

“Lessons Earned” Podcast

Strada Education Network

S. 3, E. 4: Reynold Verret

January 2021

TRANSCRIPT

Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

Host Aimée Eubanks Davis, Braven

And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis.

Ben Wildavsky

And this is “Lessons Earned.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis

Today, the president of Xavier University of Louisiana, Reynold Verret.

[Voice clip](#)

Reynold Verret

This country cannot remain great if you don't educate the talent we have in our children. And as this country becomes more Black and brown, to say that we would leave 50, 60 percent of that talent off the table is almost to consign this country to second-class status.

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:30] From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:44] So in a previous episode, we had a really interesting conversation with Jeff Selingo about college admissions and how, at least in some circles, there's this really narrow obsession with getting into elite schools. And, you know, the subtext of that obsession is that these, you know, “elite schools” are somehow fundamentally better than other schools. They've figured out the best way to deliver education and everyone else is just playing catch-up. Now, this isn't completely wrong, but the problem with that kind of thinking is that it does a huge disservice to hundreds of colleges and universities in this country that are the places most Americans actually attend, schools you might not even have heard of. But some are doing pretty amazing things and delivering an excellent education. Schools like Xavier in New Orleans.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:28] Not to be confused with Xavier in Cincinnati, Xavier is a small college. They're only about 3,300 students or so. So there's a good chance that it's not even on your radar at all. But it's a pretty remarkable place. It is the only Catholic HBCU, historically Black college, in America. And despite its size, it produces more African-American students who go into and through medical school and become doctors than any other institution in our country. And according to research from (economist) Raj Chetty, Xavier is among the best in the nation when it comes to helping its students achieve economic mobility.

Ben Wildavsky [00:02:14] Now, he'd be the first to say this was a team effort, but a lot of that success can be attributed to Xavier's president, Reynold Verret. President Verret has a compelling background. He came to New York as the child of Haitian political refugees. He grew up in Brooklyn and he went on to pursue a career in biochemistry and immunology where he's been a top researcher. And he's also been a passionate advocate for more racial diversity in STEM and in the corporate world more generally.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:02:42] We sat down with President Verret for a fascinating conversation about why he participated in the Pfizer vaccine trials, the evolving role of HBCUs, and what bigger, better-known colleges can learn from a little school like Xavier.

[00:02:57] Here's Reynold Verret.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:03:03] President Verret, welcome to “Lessons Earned.”

Reynold Verret

Thank you, thank you. It's good to be here with you.

Aimée Eubanks Davis

So MIT did an alumni profile a few years ago, and you talked a little bit about your childhood growing up in Haiti at a time where there was a lot of political unrest. Can you tell us about that time in your life before you immigrated to the United States?

Reynold Verret [00:03:21] Well, it was actually my early childhood. I was probably seven, eight years old at the time. It was under Duvalier, the father, (François Duvalier) Papa Doc, where he was consolidating power by essentially removing his opposition. My mother was a prisoner under Papa Doc, and when she was released, that's when we migrated to the United States as political refugees back in the early '60s. So in many ways, I have two childhoods. One that is the childhood that I had as a small child in Haiti, and the childhood that I had in New York City, mainly in Brooklyn. As we arrived as political refugees, my mother was recovering from what today would be called PTSD. She had been in prison. One of the stories that she relates is when she was in with her captors in prison. They were asking where was my father? And they were bringing children into the next room and asking the children to scream, as she found out later, and was saying, “Those are your children in the next room, if you don't talk to us.” So she was very much affected by that. But nonetheless, I always remember that she remembered that quote from, I believe it's “A Streetcar Named Desire,” where Blanche says about her living off the kindness of strangers. There were many strangers who are in our lives in Brooklyn who helped us find a way to recover through that. Strangers who knew us before, but strangers — were complete strangers — in our neighborhood, in our communities.

[00:04:47] So I'm here because strangers were there for me.

Ben Wildavsky [00:04:50] Well, I'm really, I'm really struck by your description of having two childhoods. And I wonder if you could fast forward to the kind of worldview that you developed with that kind of dual childhood and how that has shaped your approach to becoming president of Xavier.

