delighted that she's agreed to join me as co-host.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:00:56] I am super excited to dig in with our first guest. If we learned anything from the Varsity Blues scandal in 2019, it's that, as a country, we've become obsessed with getting into elite colleges. But the truth is, Varsity Blues is only one of the symptoms that highlights just how unfair the college admissions process has become.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:01:20] That process is the subject of a new book by Jeff Selingo. Jeff is a veteran journalist who used to be the editor of the Chronicle of Higher Education. He's written for places like The Atlantic, The New York Times, and for his new book, which is called “Who Gets In and Why,” Jeff spent a year embedded in the college admissions system and he really pulls back the curtain on this process that schools are — you know, it's very mysterious and they kind of want to keep it that way. They're very reluctant to be transparent about it. And what he discovered was that in this kind of incredible national obsession we have with this pretty small number of colleges that are very selective, that are not the colleges most people go to, we've kind of created a monster. We have this really confusing admissions system. And just by definition, there are very few winners and there are lots of different kinds of losers. And, you know, in a sense, one of the losers is

the country itself because of the damage this kind of system does to our aspirations about who we really are.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:02:21] Ben, I think you really captured it right when you said it's become a monster. I mean, in this country, students from humble beginnings often use college and higher ed as the pathway to economic mobility. And so these topics really have far-reaching implications. And luckily, Jeff came to talk about them.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:02:42] With us, here's Jeff Selingo.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:02:51] Jeff, I have to say, this book was so fascinating for me as someone who in the distant past applied to college. And then, it all made some sense to me about where I got in and where I didn't.

[00:03:04] But now I'm looking forward, and I have three children who I'm pretty tight in the chest all the time about not just getting into college, but I would say affording it.

[00:03:13] So this book was so helpful to me in the pre-planning process. Not sure you're giving me any less sleepless nights. That said, the title of your book is "Who Gets In and Why?" You know, I think most people would assume that the answer to the why part is pretty straightforward. Colleges want to admit the best and the brightest. But what's interesting and what I found really fascinating in your book is that you really argue that it's a lot more complicated than that, that it's really hard to tell who really is going to end up basically rising to the top of the admit moment. So from where you sit, what's driving the admissions process in this way if it's not a meritocracy?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:03:52] Yeah, it's not a meritocracy. In fact, it never really was a meritocracy. We kind of believe it should be. We have this belief in this country that, you know, if you work hard and do well, you're going to get to go to the best colleges. And that's not the case. It never was and never will be.

Part of the problem is that we can't really define what we mean by merit. So if you ask 10, 15, 20 people, you're going to get 10 or 15 or 20 different answers about what should count when it comes to college admissions. And then on the other side are the universities and colleges that are taking in these applications. And again, the book really focuses on the most selective colleges and universities in this country, of which there are about 200 that accept fewer than 50 percent of students who apply. And we all know there are thousands of colleges and universities out there, many of them very good, that accept a majority of applicants that apply. And one hope I have for this book is to let parents and students look up and out and see that there's a wider world out there.

But again, we're talking about is this more narrow world, unfortunately, that most people talk about because we feel like getting over that hump kind of leads to these top jobs and great lives. Although, again, I'll argue that there are great jobs and great lives to be had no matter where you go to college. So that said, you know, colleges, these selective colleges, universities are inundated with applications, way more than they can take. And so they have priorities about what they want. You know, and those priorities range from geographic diversity, gender, race and ethnicity, different types of majors, full-pay students, a range of things that are important to them in a particular year. But they also could be very narrow. And I point this out, you know, athletics plays a huge role here where they may need more. You know, they have to fill the roster spots of all of these sports that they have. And so that's really important to them to do that. So there's this in

many ways. They're also competing with each other, these priorities in some cases. And so they're always making tradeoffs in the admissions office about what they want and what they need. And so it's not as easy as lining up students 1 to 200, or 1 to 1,000 and saying, "OK, these are our best students by these metrics. And they're in."

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:06:22] Yeah, so interesting to hear you say that, because one of the things that you really do a fantastic job of focusing on in the book are the non-academic factors that go into these decisions.

[00:06:33] So, for example, you know, you have a better shot at getting into Yale if your mom went to Yale or if you're a really amazing lacrosse player, which, by the way, I had no idea what (lacrosse) was until I was well into my college years.

[00:06:49] But neither of those things actually makes you a better student. So why do they play such an outsized role in certain schools' admissions processes?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:07:00] Well, some people will argue that it does, right? That the definition of, like, a well-rounded human being is both mind and body, right? In fact, it's interesting, since I put this book out, I will get into, sometimes, Twitter arguments or other types of discussions with college athletes. And their belief is that, "Well, you're saying that I wasn't qualified to get into X University," and I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying that we make choices in admissions and there are choices made about all different types of applicants. And I think we should just be up front about that. And I think colleges should be transparent about that. And that's part of the problem is that they're not. It's a black box and no one really can see inside of it except for the people who run it. And so that's why people always think it's an unfair process. They will always say, "Someone else got in and I didn't."

