

“Lessons Earned” Podcast Strada Education Network

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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.”

MUSIC

Aimée Eubanks Davis

Today, economist and policy expert David Deming.

CLIP

David Deming: What we have is an education system that's only helping about 20 percent of people as much as it should be helping 100 percent of people.

Ben Wildavsky

From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

MUSIC

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:34] Over the past 20 or 30 years, there's been a growing policy consensus on a couple of major issues. One is that economic inequality and upward mobility is getting worse. And another is that education and workforce policy will play a really pivotal role in addressing that. But, while nearly everyone agrees that inequality needs fixing, people have very different ideas about how to actually go about doing that.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:00] And that's where someone like David Deming comes in. David is the director of the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy and a professor

of both public policy and education economics at Harvard. Now, there is no shortage of big, ambitious ideas in academia, but David is using rigorous data analysis to really stress test those ideas to try and figure out what might work and what probably won't.

Ben Wildavsky [00:01:28] And you know, what's interesting is, David's academic interests are really broad. He studied the economic value of soft skills. He's developed experiments that quantify whether someone is a good team player. And he's written columns in "The New York Times" about the role of online learning and the value of community colleges. But running through all of this is this idea that our education and workforce ecosystem is leaving people behind and there are policies we could implement right now to start to reverse that trend.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:57] Yeah, exactly.

[00:01:59] And as we settle into the first few months of this new presidential administration, it seems like the perfect time to take stock of the current policy landscape and to get David's take on where we should be going and how we can get there. Here's David Deming.

Ben Wildavsky [00:02:18] David Deming, welcome to "Lessons Earned."

David Deming: Thanks for having me, Ben. It's great to be here.

Ben Wildavsky: Well, we're delighted to have you. And, you know, I was telling Aimee how you and I met a few years ago when we were working on that big conference on upward mobility with the Raj Chetty team and the College Board. But I realized I don't know a ton more about you. And that led us to sort of wonder about your background. And, you know, I've heard that your dad was a minister. And I'm wondering, when you were growing up, whether these sort of issues around, you know, fairness and opportunity were things that you talked about at home.

David Deming [00:02:52] For sure. All the time, Ben. Actually, it's not just that my dad was a minister. My parents met in seminary at Emory at the divinity school. My mother was an editor and publisher at a religious book publishing company. So she actually published the first gender inclusive hymnal. Fun, fun story. And so lots of conversations about religion and morals and ethics in the household when I was growing up. And that's definitely influenced me in the way I think about my work today.

Ben Wildavsky [00:03:19] Yeah, sure. Well, you know, there's obviously it's kind of an old and old, you know, phrase, but economics is kind of notorious for being called the dismal science. But I wonder if you, as you began to sort of, your path sort of ended up taking you into economics, did you start seeing it as connected to social justice?

David Deming [00:03:35] Absolutely. The thing, the intersection for me was that I grew up with a strong sense of trying to do what's right, but also a curiosity about how do we know what's right? How do we know what we should be doing? What is the right way to

help people? And oftentimes I'd be in these conversations and I didn't, I couldn't articulate it as a kid or a young adult. But I wanted some data on what works and what doesn't. And for me, that's what economics is, is it's the marriage between empiricism and social justice and trying to help people by figuring out what works.

Ben Wildavsky [00:04:08] Yeah. So it sounds like you were kind of early with this approach that, I'm going to get the shorthand wrong, you know, but, you know, people say “bring receipts.” But, you know, thinking about your career as I was reading up, you know, about your various publications, you know, and background for the interview, I was really struck by how broad your research interests are. You've done work on inequality, the value of soft skills, the role of community colleges in economic recovery. And, you know, it's a pretty long and pretty varied list. So I'm just wondering, like in your mind, how do you think about all of these different academic pursuits that you have? What's the connective tissue that holds them all together?

