

Lessons Earned Podcast Strada Education Network

S. 2, E. 3 Aimee Eubanks Davis

TRANSCRIPT

Co-Host Andrew Hanson, Strada Education Network

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

[00:00:09] In this podcast, we sit down with education leaders, policy thinkers and workforce experts who are trying to improve education and career outcomes for students of all ages. We're recording this season remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. And we want to know how this crisis is affecting students and educators and how it will shape our workforce in the years to come. Today, the founder and CEO of Braven, Aimee Eubanks Davis.

audio clip: Aimee Eubanks Davis

[00:00:37] I believe, with intentionality, we can be incredibly optimistic and incredibly hopeful, but we actually have to be intentional. I also have a lot of optimism that actually higher education can play a huge role in that.

Andrew

[00:00:52] Welcome to Lessons Earned, Putting Education to Work.

[00:01:09] A few months ago, as COVID-19 began to really hit America hard, a narrative emerged: Everyone from New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to Madonna began referring to the virus as “the great equalizer.”

[00:01:24] In the weeks since, however, it's become abundantly clear that this is not the case. Preliminary data from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), for example, suggests that black Americans make up nearly a third of COVID-19 cases, even though they comprise only 13 percent of the country's population.

[00:01:42] And Strada's own research shows that economically, black and Latino Americans have been disproportionately impacted as well.

[00:01:51] Aimee Eubanks Davis knows this virus is anything but a great equalizer. Aimee is the founder and CEO of Braven, a nonprofit that helps low-income students develop the skills and the relationships that they need to get a good first job out of college.

[00:02:07] Aimee is witnessing firsthand the toll of this pandemic on the communities that Braven serves.

[00:02:13] Ben Wildavsky and I sit down with Aimee to talk about the work Braven does to improve students' socioeconomic mobility and why they're doubling down on those efforts in the face of COVID-19.

[00:02:24] Here's Aimee Eubanks Davis.

Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

[00:02:34] So you founded Braven in 2013, after you'd worked for Teach for America, TFA, for over a decade. Can you tell me about that and what was going on in your life and in your work that led you to found Braven?

Aimee

[00:02:46] Yeah, sure. I'm going to actually start out on the very personal side of this. You know, with the pandemic and COVID, you know, hitting the country in such an unprecedented way and then watching the inequality play out on a national stage, but also here in my hometown of Chicago and in the neighborhoods that I grew up in, 68 percent of the deaths in Chicago are in the African American community, which I'm a member of, and in particular, in low income African American communities, which is where I grew up. And really one of the reasons that Braven started to emerge was my own personal understanding from having parents who purchased a piece of property that now sits in an area that gentrified quite a bit over the last 40 years, and being able to experience economic mobility for my older sister and myself in particular, and just understanding that with economic mobility also comes other things, like health benefits and education, etc. And so Braven really emerged from that own personal understanding and linked to having been a sixth-grade teacher in New Orleans, Louisiana, and my first set of sixth-graders came out of college at another moment of horrific disaster, which was Hurricane Katrina, and all of a sudden thinking, oh, but if you have your college degree, you're gonna be fine. This is an awful situation, but you should economically be OK because this degree should really booeey you.

And it just was not the case. I was seeing students come out of some of the top universities in the country and just simply not have the same quality of job that I would have assumed they would have received with their bachelor's degree. And so that's really where Braven started to emerge, where I got very fascinated about how we ensure that students who were first in their families to go to college, on the Pell Grant, come out of college and earn the full dollar instead of what has become 66 cents on the dollar prior to COVID, and goes to 50 cents on the dollar by mid-career. And then by the end of a career, they could actually *under-earn* a high-income student with (only) a high school diploma.

Ben

[00:04:50] When you're throwing out the percentages about students' earnings later in life, what you're saying is that your first job has a really big impact on your trajectory of earnings later on. Do I have that right?

Aimee

[00:05:02] That's right. I mean, basically, it sets you up -- or doesn't set you up -- for a lifetime of economic freedom, especially if you are a student who's from a low-income family.