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:07:56] Yeah, but but I have to say in the book, you make it really clear that there are certain students, honestly, at moments, at a certain point in time that the school is looking for. So you can call that like a unicorn effect.

[00:08:12] And yet it's also really clear that, to have really strong grades and strong SAT scores — or ACT — scores are really important to an awesome resume. Like whether or not you have depth to you. I'll never forget that part of the book, as these admissions officers are debating a candidate like, "Oh, they just don't have enough depth." And I was sort of like, what does that mean?

[00:08:31] But it seems like those sorts of conversations. And honestly, then judgment calls really do tilt the balance toward more privileged students. Like, I kept asking myself, what chance does a low-income student truly have of being a unicorn? Could you be considered a unicorn if you're working two part-time jobs and still trying to manage everything on the school front and off-and-on the family front as well?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:08:59] You could. But here's the problem: Those students don't know exactly how to tell that story in an application. And that's the big difference here, that if you know how to, you have essentially an application on its first read. At a school that's very busy with a lot of applications in little time, you might get 10 minutes with that application. And so if they know your high school and they tend to know high schools where those high schools send the bundles of applications every year, you know, they'll kind of breeze through those applications pretty easily because they know kind of the strength of the high school. They know the curriculum. Many times they even know the counselor by name. So

those applications are already starting kind of with a head start. And these well-resourced schools, they kind of know how to present an applicant. And where somebody who has worked two jobs, they don't know how to kind of play it up. Right? You're not misrepresenting yourself, but you're not telling a story about what you found on that job, right. So there was even this case where, this was at Davidson, right, where the student was talking about a part-time job that they had and the admissions officers were kind of skeptical that she was working that many hours and she didn't have any more details about it, where if, I guarantee you, if that person had gone to a better high school, the counselor would say, "OK, write down all this information about this job and who you worked for and maybe even get a recommendation letter from that supervisor you had on a job." Like they just know that. And in low-resourced high schools, they don't.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:10:35] That's right. Well, you know, it's funny. We talk a lot about social capital. It's come up in a number of our interviews. We think about people adjusting to college. And social capital is such a crucial factor. But really what you're saying is that social capital comes up in the application process. If you know how to tell your story, how to package yourself, how to present yourself, that's one more advantage that people without advantages are less likely to have.

**Jeff Selingo** [00:11:02] Yes. And this is why I think counseling is so important and really thrilled with the work that Nicole Hurd has done with the National College Advising Corps. I think that type of work is so important in getting better counseling into high schools, because the other thing, as you know, especially at under-resourced high schools, they don't have a counselor who's really dedicated to college counseling, like many well-resourced high schools are. And every counselor now is overwhelmed with social and emotional issues in high school that they don't really have time to deal with college counseling. So if I were to really put resources into anywhere, it would be in high school counseling, because that's even earlier, because, again, it goes back to the courses you're taking in eighth grade that lead to the courses you need in 10th, 11th, and 12th.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:11:53] Well, Jeff, you know, I want to move on to a little more of the detail of your analysis, but I do want to stop for a second and just push back a little bit on your view on meritocracy. Whatever you think about the term, and you know its origins, you know, you paint a pretty dismal view of admissions really being pretty broken. But I guess what I would say is, like with all the big questions, you know, in education and everything else, it's compared to what? So what do I think about is the Ivys, you know, went through a real revolution in the '60s. So what I'm wondering is, despite all the imperfections that you outline in great detail, are we actually moving toward a fairer system now than we would have had, you know, in the '30s, '40s, '50s?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:12:38] Oh, yes, compared to that, definitely right. Because at that point, we had feeder, true feeder high schools. You know, there wasn't even such a thing as an application, right. The admissions dean would go to these feeder high schools, normally these, you know, great boarding schools in the Northeast, and say, "OK, we want Ben." Right? And "we want this person." You would all be men at that time, right? "We want these 10 people." And that was it, right? And then, there was eventually an application. But as I point out in the book, then the problem was, you know, the "Jewish problem," as they called it, especially among the Ivy Leagues. And so then we moved into more of a holistic approach and then affirmative action came into play in the '60s. And so we have definitely broadened the way we look at students coming into the pipeline of at least college admissions than we did in the '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s. Of course, I guess the other problem, though, is that not only have we broadened the look at these students, but now