Reynold Verret [00:05:07] I think one of the things that, if I might say, was living with people who are very different and learning to actually enter their worlds and rely on them was something that I learned very much as a child.

[00:05:21] Next door was a small synagogue. So there were many Jews in our neighborhood, but there were old Irish communities, old Italian communities, but also Puerto Ricans, Blacks from the South, all living in and actually playing together in some strange ways. And understanding those differences of cultures, I think, is something that I learned in Crown Heights that was very formative.

Ben Wildavsky [00:05:44] Well, let's talk about your time at Xavier. And I've heard you talk about a culture of service at your institution. And what do you mean by that?

Reynold Verret [00:05:55] First of all, I would say that it's this understanding that when students study here, whatever they study, they can become physicians, become lawyers, become engineers, they become whatever. But that higher learning that they have will have meaning when they put it to the service of another person. That is very other-centered. It's also a culture of service

that even as the NIH review team coming here commented that how they saw that even though our students were working it very hard, they were competing at some level, but they were not competing to leave each other behind. It was basically, how do we all come across the finish line? Yeah, the expectation that basically you are not here for yourself, but the benefits of everyone else around you, and comes very, very deep in our history. And I think what you will see among our students is that becomes part of their thinking.

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:46] Yeah, that makes sense. Well, you know, Xavier, as I've just learned a little bit about it, it's impressive for many different reasons. But I think one of the things that's most impressive is the degree to which Xavier has been able to achieve upward mobility for many of its students. You know, the economist Raj Chetty and his team did a big report a few years ago, as you know, where they basically looked at how effective certain universities have been at turning students from poor backgrounds into well-off working adults. And Xavier ranked really high on this list. I wonder if you can talk about how you achieve that and if you could sort of walk us through your approach.

Reynold Verret [00:07:25] Well, I think Chetty's study that you're referring to, I think Xavier was sixth in the country, among the top 10, at that point. But part of that was that we achieve it by the quality education that we give, but also about understanding that none of our students come with the education that they deserve. But they come on and they've got some chink in the armor. How do we repair that?

[00:07:49] And that repair is important, to think that everyone comes with certain chinks, but we fix them. And when we leave, you leave with capacity to lead and be there.

[00:08:00] And also that you have a faculty that we have established and the faculty that renews itself, that is committed to these students of as many faculty as many students will testify, while they are in our class, we may not be loved, but when they leave us afterwards, they will love us and come back. And actually we see the examples among our alumni and that, and that's something that our students appreciate. And I think our students know that. They know that. And they may forgive other things, but they would not forgive us if we did not have this faculty.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:08:32] That's amazing. I'm just so curious. President Verret, do you think that the Xavier model can be outsourced to other schools? Could you ever see an institution, maybe even a predominantly white institution, actually doing what you do on a larger scale?

Reynold Verret [00:08:50] Well, I believe it could, but I would not use the word outsourced. It almost implies that basically that they would have someone else do it for them. It is not easy, because nothing that I would say one could turn and do it overnight. And then suddenly we are doing what Xavier does, because we have these classes in the first year, or we do this. And it will not, it doesn't happen that easily because what I do say is that a culture and a faculty that we've got to establish, and that commitment, takes time to establish.

[00:09:20] It also requires a real belief in educational equity.

[00:09:25] But these young people, these young men and women, come to us sometimes from schools where, I use an example of a young man who's now a rather well-established robotic surgeon in Illinois, who speaks of the fact that when he came to Xavier, he was the best in his class from his high school, and he came to Xavier and he was flunking chemistry.

[00:09:47] But one of the things that he did not know, despite the fact he was the best from his department, is that he didn't know what the periodic table was. He had taken chemistry in high school. So understand it's like diet and menus. You can have a menu with no vitamins and minerals. Right? It's all food. But in some ways, his science was educational junk food. So not all kids come to us with that preparation. But the point is to identify those and to fix that. That's something that the faculty was committed to, but also the faculty have a certain belief in that student's capacity.