David Deming [00:04:53] Yeah, it's a great, great question. I mean, I guess for me, the connective tissue is that I've always been interested in trying to understand human potential. So what people can do and particularly how education helps you learn things that are valuable to you, certainly in the job market, but also in life more generally. I think it's something we take for granted. You know, there's a thousand studies in economics and other fields showing that people who get more education earn more money and they live longer and they're happier. And, you know, all these things. We know education is good for people, but I think we're hard pressed to explain exactly why, at least in a scientific sense. I mean, there's a lot of different reasons. It's probably not one answer. But that's the thing that I think is interesting to me, Ben, is that I want to know what education does for people and then therefore to work backwards and see how can we make it better so that it can help lift people out of poverty, help make our democracy stronger. All that. I think it requires an understanding of the nuts and bolts. And I feel like, at least for researchers like me, there are a lot of missing holes there. And so lots of lots of work to be done. A full employment act for education economists out there.

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:03] Yeah, sure. Well, it's interesting because it sounds like, you know, this whole notion that we associate, well, I think of some of the books by, you know, Claudia Goldin, Larry Katz, when capital really maximizes economic progress. But it sounds like you're really trying to do this very research-based — as they are rigorous, too — but you're trying to really get, delve into the rigor and the sort of causality of what's behind that. What really are the really nitty-gritty factors that make that happen or not happen?

David Deming [00:06:31] Yeah, I think it's I think it's, as you said, causality, but it's also mechanisms. Right? So I think in the Goldin and Katz work, there's a kind of clear through-line, which is that education in the U.S. at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution was actually meant to teach people specific skills that were helpful in the kinds of jobs that were becoming more available. Basic literacy and numeracy was useful in factory work, manufacturing work. And I think that's still true, that education prepares people for

work today. But work has really changed in the last century. And so the question is, should our education system change? And if so, in what way? Like what are the skills that we need to teach people in school so they can be more productive and then therefore be happier and earn family sustaining incomes and all that? You know, to the extent that the workplace has changed, probably the school system should change, too.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:07:20] So, David, we would really love to dig into some of your research on this piece around skills and skills being different today than they were 100 or so years ago. And we'd really love to hear more about the soft-skills piece. You know, we'd first love to hear you describe, what are soft skills?

David Deming [00:07:46] I think, so when you ask people, what are soft skills, the first thing to say is that you're going to get different answers. And I think that's why they're called soft skills, because we don't actually know what they are. We have different definitions. And so you could think about what I'm trying to do in some sense is make soft skills less soft, have them develop a more, I guess, scientific understanding of what they are.

[00:08:06] But but to start off with, I think what people often mean is, they want, you know, employees who are good problem-solvers, who are adaptable, who are team players, who communicate well, who have a strong work ethic. These are all skills in the sense that you're looking for people who have more of it, but we don't really know how to identify it.

[00:08:25] So we have these kind of crude approximations by doing an interview, sometimes structured, reading a resume, and we try to guess it, whether people actually have these soft skills using those techniques. And then oftentimes employers find that those techniques aren't very good. And so you end up with a lot of churning and like trying internships in ways that people can kind of signal or show to employers that they have these soft skills. But sure, wouldn't it be great to have a better way of identifying them and understanding what they are to save everybody more time? And so the better job we can do at figuring out what people are capable of, the more we can help people match to jobs and careers that can help them be upwardly mobile.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:09:08] So what has your research taught you about the value of these, you know, quote unquote, soft skills, particularly in comparison to technical skills or skills that people define as harder skills?