we just have many more students applying. And the size of these places have increased. So even as you broaden the criteria, you have in some ways narrowed the pathway because you only have so many seats for all these applications. And so really, the only way to fix that is not through the admissions process, but it's through a, we need to increase the number of seats somehow.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:14:04] Yeah. Let's just unpack a little bit of your analysis. You know, one of the things that really I thought was very powerful when you're talking about this whole marketplace of admissions and you talk about colleges being divided into buyers and sellers, can you explain that a little bit?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:14:19] So the sellers of admissions are the haves of admissions. They have way too many applicants, few seats. So they're incredibly popular. They also focus most of their financial aid on low-income, needy students. There's very few of these schools, 50, 60 overall. The vast majority of colleges are somewhere on the spectrum of what I call the buyers. They have to discount their tuition. They have to use enrollment management techniques in order to fill their class and more importantly, make a budget every year. And so they are dedicating a portion of their financial aid budget to need-based aid, but also a significant portion to merit-based aid, which are in many cases just coupons to try to fill their class. And some schools give out bigger and more coupons than other schools, the true, real, true buyers of it. And so what I'm trying to do with this buyers-and-sellers construct in the book is to let students realize that there is a huge difference. We know there's a huge financial component to colleges and universities, but I sometimes think that parents and students kind of ignore it because we think our kids have so much potential and we're willing to kind of stretch to fulfill that potential. So we will say, "Don't worry," when we're beginning the college search. We'll say, "Don't worry about the price of the college. Go and find the perfect academic and social fit, and then we'll figure out how to pay for it later on." And I actually think that's a wrong way of thinking about the college search. I think that the financial fit of a college needs to be up front and center much earlier on than it is for way too many families and students.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:16:07] I mean, I think another thing that just was so, I would just say it just really turned my stomach as a kid who was on financial aid. You start to really argue in this book that it's really become warped. The whole purpose of financial aid is just completely out of whack.

[00:16:25] And given it was originally a tool to help low-income students afford tuition and has become another way of maximizing a school's revenue, you know, I'm just so curious. How do you think that happened?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:16:37] So I think part of it really largely goes back to the cost of higher education. So as the cost of education has gone up, fewer and fewer people are able to afford it. And some people just didn't want to afford it, right? They didn't think that the value of this particular college was worth it. And so colleges had to start discounting that tuition. They just had fewer full-pay students.

[00:17:01] And so because of that, because of that rising cost and fewer people either able to or willing to pay, colleges had to start doling out these, as I call them in the book, coupons.

[00:17:15] And then they kind of got stuck on it right there. It's like the Macy's thing, right? Like at some point you can shop at Macy's and you're like, "Well, I'm not going to pay full

price because next week there will be a coupon in the paper, right? So why? I'll just come back next week and I'll buy that shirt," and then Macy's, unfortunately, gets kind of caught in that process and everything's always on sale, and that's exactly what happened to colleges. Once they started doling out these coupons, they just couldn't stop because it was the only way they would make their class. And then parents started to compare these offers. And so they had to offer even more. And then there was a whole industry, as I talk about it, that kind of came in and helped colleges maximize their revenue. So they knew, "Well, if I offered Ben \$500 more, I could get them to come here. And by the way, we put a nice sheen on these things of, it's a merit scholarship. So you're really proud to get these, right? You know, we don't call them coupons because nobody would be excited about that. So all this just kind of fed on itself. And now colleges are really stuck because they have created this system. They created this monster in many ways and they can't get out of it.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:18:26] Yeah. I mean, and I have to say it was very apparent to me that the group that really seems to get shortchanged here are the vast majority of students who are in the middle of the pack socioeconomically, kids who might not be eligible for federal student aid, but who can't afford the sticker price of one of these elite colleges, and honestly, the amount of money it takes to be a student at one of them. So how are these students supposed to get in and afford a school like this? You know, what are the possibilities here? And I would say when you're looking at any middle group of students, as a former teacher, like that's usually the majority of students.

**Jeff Selingo** [00:19:05] It's the barbell effect. And that's what you're starting to see. More and more schools, very wealthy, very poor, nobody in the middle. And I thought about that so much in reporting this book because my father was a high school teacher. You know, my mother was a teacher's aide. Right. So I went to college on that salary because of financial aid that was largely delivered around a financial need. And I thought about that so much right now in terms of how I would be able to, you know, how my parents would be able to do that today. And so now we have all these students who are just above the cutoff at all these other colleges. And they're kind of stuck with, OK, I could cobble together federal loans, parent-plus loans, all these other things. And I'm still left with a gap. And that gap is just getting bigger. And what do you do?