Ben

[00:05:13] Sure. I gotcha. And then, you know, as you said, you started at Teach for America in New Orleans. And I heard that one of your former students applied for a job at TFA, but that her application was rejected because she lacked what was called and I'm quoting, "intangibles." Can you tell us about that?

Aimee

[00:05:30] What happened in her case was she was going to Northwestern University up in Evanston.

[00:05:36] And the recruiter for Teach for America, who is amazing, came in my office one day and said, "Hey, she's amazing and wonderful, but she's not going to get into Teach for America" because she doesn't have these intangibles, as you were saying.

[00:05:53] And mainly that was around confidence and leadership skills. And so what happened was when she told me this, I literally thought I was going to, like, fallout in my office. I called my younger sister, who was in the 2004 Teach for America Corps, and said, "Adrienne, for so many reasons, you owe me. I need you to actually coach Katika through this application process. And so I couldn't coach her because I, of course, understood how the selection model worked. But my sister did not, though she had come over that bar, and Adrienne, like, took it upon herself to really coach Katika through that process. And then all of a sudden she gets in and she does incredibly well and wins a lot of awards.

[00:06:37] And then a few years ago, she graduates from Harvard wearing the gold stole around her neck. But she was indicative of thousands and thousands of students I was seeing like her in the Teach for America process, where we had 50,000 young people applying every year to the teaching corps.

[00:06:54] And when you start to have that kind of data coming in, that students who are first in their families go to college, often on the Pell Grant, who actually are working really hard and doing some extraordinary things to not only get into college, stay in college, and try to come out of college, but actually not earning at the same level as their higher-income peers coming out of the same schools, you're just like, this is just not fair. This is not what equality of opportunity looks like.

Andrew

[00:07:17] So, Amy, could you explain to us exactly what Braven does and specifically, can you walk us through a typical student's experience in a Braven course?

Aimee

[00:07:26] Yes. So Braven works in partnership with higher education institutions. So we're in partnership with San Jose State, Rutgers-Newark, Lehman College out of New York, and National Louis University here in Chicago. And basically we partner with faculty members and deans to run a credit-bearing course. And what that means is that students receive credits for the Braven experience just like they would for a writing class or a science class.

[00:07:57] So basically, it's an entry-level course like many other courses and why it's so innovative, and I'm so, just so proud to work with the schools that we work with, is that a lot of times people don't think that getting students ready for careers after college should be a part of the college experience. And our school partners have realized that it's not a false choice.

[00:08:18] You can do both. You can give students a very strong education and you can also make sure that they're more ready to go into the workforce strong. And so basically, what we do is, we then bring in volunteers from the professional workforce to coach teams of students through the learning lab experience, which is basically the lecture hall.

[00:08:38] So instead of showing up at a lecture hall of 500 students, it's a small team of five to eight.

[00:08:43] And basically what we've been able to pull off is the ability for these young professionals mainly to really get to know this set of students and give them a lot of inside knowledge into how to get a job at their companies and at other companies. And what we realized was that, through that experience of having the leadership coach as a part of the cohort, all of a sudden we were manufacturing social capital. And what that means is that this group of students actually was getting a zero-degree relationship with someone in the professional workforce. And for them, they actually often don't know anyone in the professional workforce. And so that's how the course itself works. So resumes, cover letters, etc., all of those artifacts get graded by a teaching assistant at the college. So it is a course. It is rigorous. Students often say it's harder than many other courses they take after the course concludes. We then support a student for another two and a half years until they come out of college with a strong first job.

Andrew

[00:09:45] So you mentioned that students get a credit for this course.

Aimee

Yes.

Andrew

How important is that in getting them to buy into the program?

Aimee

[00:09:51] We think it is imperative, given the group of students who we work with are often going to school full-time and they're often going to work full-time.

[00:10:02] And that was a part of what I felt like I really saw with my former student who was likely not to get into Teach for America was that in the selection model. One of the things that we were looking for was whether or not you had leadership skills on your campus. And it wasn't that she didn't have them, but not at the same levels.

[00:10:21] Other students who honestly have a lot more time to be the president of whatever, because she was working.