[00:10:19] And that belief is important. And it's not something we can intuit for every faculty member, because the American mindset that values things so-called white as we define white, as so-called Black in different ways, makes some presumptions about why this young person doesn't know.

[00:10:36] But really, it's because he was fed things without any vitamins or anything. And so that belief in the capacity of these students and having seen that we have done this with those before him is there so that belief and that affirmation of the worth of each person is an important piece that everyone has to have in the faculty.

[00:10:57] And I don't know if it's everywhere. I can't see that.

(music)

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:11:10] You've really spent the better part of your career advocating for more diversity in STEM. Why has that been so important to you personally?

Reynold Verret [00:11:18] Well, I, my love for science, I could tell and I tell the story that my love for science began when I was probably in the fifth or sixth grade. And from the dangerous games I played with electricity when I was even younger. And there are many children like me.

[00:11:33] But many of them do not, are not given permission, to grow and become scientists. And I think that's an important thing, that when I understand that as a student in the United States does not meet another science and professor of color, Black, Hispanic or anything, until I probably was almost graduated from college.

[00:11:56] It hadn't happened. There were very few. I've a very good friend, retired from the EPA, and we both remember the story of coming up and down the stairs at the laboratory. And then she's like, I'm running up, she's running down, and both of us turn around and come back together and say, "You're Black!"

[00:12:16] And we've been friends forever. But we both, that experience, I don't think is unique.

[00:12:21] But also I think it's also the larger piece about who is in the room, not only when science is being done, but also to pose the questions and the questions that are relevant to all the American people. What is important?

Ben Wildavsky [00:12:33] Yeah, well, you know, President Verret, this seems like a good opportunity to put a different question on the table, but it's very related. Of course, you're a biologist and an immunologist by profession. And that, I think, puts you in a really unique position to speak to the moment that we're in. A couple of months ago, you not only joined the vaccine trials for the Pfizer vaccine, but you actually wrote a letter encouraging your student body to do so as well. Can you tell us why participating in these vaccine trials was so important to you?

Reynold Verret [00:13:17] It was important to me, and to clarify, I wrote to my students and asked them to think and consider, because when I joined the trial, I already knew that the representation of African-Americans and others, people of color, in that trial was very low. They were struggling to get that up. When I, and also my colleague, my brother, president at Dillard (University), also wanted to try it after he heard about it. He got some information for me, then proposed that we should write a letter to what we proposed, that we should try to let us just let them know. Essentially we were teaching by example and saying we are two Black men rolling up their sleeves. The important thing for us was that you educate people by elections and to think about difficult things, and to put Tuskegee in context because Tuskegee occurred.

[00:14:06] Late 1930s, and at the same time, because of not just the Tuskegee, but a lot of misbehavior and misuse of science, we put together certain practices, including the fact that we have people in the room who are value to the trials, some of them who look like me.

[00:14:24] Which is the difference, as I say, who poses the questions?

[00:14:27] So I do not want our fears of the past to keep us from benefiting from something that we need right now.

Ben Wildavsky [00:14:37] You know, during the recession, of course, you know, that's come from covid, there's been a lot of discussion nationally about the need for short term skills oriented programs for economic recovery. But, of course, those kinds of decisions come with risks. And it's reminded me a bit of this historic debate, you know, that used to, that's gone on for, you know, more than a century between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois.

[00:15:04] It's a complicated debate, but it's partly about whether Black advancement should be driven by developing very practical, very vocational skills or whether it's more important to create along with, you know, broad civil rights, really rigorous academics for the top students. And I find myself thinking about that as you look at the combination of certificates, non-degree programs, plus, obviously, you're very well known for your degree programs. I wonder if that old debate is still relevant today.