David Deming [00:09:22] Yeah, so I tend to try to go one at a time with these things. And so the soft skill that I've done the most work on is teamwork. And so I have two different projects working, looking at social skills. One of them is very macro. So it's saying, OK, let's look, let's look at changes in the U.S. economy, the U.S. job market over the last several decades. And when you look, what you see is that jobs that require more teamwork, that's become much, much more common in the last several decades. And those jobs are paying relatively higher wages as well. So when you look at jobs that are kind of, let's say, mathematically oriented or and require a lot of technical or

analytical skills, but do not require a lot of teamwork, those are actually shrinking and they're paying relatively less. And so increasingly, what you need is both to succeed in the labor market. You need to have some analytical skills, but also be good with others. And the reason for that, I think, is technological in some sense, because it's actually very easy for most people to have a two minute unstructured conversation with another human being and kind of read their emotions. That's really, really hard, actually, to program a robot or a machine or an A.I. technology to do, to just have a have an unscripted conversation because it's such an open-ended problem. But we as humans do it very naturally. And yet if you think about a purely analytical thing, like playing chess or something, that's a solved problem from a technological standpoint. We can develop an algorithm that can beat almost any human in chess. And so that's something that's easy for machines but hard for humans, whereas, social skills are easy for humans, but hard for machines.

Ben Wildavsky [00:11:03] Well, it's so interesting. You know, if I go back to what you said earlier about rethinking about what schools might be doing, so what should schools be doing to teach soft skills? You know, are there particular classes or bootcamps a person could take or is it something that kind of comes more organically over the course of earning a degree over a number of years?

David Deming [00:11:25] Yeah, that's the hard thing, Ben. You know, it's not like you can say, all right, it's third period. We're going to teach teamwork now. And it's not, it's not really like that. And so I do think it may require, particularly at the high school and college levels, some rethinking of the way school is actually structured. You know, we all as a professor myself, I know that actually group projects can be very difficult to grade and students will often complain, well, you know, I did all the work on this project and, you know, somebody else was a free rider. That's the way life is, you know? And so I think we almost have to shift our mindset away from evaluating individual accomplishment and towards thinking about longer-run group projects, thinking about more holistic assessments of what students are capable of. That's expensive and time consuming, which is one reason why I think it doesn't happen. We've kind of developed a system that works pretty well from the college perspective. It just doesn't happen to give employers the kind of signal they need about what people can do.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:12:17] David, I have to say, if you figure that out for all teachers in high school and college and group projects, you will be doing very well for yourself.

David Deming [00:12:27] So I mean, I actually segways to my second project about social skills, which is actually trying to figure out what makes somebody a team player? Like, how can you identify somebody who's a good team player?

David Deming [00:12:42] And the way we do that is actually with an experiment. We take people and we bring them into the lab and we give them a bunch of problem solving tasks that they do individually. So we can we have a good measure of how good you are at certain problem-solving tasks. And then we in a second stage, we bring a

bunch of people into the lab and assign them to teams and we have the teams do a team version of the same task. And so we have a good measure of how well we think the team should do based on the skills of the individuals.

[00:13:12] And then we say, OK, well, if every time I add Aimée to a team, does the team do better than what I would otherwise predict as I take her and I put her on a team with Ben and David, and then I put her on a team with two other people. And if every time she gets added to that team, the team outperforms its prediction, then Aimée is a team player. And we did this experiment, figured out who the team players were, and found that those people score higher on a widely used test of emotional intelligence.

[00:13:36] And so actually, I think there is a way to identify who is a good team player. We just don't do it commonly.

Music

Ben Wildavsky [00:13:49] I want to go on to some sort of, try to I understand these are you know, these are challenging questions. But if you were to sort of try to distill it to advice you'd give someone who's graduating from high school, you know, in the next year or two, you know, and here I'm thinking really about what you alluded to about degrees and skills. Do you still think of the four-year degree as the gold standard? You know, I know you've done some research on it, sort of its persistent economic value, or do you think people should really be looking at other, more short-term options as well, where we know there's just a lot of interest in those right now?

David Deming [00:14:23] Yeah, it's a great question, Ben. I think my answer, if I were to advise an individual young person, I would say the four-year degree, for you, is still the gold standard. And I say that mindful that it's becoming much less affordable for many people and many people don't have that option. And I think that's a bad thing. But I think the answer is not to say, to pretend that it has no value, but to try to make it so that it's accessible for more people. So that's my answer, is that for an individual, you know, I worry sometimes that we say, Oh, you should go get this certificate or this short-term degree. But that's for other people's kids. My kids are going to go to a fancy college. And, I don't like that.

