

# Lessons Earned Podcast

## Season 2, Episode 2: Meghan Hughes

### President, Community College of Rhode Island

April 30, 2020

#### TRANSCRIPT

#### Strada Education Network Co-Host Andrew Hanson

From Strata Education Network, this is *Lessons Earned*. I'm Andrew Hanson.

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 president of the Community College of Rhode Island, Megan Hughes.

(audio clip: Meghan Hughes)

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#### Andrew

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

(music)

#### Andrew

Hi and welcome back to *Lessons Earned*. I'm Andrew Hanson, filling in for Ben Wildavsky this week.

In this episode, Ben sits down with Dr. Megan Hughes. Meghan is the president of the Community College of Rhode Island, which is New England's largest community college. We recorded this conversation back in January before many of us had even heard of the Coronavirus. Ben and Meghan chatted about CCRI's partnerships with big Rhode Island employers and how their mission has changed from a focus on accessibility to a focus on completion.

And then a couple of weeks ago, Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo implemented a statewide shutdown.

(audio clip: Gov. Gina Raimondo)

Because we're seeing such noncompliance with the orders that we've been issuing, I'm now issuing a stay-at-home order for all people in Rhode Island. It basically means if you're not getting food, getting medicine, getting gas, going to work, you need to be staying home.

#### Andrew

So we connected with Meghan again to talk about how CCRI is responding to this pandemic and how, despite the circumstances, she's actually viewing this as an opportunity for her school. Meghan has this unrelenting sense of optimism that I think we all desperately need right now. I hope you enjoy the conversation. Here's Ben and Meghan.

#### Lessons Earned Host Ben Wildavsky

Well, I want to talk about CCRI specifically in just a moment, but I want to just begin by providing some kind of broad context for our listeners. Community colleges were intended, of course, to

expand educational access dramatically, but they're sometimes faulted for not doing so well with credential completion. And I'm wondering, from where you sit, what do you think is working and what needs to be improved?

**Meghan Hughes, President, Community College of Rhode Island**

Sure. You know, I can't be a spokesman for America's community colleges. But what I can observe is the following, and you've got it just right. At the beginning, at our founding, it was about access. It was about throwing open our doors widely to invite in a group of learners that previously had been formally and informally excluded from higher education. And I think what has happened over, say, the last 20 years, is the right shift. And that is, of course, it's not simply enough to throw open the doors and say, "Welcome." Once we actually have welcomed those students inside our colleges, we need to double down and really work with them intensively to focus on completion. So I think that critique stripped of, you know, ideology, is that we need to dramatically improve completion rates. I completely concur. I think where there is active conversation, dialogue, and debate is what kind of support is required in order to ensure community college students have the resources they need to actually do that completion.

**Ben**

Right. And I want to just ask you, you know, following up on your point, and I think it's true, you know, many community colleges, you have working students, you have older students, you have students with a range of academic preparation. But going beyond the kind of demographics or the background of the students, what would you say the average student is looking to get out of community college?

**Meghan**

That's such a good question, because it's so obvious what the answer is, right? I talk to students every single day. And if you ask our students, they're not at all confused about why they're here. The vast majority of them are here because they are working in low-wage or minimum-wage jobs, and they understand, rightly, that what remains true in America is if you want to advance socioeconomically, you need a college degree to do that. And so they're here in order to learn, in order to be inspired, in order to broaden their horizon and to see what's possible. And they're also here to get that credential, that piece of paper that is going to make them more employable than they are without it.

**Ben**

Well, Meghan, let's talk about sort of how you got here. You became the president of CCRI in February of 2016. What was your mandate when you were brought on board? What kind of big structural issues was the school facing at the time?

**Meghan**

We had had declining enrollment for six or seven straight years. Our graduation rate, our two-year rate, had been hovering at 4 percent for a number of years.

**Ben**

And that's low even within the community college world, which doesn't have great completion rates. That's on the pretty low side, right?