Reynold Verret [00:15:34] The debate that you are leaning upon is whether we are to train people for this job or whether we are giving them the flexibility to actually build careers. And on that axis, we lean very much on preparing students for careers, which means that you and I do not foresee the future where many of the jobs that these students may undertake don't exist today. But we want to give them the plasticity to be able to apply what they know. We have chemists who are doing policy work and likewise we have people in the social sciences who are doing important data analysis work within the tech industry. So there is plasticity. I think there is a social justice issue reason that we have to the value we place on different individuals based upon class or race in this country, because we have said that basically no, historically these people are not worthy of higher learning, which is the argument that Dubois fought against. At the same time, be able to have economic wherewithal and to be able to support one's family. It's not the voice, on the Booker T. question, is very important as well. So it's not that the idea that we should not be doing one, both that we should choose one or the other, is wrong.

[00:16:54] At the same time, I says it says that for the talent that we have among our young people — I'm talking about second and third graders — these freaky, curious young people, when you go into their class to see these kids walking around asking these questions, that talent is there, is there for us, and that talent needs to be cultivated and allowed to choose, for example, in many ways. And they make intelligent choices if they are prepared properly.

[00:17:17] I would also add the larger question is that this country, this country cannot remain great, whether it is as a military power, as an economic power, as a leader on climate and all the other important things that we have to deal with internationally, if we don't educate the talents we have in our children. And as this country becomes more Black and brown, to say that we would leave 50, 60 percent of that talent off the table, is almost to consign this country to second-class status internationally. Now, if you want to play well, you'd better be training your own.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:17:57] So let's talk a little bit about training your own. Back in the 1960s, pretty much if you were Black, you went to a Black college, 90 percent of Black students attended an HBCU. But once the doors of opportunity opened, as you well know, at other universities, those numbers really dwindled. But recently we're actually seeing an uptick in enrollment at HBCUs. Even our new vice president, Kamala Harris, graduated from an HBCU, Howard University. We'd just love to hear your thoughts on this. Like, what do you think the role of HBCUs will be to our country now?

Reynold Verret [00:18:32] Well, I think what HBCU is — and there's pieces of a diverse group of schools, but one thing that they have the commitment to education of the underserved, and they've done it very well.

[00:18:44] Now it is, I lift up the choices and the options that we've created at all other institutions nationally because it is what we fought for. At the same time, HBCUs have much to show as to how it can be done and continue to educate at the highest level. The fact that Xavier, as I said, there are some great schools in Pennsylvania where I was provost, of those great four-year colleges — I won't mention who they are — but I'm saying if you are, pre-med at Xavier implemented in one of the schools where the likelihood that you'll reach your dream, it is higher. We do very well because of our commitment to education in a country, that we've established. So we have something to offer for this country. The majority of students, of Black students, will not be coming from, will not be going to HBCUs because we're scattered around this country, right? A significant number will come here, but likewise, other students come to HBCUs as well. And I would say it's important that others can learn from us the same way I go to learn from Duke or from University of Chicago. The University of Chicago students have something to learn from us as well. So we are part of the large, diverse educational enterprise in the United States, but we have an important piece to contribute.

[00:20:00] We continue contributing in a large way.

Ben Wildavsky [00:20:03] Well, you know, I want to go back to something. And if you'll forgive me, I want to try to ask again something that Aimée asked earlier, which is about whether or not you can take the sort of the elements of your great success at Xavier, whether other schools could build on it. And I understand that they can't contract it out. They have to do it internally. But what I find myself thinking about you mentioned Pennsylvania. I'll just mention as just as an example, Penn State, because it's such a big, well-known, big state institution. I'm wondering whether, you talked about just this very profound need to believe in students and their abilities and their potential, and I'm just wondering if you had to come up with two or three elements of what's been successful for Xavier that another university could adopt, like a big place like Penn State or any other school you could think of. Are there any things that you could point to as a sort of summation of that?

Reynold Verret [00:20:57] Not not to approach Penn State. I will move out to a more general institution than Penn State.

[00:21:04] Clearly, I think one of the piece that you have to be is not only seek for faculty who have great freedom to experience or doctorate degrees, but also the faculty that have the human sensibility to engage with students. So that that's an important piece of faculty members who can truly be mentors to all students. That's an important piece.