Ben Wildavsky [00:15:02] Yeah, yeah. No, I hear you. But look, let's let's be real, though. I mean, during this pandemic, you know, people have lost jobs, or their real job, they're stagnant. There's just, we definitely see this in our surveys at Strada, you know, huge demand for the short term, sometimes more skills based, vocational based. I mean, one way to think about it is just the pure economic payoff. I mean, what's your read on the evidence there?

David Deming [00:15:23] Yeah. So I think there's an enormous economic payoff to a college education. It's growing all the time. The growth in the earnings differential between people with a bachelor's degree and people without one has slowed down. But it's not, it's actually at an all-time high, or close to it. And so I think if you have the ability

to go get a four-year degree, you should do that. However, I think that there's a rapidly burgeoning market of alternatives which can be additions to your education, not substitutions.

[00:15:56] So I could see a world where more and more people are getting a four year degree and then also going to get a, go into coding bootcamp, or going to get some certificate in some specialized trade, you know, because you're not really getting that specialized skill in a kind of more general B.A. program. And I also think that for people with no other education, those certifications are helping. So I think it's a both and, not a one versus the other.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:16:19] No, that is definitely something that Ben and I have heard from other people. And, you know, we just are really curious, as you think about the current situation that we're in economically, and you wrote a column in The New York Times a few months ago where you spoke pretty convincingly about the role community colleges can play as we attempt to rebuild the economy. Can you lay that out for us a bit?

David Deming [00:16:46] Yeah, sure. I'm glad you found it convincing Aimée. So I think that in the last recession, which was, you know, in 2009 after the financial crisis, what happened was that the federal government spent a ton of money in the stimulus package to give Pell Grants to students to go back to college, which was a good idea, except that, at the same time, states, which fund community colleges, had their budgets slashed tremendously because they had declining tax revenue on other things.

[00:17:16] And they actually couldn't accommodate the increase in students flowing in who, you know, who didn't, who couldn't find work and wanted to go back to school and get retrained. And so a lot of those students flooded to the for-profit colleges. And those students didn't get a good education. They were saddled with enormous debt and couldn't find a job afterwards. And I'm just very worried that that's going to repeat itself if we don't explicitly say, rather than just giving students a bigger Pell Grant, let's actually directly fund the public institutions that are locally based, like community colleges that know their communities, that have the ability or have already built connections with employers so that people can go back and not just go to school and get a general degree, but get trained in some specific vocation that can supplement what they've already done so they can transition from a job where they got laid off to some other job that potentially can pay them family sustaining wages. And I don't think the for-profit sector by itself can do that. I think that the community college sector is the best equipped to help people who've been dislocated transition. And I think we ought to not make the mistake that we made in the last recession.

Ben Wildavsky [00:18:14] You know, to give credit to the for-profits, I mean, if we want to be really clear about what people are good at, you said in the same New York Times column that they're very good at being market aware about where the needs are, what sort of programs and skills they ought to be developing. And yeah, there have been a lot

of bad actors, but essentially you said they should take some of that real market savvy and bring it into the community college world, right?

David Deming [00:18:40] That's absolutely right, Ben. Thank you for pressing me to clarify. So what I think is that there's a big difference between sending students to a for-profit college and using market competition to allow for-profit, potentially, companies to help colleges supplement their education. So, for example, Google is partnering with community colleges to offer IT certificates. There are online classes and boot camps and other things that can be supplements. But when students show up to community colleges, they don't just need that specific certificate. They also need sometimes remedial classes, sometimes kind of a baseline, and they need supports. And so what I propose is that the community college kind of be the center of what's happening, but that the community colleges quite deliberately partner with private actors to provide the best education possible. I think that's the way forward.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:19:30] Yeah, I mean, we really were impressed with how you seem to be able to really look across different sectors that are often siloed. And so I'd love to segway into the new presidential administration and really hear your thoughts on, you know, the Department of Education, and then there's the Department of Labor. They don't seem, in my opinion, to talk to each other all the time. And so we'd love to hear what you think the Biden administration should be tackling first. But also, like, how might those two, you know, groups work together closely? And maybe you would say that they do.