**Meghan**

More than 50 percent below the national average at the time. For our students of color, it was twice as bad. So if you are a student of color, you had a 2 percent chance of completing a degree here in two years. So you're correct, there was a mandate. There was very little ambiguity about why I was brought into the college. And that really goes back to the first topic we were discussing, which was moving from an access agenda to a completion agenda. And there were, I think, structural changes

that were required -- things like delivering a master schedule for the first time in the college's history that resolved literally thousands of scheduling conflicts, making it possible for our students to accumulate credits more quickly and integrate their work and home lives with being a college student.

And, you know, I guess I'll anticipate where I think you likely will go, which is: So has it worked and where are you now? So three years in, with our May '19 graduation, we had an 18 percent two-year graduation rate. So what I say all the time when asked about that is really two things: I think it's an incredibly good start. I don't think we're done. I don't think we *can* be done. But I think it shows -- and this is true for the other 1,200-ish community colleges around the United States -- I have a line that I wrote on my whiteboard, which is, "If we can do it, anybody can." And I really mean that. And I think we're just getting started.

### **Ben**

This is fascinating. There's so much I would like to dig deeper on, but I want to move to workforce. And of course, that's another, I believe, another central component of your mandate, you know, has been trying to improve labor market outcomes for your students. And one thing you've done has been partnering up with these large private-sector companies to try to build something. You know, we, of course, at Strada care a lot about a more effective pipeline from the classroom to the workforce. And I wonder if you can just tell us a little more about some of your partnerships like with Electric Boat.

### **Meghan**

Sure. So for your listeners who may not know, shipbuilding and defense is central to Rhode Island's economy. General Dynamics, of which Electric Boat is a subsidiary, they build the world's submarines, including America's submarines. And over the last several years, with Electric Boat, CCRI has trained more than a thousand Electric Boat workers in the trades that are essential to keep building extraordinary submarines. And the reason I think that it's a compelling story is that even in New England, which is by and large, as you likely know, it's a knowledge economy. Even in New England, there is, in fact, still a place for family sustaining careers working with your hands. Now, these are hands that require training and, in almost every case, adept use of computers. But nonetheless, these are still jobs, good jobs, that are about making things.

What's exciting to us about the partnership, I think, is, one, I think it creates an avenue for Rhode Islanders who see themselves in that kind of trades profession, still having a venue for being able to pursue that, I think. Number 2, for the college, that kind of partnership, at scale, I think matters. You know, it matters to have the kind of public-private partnership that really allows us to think about how we serve Rhode Islanders at scale and meet our mission. And then finally, what's exciting, I think personally to me, about the partnership is that it's a company that has been open from the beginning to thinking about, what are other ways to grow this relationship? And from the beginning, something I really pushed was, look, I want to understand who are your current and future workers who are actually going to need a degree? You know, for the thousand workers, what they need is hands-on, the very best training we can provide. But there's gotta be an unmet need inside that company for your current and your future workers that actually need an academic degree.

And what they've launched, along with (United States) Senator (Jack) Reed's support, is an apprenticeship program where they are both working at Electric Boat and earning a college degree. And I think that kind of novel model is the kind of model that we're going to look to continue to both sustain with Electric Boat and grow with other partners. So get on a train or a plane and come see us.

### **Ben**

We'd love to.

**Meghan**

The Westerly Education Center, which is where Seaspray locates this partnership, is just remarkable. And it turns out, I'm not a submarine specialist, so I'll speak this in layperson-like terms. There is a submarine inside that building. It's a SIM lab. So if you're an Electric Boat, a member of this partnership, you walk in every day and you train to actually build the component parts that will go into outfitting the next generation of America's submarines. So you've got it exactly right. It's hands-on, real-time training with folks that either currently work at Electric Boat as the instructors or folks who have deep experience in that training.

**Ben**

Sure. Well, sort of a related question: There has been a growing focus on workforce outcomes in higher ed and there are some tensions, at a lot of places, between how institutions define their pedagogical mission. So I'm wondering, and you described a whole bunch of different things from the degree completion moving from access to completion, with all the kind of policy stuff that goes with that. You've talked about the workplace partnerships that you have with employer partnerships. From your point of view, what's the optimal balance between traditional academics and workforce development?