[00:21:26] At Xavier, that is a criteria that the faculty apply in determining who to hire and not to hire because they do the recruitment and the choosing. They're looking for, not just someone who has a great résumé on paper, but certain human abilities to engage with our students. That's why I'm saying that they are replicating themselves. So that's an important piece. There has to be a very clear commitment to equity and to recognize the abilities in everyone. We have to move away from the old notion that, basically, it is obvious that the student is not capable because he or she doesn't have the highest standardized tests. But standardized tests track with socioeconomic. You can plot the graph.

[00:22:05] How is that? Is that an accident? And oh, you say that, no, the socioeconomic is because of standardized tests. But actually, these are easy beliefs to approach things.

[00:22:20] Yeah.

[00:22:20] And that understanding that — how do I say that? — it's almost a communal understanding that basically every young, every child before me, every young person, every

student before me, is my student, my child, rather than those other people. So you need professors who can actually make that and see that, in that person, doesn't look like me, this is my repository. This is my legacy of knowledge.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:22:45] Yeah. I mean, I think you're really pointing towards the trust that people have in the HBCU experience as a Black person.

[00:22:54] But there's a lot of distrust, and you talked about this earlier, in the medical system. And it's pretty pervasive with African-Americans.

[00:23:01] In one recent study I saw in "The Washington Post," fewer than maybe half of Black people would take the coronavirus vaccine. You talked a little bit about the Tuskegee experiment earlier.

[00:23:15] That's a huge hurdle that we're going to have to overcome. How do you start rebuilding the trust in the medical system? And do you think Xavier will play a role in that?

Reynold Verret [00:23:25] I think Xavier, but also others. I'm thinking about some of the medical colleges, especially the Black medical colleges like Maharey, Tuskegee and even Charles U out west.

[00:23:35] We don't have much time.

[00:23:37] Fifty percent will not do, especially in the most affected populations. We need more than that. I think one of the trust will be based on real transparency, of showing what's behind the veil, but also showing what's behind the veil as those who are behind the veil. And I think in this visual age, we need to show pictures of who are the study groups. To give names to me means nothing to most people. But I want to see people look like you or me are in that room. And that's something that will help us with trust. I think we need to be much more proactive in telling the story of how we actually created new institutions beyond Tuskegee, because, as I said, you can't be stuck there for the same reason that our education system has been unjust to us. The public safety systems have been unjust to us. Take your pick. Do we stop using education? Do we stop using police or public safety?

[00:24:29] Hospitals have been unjust. Do we stop using hospitals? No, we need the demand of hospitals that they give us what we need. So I think that argument needs to be moved, needs to move away. Also, I think we also need to depoliticize the instruments of safety, whether it's the vaccine or the mask, remembering that no one — and the mask was not an issue in January, was not a political issue in January.

[00:24:53] And by March or April this was a political issue, it was almost a statement of whose side are you on? It's almost like politicizing traffic lights and saying, I choose, I'm for or against traffic lights. Well, there are consequences to being for or against traffic lights. And I think that's why, we take the things that can protect us, and by politicizing them, we're hurting ourselves. So I think our thought leaders, and I'm speaking of doctors, lawyers, priests, need to be speaking very forcefully about vaccines in an apolitical perspective, of saying, it's for everyone.

Ben Wildavsky [00:25:26] Yeah, yeah. Well, President Verret, you know, Aimée and I were really looking forward to this interview, and I feel like our feelings have been amply rewarded. So thank you for taking the time out of your day to join us. And, Aimée and I, we just, we really appreciate it.

Reynold Verret [00:25:43] It's good to be with you. And thank you, and thank you for being a voice that brings information into the world, because I think it's how we come to know each other. And I mean all of us, that will get us beyond this moment where we have stopped speaking to each other.

[00:26:00] And even to actually know, see, that we're all somewhat broken but trying to walk in a better direction. And we can have those difficult conversations and go beyond.

Ben Wildavsky [00:26:15] That was our conversation with Reynold Verret. See you next time, Aimée.

Bye, Ben.

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[00:26:41] For more information on today's guest and to listen to other episodes of "Lessons Learned," please visit our Website, LessonsEarned.org.