[00:10:29] And so really understanding that this group of students is pretty tethered to work and to school in a way that doesn't allow them to have some of the space that other students have to just be exploring and honestly, leading in various different ways. And so just realizing how important it is for it to be within college if we want to give this group of students a fair shot.

Ben

[00:10:53] Sure. Well, let me ask you this: I mean, it sounds like you're saying it's that old kind of cliché, but it's true. It's not just what you know; it's *who* you know. And you're talking about building social capital. You're talking about soft skills. When you try to measure results, what can you point to over the past seven years? How are things working?

Aimee

[00:11:14] The result we've always measured squarely was within six months, did they come out and earn the full dollar? So close to 70 percent of them were doing that prior to COVID and the others, because again, there was very low unemployment, were employed.

[00:11:32] They just were not in full-quality roles. So we called them part-quality roles. And so often with that other group of students, we were, like, working very hard to help them get to a full-quality role as fast as possible.

Ben

[00:11:43] Gotcha. But you feel you've made, over the seven years, you feel you've made good progress on the measures that you've established.

Aimee

[00:11:49] Oh, huge. We were able to really see a student from the demographic background that our kids are coming from, truly ending up in a full-dollar role.

[00:11:57] And what we were also seeing is we had been tracking some of the earliest students who are now well into the labor market as they were being promoted at a higher rate.

[00:12:05] Close to 50 percent of them were out-earning their parents in five semesters. Seventy-one percent of them were getting internships at a far higher rate than their peers. And then also 95 percent of them were persisting in college. And what we would definitely say is, we were staring at what we would call a solvable problem.

[00:12:24] Yes, there are a lot of problems that are hard to solve. This one, you were like, yeah.

[00:12:27] You know, it's hard, but it is not as hard as some others because of where these students are sitting in their lives and all that they've done to get to the doors of economic opportunity.

Andrew

[00:12:43] So this pandemic has disrupted all of our lives. But I know it's been particularly disruptive for low-income and first-gen students. What would have been the major challenges so far in continuing to serve this group now that their education has pretty much moved entirely online?

Aimee

[00:12:58] So 80 percent of the Braven content was already online. So when you heard me describe the model earlier, you didn't actually hear me talk at all about the online portal, which we have. And it's really interesting because I deeply believe that the Braven, like the secret sauce in Braven is the coach in the cohort and the in-person experience and building the social capital network. All of a sudden, in the world of the pandemic, I've now had to go back to our technology team and say, oh, well, I'm now standing corrected in this moment. Actually, the secret in the Braven sauce is that we, 80 percent of the content was already online and we already knew how to operate in the virtual world. It just wasn't our *preferred* world. What's been very interesting is watching us within four universities pretty seamlessly be able to put everything online. Now, that said, as we're going forward, we're going to have to make sure that we can work out all the kinks of our larger-scale events in particular. I do think one of the things that's been really, really heartening is how much the

students have said the *community* has meant to them, of Braven, because it has been able to keep going. I would say in particular from a mental health standpoint, it has been really important. I mean, our students, especially in New York City, where the city has been hit so hard, it's just been so important to have a place that feels like a community that you know, and that's staying consistent during this moment in time.

Andrew

[00:14:21] So what's happening in New York, is that representative of the experience of Braven and fellows more broadly? What's your sense of how the current crop of Braven fellows is holding up?

Aimee

The students, whether it's in the Bay Area or here in Chicago or Newark or New York, are incredibly grateful for the Braven course being able to continue to go forward.

[00:14:42] We actually are seeing our attendance and engagement rates continue to be very high.

[00:14:47] And so that's been heartening. And we're also hearing loud and clear from students that the anxiety of the moment, knowing people who are getting sick, unfortunately, knowing people who are passing away, but then also the anxiety of the future. I mean, this group of students, along with a bunch of other seniors, have worked so hard to get to this point. And they've earned the right to have a strong job. And there are going to be 500,000 low-income students graduating this May and June into one of the worst economies ever. Yeah. I mean, there's just a lot of anxiety around that.