**Meghan**

So, not to be a contrarian, I don't even see that question in those terms. And here's what I mean by that: What do we know about New England? It's a knowledge economy and it's becoming more so every day. And that means it is essential that working-age adults get some form of quality, postsecondary credential. So what do I say all the time? What's the single best form of workforce development that I can name for Rhode Island? A college degree. And I believe that fervently.

So I guess I'm a very practical person. I don't see it as a divide. And I know for sure because I am a product of the liberal arts, and as a history major, I think I want our community college students to have a rich exposure to the liberal arts. Why? Because I think being curious and inspired makes you think bigger and better and harder. I want their brains to have that kind of exposure, along with all those very practical HR rationale. Right? We know what is essential in the workplace: critical thinking. I can't think of a better place where a student learns critical thinking than the liberal arts. What's essential in the workplace? Teamwork. Again, I see that as a foundation to workforce training. And there's not an employer I've talked to in Rhode Island that doesn't share that point of view. And then finally, I think community colleges, by and large, are ahead of higher ed, as a body, in understanding that. I think there's been a sort of a practicality, you know, a marriage of both practicality and inspiration from our very founding.

[\(music transition to follow-up interview, during COVID-19 pandemic\)](#)

[\(audio clip: Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo\)](#)

I am issuing a stay-at-home order for all people in Rhode Island. The order will be in place...

**Ben**

Morning, Meghan.

**Meghan**

Good morning. How is everyone?

**Ben**

Pretty good. How about yourself?

**Meghan**

Great. Thanks.

**Ben**

Your physical campus is no longer operational, but you're up and running totally online. And what are your students, how are they reacting? How are they finding this transition to online?

**Meghan**

You know, like with so many community colleges, we have 13,000 students. So there is, of course, no unitary answer to that question. What I would say, generally, is what we've all always known to be true about community college students is never truer than right now, which is, it's a group of learners that have had to figure out long before this virus hit our country how to make their lives work with Duct tape. And so the overall impression that I have of our learners is that they're doing the very same with this challenge -- so applying a lot of resourcefulness and creativity and enormous grit and resiliency. And they're doing that in the face of the situation that I'm sure everyone on this call recognizes, which is record unemployment, unemployment that is, of course, disproportionately affecting the workers that are the sorts of workers that we have at our community college. So, sure, despite all of that, you know, what we see is our students are showing up for their classes and are jury-rigging really creative solutions so that they can keep going and complete the springtime.

**Ben**

Yeah, it sounds like resilience is the right word, but I'm wondering about, on your end and on the part of the administration and the faculty, what are you doing to support your students? Obviously, many of them are older. They're working for their families.

**Meghan**

Sure. Sure. You know, we went to what we knew needed to be solved first. And I would say those two things were the following: 1) hundreds and hundreds of our students didn't have the capacity to move to remote learning because they lacked the technology to do so. So we knew we needed to solve for that immediately. Our foundation went into aggressive action and we really spent quite aggressively to get the devices and the wireless access into our students' hands basically overnight. We had a week to convert to this new plan. That is what we prioritized.

And then the second piece, of course, is for those students whose lives have been immediately impacted by the virus, whose families or themselves have lost their jobs, we needed to get emergency relief into their pockets. So beyond that sort of first-order set of priorities, the next pieces, right? It is a brand new world. You're working in your son's closet for our students. They're trying to figure out how to be college students working from, in many cases, very tight living quarters in their homes.

We have tools now that are allowing our faculty to really reach out, I think in a very personal way, to take care of our students, to check in on our students, to ask, "How are you doing? How is class going? Do you need more help from me?" So I do think, very basically, that recognition, that very human recognition, that this is in addition to being anxiety-producing and scary for just about everyone, it is at the most essentially alien. It's an alien world. And for our students, whether they're straight out of high school or adult learners, I think the college, what has been inspiring to me to watch, is the college just very quickly, without the sort of discussion that I associate so often with the academy, just figuring out what matters most and going after it. And that is really putting our students' well-being front and center.