David Deming [00:20:10] No. I mean, Aimée, you put your finger right on it. You know, there is a Department of Education in the Department of Labor and they don't work that well together. And that's a kind of bureaucratic reason for why we don't have — I mean, it's one reason why the U.S. is far behind other nations with similar levels of prosperity in terms of having a workforce development system. We spend a lot less money on so-called active labor market policies, about 20 percent of other OECD countries. And this, in times like this is where that really hurts. And so I think the Biden administration — and I think they will — I think they should really prioritize creating a better workforce development system by, and that's why I say, I think community colleges actually can be the lever for that.

Ben Wildavsky [00:20:51] Yeah, that's great. Well, you know, I just want to touch on a couple of quick things before we wrap up. And one of them is actually, you reminded me of this when you mentioned, you know, the concern about over credentialism. I'm just trying to sort of synthesize some of what you've said. On the one hand, you've been very clear, the bachelor's degree is the gold standard, but you've also said you're open to sort of some of the short-term, you know, programs to meet immediate needs, that we should take more of a both-and approach. But I'm wondering, is there a tension between really making the case for degrees and trying to simultaneously make the case for bypassing degrees because of excessive credentialism?

David Deming [00:21:28] Oh, that's a good question, Ben. There may be. I would say that it's not it's not necessarily inconsistent to say that employers use the bachelor's degree too much and also that getting a bachelor's degree is actually helpful for students and may actually teach you some real skills, even if we don't have a good idea of how to measure them. I don't necessarily think those things are in tension. My view is that, again, is advising an individual student. You just kind of have to accept the world the way it is. And the way it is now is that you should probably go get a bachelor's degree if you can. However, I can think of all sorts of ways that we should design the system better so that maybe people don't have to get a bachelor's degree or maybe a bachelor's degree means something different, or maybe we're just more precise about what you need in addition to it, or whatever. And so I think it's almost a question of the world as it should be versus the world as it is.

Ben Wildavsky [00:22:15] That's perfect. That's exactly what I was thinking. That's a great way to put it. Well, look, looking forward, what in your view is the most pressing single educational policy challenge that we face? And another way to put it, what's at stake if we don't tackle the issue you see as most important, if we don't tackle it adequately?

David Deming [00:22:35] I think the stakes couldn't be higher. Education, development of human skills, is the most important investment we can make as a nation. And I think the biggest problem we're facing is that we, at a time when we need to be investing more in the skills of our population, we're investing less for a variety of reasons ranging from, you know, tightening state budgets to other priorities. And I think the kind of fiscal reality is bumping up against the need to educate ourselves for the demands of the 21st century economy. And right now, we're not, we're not there. And so what we have is an education system that's only helping about 20 percent of people as much as it should be helping 100 percent of people. And I don't think we'll ever really unwind declining intergenerational mobility or declining economic growth in the U.S. until we address this challenge. But it's a long-run challenge, so it's not going to be a quick win for policymakers. We have a battle, a war of ideas to wage, to try to convince people that this is our most urgent, one of our most urgent national priorities.

Ben Wildavsky [00:23:37] Well, that's, you know, in a way that's very sobering. But it's also in some ways, it's inspiring because it means there's things that we can do to try to make things better.

David Deming [00:23:46] Yes, a lot. We have a lot of things to do. Like I said earlier, a full employment act for education economists and people who care about these issues.

Ben Wildavsky

That was our conversation with David Deming. See you next time Aimée.

Aimée Eubanks Davis

Bye, Ben!

Voice over

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