Andrew

[00:15:19] So earlier, you alluded to the scarring effects of graduating into an economy that's in a recession, which, you know, seems like an inevitability at this point. So how are you planning to adapt to a job market that's significantly tighter?

Aimee

[00:15:35] Yes. So what our team has been doing is we have been getting on as many calls as we can and watching as much news and consuming as much news online as we can about where will the (job) openings be. And there are some. There will be openings in health care for sure.

[00:15:49] And clearly, there'll be openings at certain big box companies, etc. And one of the things that Braven has done really well, and it's part of why we've gotten to the outcomes, is we built the network for sure around this group of students. We've also been an information provider. So we are going to up the amount of information we're providing to our students about where the jobs are in their respective communities. So that's the thing that we're gonna do for those students who've been through the Braven experience - and honestly, even for our alums, who are likely to lose jobs in some cases -- like how do we help them re-enter the market? The other thing that we've decided to do in the world of Braven is, because we have a lot of content and because we are actually very strong in the virtual environment, we've had some of our college partners say, is there anything more you might do for our seniors who never maybe went through Braven? And so we've now designed what we're calling the Braven Booster, which is going to be an intense week-long set of modules that students can pace themselves through in order to make sure their resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profile ... and we're also going to help them create a contingency plan. And that's something that we have not had in the regular Braven

accelerator, but we will now bring it in because it looks like the economy could be in a jam for a couple of years. And so basically what we're doing is building this Braven Booster and this contingency planning is going to be really important. And we believe that the Braven Booster can serve upwards of 20,000 students at a time because we just are viewing it as our shield, like Ford is building shields, and not building cars at the moment, for first-line responders. We are feeling like we should do something similar for our current partners and honestly for some other folks who we've been in partnership with as well.

Ben

[00:17:28] You know, I mean, that's actually a great transition to what I was going to ask you about next, which is really about the growth of Braven as an organization. You started in 2013 and you were basically a bootcamp. You only had, I think, 14 students.

Aimee

Seventeen.

Ben

Seventeen, OK. And now you're up to more than 2,400 students across four schools. I've heard you describe your approach to scaling Braven as, "We've got to go slow to go fast." And I'm wondering, beyond this new one-week model that you're adding, I wonder how you're thinking about skills has changed in the face of COVID-19. You know, I'm thinking so many funders -- and I should mention, of course, that Strada is one of yours -- funders are often concerned about bringing successful efforts to scale. And how do you think about that?

Aimee

[00:18:15] Yeah, it's a great question. One of the things that we realized was that because we had gone slow to go fast, we really had built a scalable, repeatable model, as long as we had the right college partners.

[00:18:29] And so from that plan, we could see in New York, Chicago, the Bay Area, and Newark getting to upwards of 40,000 high-potential, low-income students, which was incredible to see.

[00:18:42] And when we started to look at the markets of the college partners in those places, you start to realize that, like, we would be covering an enormous number -- not quite all students who fit that profile, but a very, very significant number. And so one of the things that we believe coming out of COVID is that we should not back away from that plan. And so we should double down with our current partners and go ahead and scale up our work to three to four thousand students per campus.

Ben

[00:19:09] Yeah, absolutely. Well, you know, we launched a few sort of bigger questions, I think, from each of us, as we wrap up. You know, you mentioned earlier your goal is to build social capital for your students. Now, we talked to Tony Jack in the first season of the podcast, of course, the Harvard professor whose book is *The Privileged Poor*, and he talks a lot about the hidden curriculum on campus and also, of course, social capital.

[audio clip: Tony Jack \(Listen to S.1, E.4\)](#)

Tony Jack [00:19:31] We value and mislabel a go-getter attitude, when really, we're valuing class privilege.

Ben

[00:19:39] And these are a big part of the broader higher ed discussion. And Tony and you are probably in the minority in terms of really focusing on them so, so intently. And I'm wondering whether you think building social capital should be a more pressing policy priority or is it really something that ultimately is just going to happen at the campus level in a more kind of granular, local way?

Aimee

[00:20:03] Yeah, I'm a huge fan of Tony Jack's work. And what I would say, he's absolutely right.