**Ben**

Yeah. Well, you know, one thing that I remember from our last conversation, of course, is that you've done a tremendous amount of work with, you know, workforce programs. You know,

obviously, the submarine is the famous example, but lots of other stuff as well. And those are really integral to a lot of what you've done. I don't know what you do with that stuff when you have to do it virtually. Have you been able to continue some of it in a different form?

### **Meghan**

Yes, so with any kind of a training program that already had a virtual component baked in or had a component that could, in a relatively painless and quick way, be converted to remote learning, we've done that. So just as we have done on the for-credit side, with these workforce partnerships that you're describing, we went to the instructors and said, look, take a look at your learning outcomes. How can you redesign your course so that you're delivering comparable learning outcomes in this new reality? And in many cases that means if there is an element, and of course there will be in some instances, that simply is hands-on in-person learning, we're delaying that. We're moving that to the end of the course. The other example I would give you is we were sort of knee-deep into designing a partnership with Bank of America and some other Rhode Island employers around -- it's so ironic, you know -- digital competency for their workforce, and that work has accelerated and grown since the virus has hit Rhode Island hard.

### **Ben**

Got it. So in some ways, it may actually, I mean, you hate to say it's an opportunity, but it does provide a sort of intense period where people have the time maybe to be doing stuff at home that will help them, because I'm thinking about really sort of transition to my question about what this means for the future. So does this mean that some of the kinds of skills that people are getting in these remote settings are going to be useful to them as we kind of rebuild the economy?

### **Meghan**

Yeah. Part of being a leader is figuring out how you are going to optimize every single situation that's put in front of you, right? So from the beginning, it has been clear to me we have to look at this pandemic as presenting us with an opportunity. We *have* to. Otherwise, I don't know how any of us get out of bed for as long as we're going to be working in this way. And I genuinely believe that what this pandemic has done, at least for CCRI now, is, in fact, teach the entire community what it's capable of doing when our backs are up against a wall. What our students are proving to be true. What our faculty and staff ... you know, I can't adequately describe what it's been like to watch a community of, let's call it 15,000 people, figure out how to do this and do it overnight.

And so, yes, I believe that the skills that we have advanced or begun, in some cases, we're not going to lose those. And when I think about that, I think it's a couple of things. First, adaptability. You know, when I think about the academy, I think one thing that very few of us have ever been known for is rapid adaptability. I think that's a truism I'm comfortable in making. I think the very best thing for the academy, for higher education, for community colleges, for *our* community college, is to figure out higher education was already being disrupted. And those of us who intended to come out successful were already innovating. We needed to adapt in ways that the professors we had 30 years ago could never have imagined. Well, here we are right now, and we're watching folks adapt by the minute and by the hour and by the day. So when I think about that, I think it means actually learning that there can be a host of ways to get to a quality learning outcome and that this experience that we're having together, in fact, is requiring us all to collectively design new ways to continue to ensure really strong learning.

I think there are, sort of, the hard skills that people are going to come away with. Everyone's going to know how to teach in Blackboard in a sophisticated way. That's a skill that's going to matter and open up possibilities for so many Rhode Islanders who really didn't see themselves as college material because they couldn't make their lives integrate with the sort of bricks-and-mortars approach. This has fast-tracked us to figuring out how we live our mission even more than we were prior to this pandemic, because we're learning these hard skills, how to work in WebEx, how to

work in Zoom. Those are the hard skills. And I'm sure there's more. Of the soft skills, that's the resiliency and the grit -- like we can make it through anything because we're proving that we're doing it every single day. And so, look, this is a horrifying thing that's happening to the world. And I wish it weren't happening, but it is happening. And I think the good that's coming out of it for our college, it will be a lasting good.

**Ben**

That's great. Well, this has been a great update. With that, I'll just say thanks and best of luck with everything that you're working on.

**Meghan**

OK. You guys, thank you so much.

**Andrew**

That was Ben's conversation with Meghan Hughes. Thanks for listening to *Lessons Earned*.

(voiceover)

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