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:19:54] Well, you know, I want to talk about some of your big-picture reforms, but I'm thinking really we've talked about, you know, students' ability to present themselves. But shouldn't the onus be on the schools, on the colleges? You know, what do you think they should be aspiring toward to really make the system more meritocratic in a genuine sense or more transparent? Like what could they be doing?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:20:15] I'm not quite sure they want to make it more meritocratic, by the way, because one of their priorities is to make a class and have a budget. Right? And so they don't want a class with, to be perfectly blunt here, they don't want a class with all highly talented, low-income students because they feel like we can't afford them. So I'm not quite sure they want that bet on the system in some ways works for them the way it is now.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:20:45] Well, they talk a good game, though, about their desire to boost their poll percentages. And, you know, this has been happening for a while, but it seems like it's been going kind of slowly.

**Jeff Selingo** [00:20:56] Yeah. And I actually think that's on purpose. And I think they have all these other constituencies to worry about, right? So they have alums, you know. It's no

different in some ways than in the 1960s when, you know, all these alums were saying, "Wait a second. Why are you allowing all these African-American students in and all these low-income students and these first-generation students?" Right? Like, "we want to kind of protect the way we have it." And that's the same way even now, right? Like alums want to have the, you know, they want to be able to make sure their kids get in. And so there's all these other priorities and again, it goes back to athletics. It goes back to all these other priorities that they might have in terms of their agenda. The reason I don't think they wanted to be more transparent is because when you read the book, my God, there's so many contradictions in admissions. They don't want you to see inside that box because there are too many contradictions in it. And they don't want you to say, "Wait a second. You just told me to do these 12 things. I did them and I was still denied.":

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:22:04] Well, let me let me ask you this, Jeff. While this has been fantastic, we're almost out of time. But I do want to ask you something that you wrote about in one of your previous books, which is about life after college. And you kind of reiterate this point in this book and you basically say, consumers, you know, students and their parents, should think a lot more about how you go to college than where you go to college, and I wonder if you can just in a in a quick summary, say why that is so. And are you optimistic that you can actually get people to do that?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:22:37] I'll answer the second part first. No, I'm not optimistic because I think that the power of the brand name still matters in certain communities. But I'm hopeful that especially as outcomes become more important for students, that they do think about what they're doing while they're in college, the courses they're taking, the mentors that they're meeting, the internships and the other types of experiential learning that we have. And we know there's a huge body of research out there that all this matters to success after college. It's not just getting that degree. It's not that piece of paper that's the most important thing. It's all these other activities that you're doing that help you. By the way, if you're not going to the most elite colleges or the most name-brand colleges, I actually think it helps you kind of even the playing field if you have all these activities. Aimée knows this from her own work, right? The more that you have that stuff, the more that you even the playing field between the no-name colleges and the elite colleges.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis** [00:23:30] Yeah, I mean, Jeff, I have to say, one of the things I love about the books that you've written and just the articles and all that you've done to really shine a spotlight on this very, very important set of institutions that really can also make sure that our country is the one that we've all set out for it to be, which is the land of opportunity. And I'm just so curious to know, what do you believe is at stake if we fail to reform this admission system that we're seeing in our higher institutions?

**Jeff Selingo** [00:24:04] What's at stake is that in the community that I grew up in, for example, that students won't necessarily have a pathway either into higher education at all or into institutions that would do well by them, that they're going to end up at institutions where they are not going to succeed and they will have some credit and some debt and they won't have much to show for it.

[00:24:31] That's really what worries me, is how do we find, I think this is something we've been searching for for a long time. How do we find the talent that we know is distributed throughout this country? That to me is that nut that we've been trying to crack for a very long time. And it's going to become even more important because we know the demographics of this country are changing drastically. And I think it's going to become even more important for colleges to figure that out, not only colleges, but us as a society

and all the other agencies out there, the testing agencies and the other community-based organizations. It's about matching talent to the right institutions.

**Ben Wildavsky** [00:25:14] Well, Jeff, that's a great note to end on. I think I can speak for both of us, it's just been a fantastic conversation. Could go on. You know, if this were normal times, we could go out for a coffee or a drink and keep on yakking away. But thank you very much for spending time with us.

[00:25:30] No problem. It's great to be here. Thanks so much. Thanks, Aimée.

**Ben Wildavsky**

That was our conversation with Jeff Selingo. See you next time Aimée.

**Aimée Eubanks Davis**

See you next time, Ben.

(voiceover)

[00:25:51] "Lessons Earned" is produced by Strada Education Network in partnership with Antica Productions. You can subscribe to "Lessons Earned" wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like this episode, please give us a five-star rating. For more information on today's guest and to listen to other episodes of "Lessons Earned," please visit our website, [LessonsEarned.org](http://LessonsEarned.org).