[00:20:08] There is a hidden curriculum. And I would say in the world of Braven, we actually believe in the "both-and." We're a bunch of former teachers and talent nerds. I actually deeply believe, and we deeply believe, in the skill-building part. Like what I was seeing from my student was also that she literally did not know how to operate in the world of the professional world, which is teachable, like resumé writing and cover letters and let's do mock interviews. In my opinion, those are like harder skills that you can teach, and honestly, that you can grade on. The social capital network, though, is I think a bit more tricky because if you have one, you just assume that everyone else does too.

[00:20:47] You just assume that everyone is able to pick up the phone and call an uncle or an aunt or a friend to help move something forward.

[00:20:55] That is just not the case with this group of young people. And so what I would say on the higher ed side of things, I do think there has to be more intentionality around, How do we open up the doors, in an authentic way, of social capital to this group of students? And I do think Braven presents one of those authentic ways, because you're bringing in young professionals to help coach teams of students and they really get to know them. And I do think you function differently around people when you know them.

That said, when I think about the policy in the world of higher ed, some of it is -- I do think we're at a point where it's not responsible not to say it is critical for this group of students to have some kind of experience like Braven. It does not have to *be* Braven. But to not set this group of students up in a way to make sure that they can come out strong is unfair.

And Dr. Monica Higgins from Harvard did the first study on Braven. And one of the things that she pointed to was that we were helping students build career search and job search self-efficacy, which meant that they were going through the process of getting a job. And she basically was like, for this group of students, if they don't go through that kind of a process, they do not earn the full dollar. They just don't. And they have no idea that they're under-matching.

[00:22:07] The other policy is actually in the world of employers.

[00:22:10] The referrals and the bonuses around referrals really does create a real unfair system in the world of employers, because, again, if you're not in the networks of people, then you're not gonna, you're not going to be on that referral line where someone's going to benefit from the employer. And I'm not actually anti giving referral bonuses, as someone who ran a human capital shop, as much as it is, can we help people think about, are there ways in which you can influence behavior around getting to know people outside of your immediate network and maybe there being a higher value to that.

[00:22:46] So I actually think there are some ways that on both higher ed and on the employer and that we can do this together.

[00:22:52] Yeah, yeah. I love bringing the employer in. Obviously that's a crucial aspect that I think, when we limit this to higher ed, we overlook that.

Andrew

[00:22:59] So, I mean, I just want to ask you one last question. I know it's difficult, but I'd love to take a step back from the current moment that we're in and think about the long term. Obviously, this crisis is going to have a disproportionately negative effect on some of the populations that we've been talking about in this interview. But as you look to the long term, you know, the next decade or so as we come out of the crisis, where do you see the country going in terms of socioeconomic divides? Are you hopeful? Are you optimistic? What's a word that describes how you're feeling and what you're thinking?

Aimee

[00:23:35] Yeah, I believe, with intentionality, we can be incredibly optimistic and incredibly hopeful. But we actually have to be intentional. We have to look it in the face and say, there are these very obvious and glaring inequities in our country. And as we come out of this together, we have an opportunity to rebuild America in a way that really makes us all proud in terms of being the land of the free, the home of the brave, a place where equality of opportunity truly does exist.

[00:24:07] And I have a feeling that as we come out of this together and see the inequities just play out like they are, that there will be real call to action of the country to become our better selves in terms of shrinking some of the divides that we've seen.

I also have a lot of optimism that actually higher education can play a huge role in that, not only from the academic side of English and math, etc., but also from the academic side that can come into the world of preparing young people for the workforce in a way that is more equitable.

And I also really do think that employers are going to come out of this and say, we do want to make sure that we're seeing our workforces look like the country and really being able to showcase the American dream in action and really have equality of opportunity.

Ben

[00:24:57] Well, I mean, it's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you for carving out the time in this crazy period, but we really, really enjoyed it. And thanks for joining us on *Lessons Learned*.

Aimee

[00:25:08] Sure. Thank you so much again for having me.

Andrew

[00:25:17] That was our conversation with Aimee Eubanks Davis.

[00:25:21] Thanks for listening to *Lessons Earned*.

[audio voiceover](#)

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