

LESSONS EARNED: DEBORAH SANTIAGO

Host Ruth Watkins

[00:00:01] Hi, I'm Ruth Watkins, and this is Lessons Earned. Today, the co-founder and CEO of Excelencia in Education, Deborah Santiago.

Excelencia in Education CEO Deborah Santiago

[00:00:14] It's been fascinating to hear students talk about what a college education means for them, because, after just getting that degree or certificate, they talked about what it means to give back to their families and their communities.

Ruth Watkins [00:00:31] From Strada Education Network, this is Lessons Earned, putting education to work.

Ruth Watkins [00:00:49] In higher education, there is a designation for institutions, and it's called HSI — Hispanic serving institution. The primary criteria for being an HSI is serving a student body that is at least 25 percent Hispanic or Latino. Deborah Santiago tells us that enrolling Latino students alone does not mean that an institution of higher education is actually serving Latino students. In the late 1990s, Deborah was working at the U.S. Department of Education, and there she met a colleague, Sarita Brown. They became close colleagues and partners in an effort to change the discourse around Latino students. Students were seen as a crisis that needed to be solved, rather than people to invest in. This did not sit well with Deborah and Sarita. Together, they set out to change this perception. They cofounded Excelencia in Education in 2004. Their explicit goal was to improve outcomes for Latino students by improving the institutions that serve and support them. So I wanted to sit down with Deborah to talk about their mission and the cultural blind spots that still exist in institutions of higher education, and in our policy making. And, of course, to hear from them what it really means to serve students. Here's my conversation with Deborah Santiago.

Ruth [00:04:25] The issue that you raised about what people were saying about Latino students, tell me more about that.

Deborah [00:04:43] So I feel privileged to be in some of those rooms in those conversations, but I will say back then, and unfortunately still sometimes today, it was very deficit-based thinking about our community, if we were raised at all. Right? And the focus was on a profile that didn't resonate with the data. The narrative in public policy was, you know, Latinos were high school dropouts, English language learners and and immigrants, often on undocumented immigrants. And while we are more likely to be that than some other populations, the data were clear that the majority of Latino students are U.S. born. The majority of us speak English, and the majority of us are graduating from high school. Now, we can and we must do better in those areas, and certainly back then that was also the case, but what I found, the public policy was around really focusing on these as crisis issues and things to resolve, to reconcile. And what I learned quickly, Ruth, in these conversations is that, you know, we might throw money at a crisis, but we

invest in opportunity. So despite the fact the majority of us are, of our students are U.S. born, the majority of us speak English, and are high school graduates, that wasn't where the investment and the policy focus was. And from a power base, you kind of minimize the majority of Latino students to deal with those issues. So while we must deal with them, imagine addressing it from a position of power, saying the majority of us fit this profile, data show that, and we must address English-language learners, we must address workforce needs. That's a different policy framing and context than the only time to raise Hispanic students is when you have an immigration issue or you have a language issue, you know what I mean? And it's a framing issue that guides Excelencia today.

Ruth [00:04:32] Yes. Yes. I think, I really want to ask you about whether we're better now. But before we get to that, I need to ask you about working with Sarita, though. What was Sarita bringing to the table that other people you were engaging with weren't bringing?

Deborah [00:04:50] First and foremost, that asset-based lens, that strength-based lens. She had been working in that her entire career and found ways. And people said, We can't do things differently, or, It's all up to students. She said, We can address structural issues here. And she showed it was possible from that process all the way through. And what I found — kind of a kindred spirit; we talk about, you know, she's like my sister, — is the opportunity to leverage each other's value ads and contributions. And she is so articulate and she's more of an extrovert and she can engage with folks. And she has a powerful vision that people connect to authentically. And I resonate to that as well.

Ruth [00:5:37] Well, Deborah, tell me about your own story and your own experience. Has it informed your work?

Deborah [00:5:44] Yeah, Ruth. It has. It's simple, and yet it still drives me day in and day out. I am grateful. My parents, my mother does not have a college education, although she would have loved to — at the time, it was challenging for her. My father took him 20-plus years to get his bachelor's degree because he was in the military and would take classes where he could as he continued to grow and raise a family. But what I knew from a young age was that I was going to go to college. That was clear, even though my parents didn't know how to get there and what to do to make it happen. All four of us, I'm one of four, were going to do that. And my junior year in high school, my father was stationed to Spain, which was a dream. That's where he started his military service, and that's where he was going to end up. But it meant our family had to move. And I remember distinctly, just as if it were the other day, just thinking, How am I going to go to college from Spain? And my mother said to me, "You need to say. You need to figure it out." And to this day, it's a mixed emotions because the trust and the faith that they had in me, that I would figure it out and the willingness to let me go was profound. Because we were a really tight family anyway — imagine being a military brat, right? You moved quite a bit, and what was constant was your family. And so when she said it, I knew she was right. That's what I needed to do. So I lived with a third cousin and I stayed in the States. My parents went to Spain for three years, and I had to figure it out.

How do I apply? Where do I choose? How do I pay for? That was the journey. And Ruth, I think that very experience grounded me in the kind of educational opportunity that I think for others. How do you afford college? How do you pay for it? How do you choose an institution to go to? And how do you make sure that these opportunities you're given, that you're able to capitalize them for yourself, led me to think I can help others do this. I'm now a person of privilege. I have a college education. Less than one in four Latino adults have a bachelor's degree or higher. What can I do to give back?

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Deborah [00:8:31] So, *Excelencia* in Education, actually, we were going to just be a project within another organization when we started this conversation, but it didn't work out. We had a contribution that had been a verbal commitment from a funder that fell through. So we started with a \$16,000 contract to try and build an organization. We gave ourselves a year. Can we contribute and make a difference? And we're grateful that we're almost 18 years in and being able to do that. Our mission has not changed in those 18 years, and that's to accelerate Latino students' success in higher education. And for us, that's not to the exclusion of any other group. It's just an acknowledgment, certainly 18 years ago, but probably even still today, that we want everyone to increase their educational attainment, but to close equity gaps in attainment. We have to accelerate Latino student success to be able to meet that aspiration we have for the country. That mission has been the same from our outset. And the way we've approached it, Ruth, has always been consistent. We knew we kept hearing all these, you know, this demographic analysis. Often, again, very deficit based, but always tied to natural disasters. We talked about the demographic cliff and the tsunami of Latinos coming into the country, or the fault line. And we said, no, we have to focus on the approach that is grounded in data, but not data for its own sake, but data that can inform and compel action.

Ruth [00:10:05] Well, Deborah, I'm curious about whether you faced pushback or tension around a focus so specifically on the Latino population. Tell me more about that.

Deborah [00:10:18] We have been, even in our, we're *Excelencia* in Education. Intentionally bilingual. You don't need to know Spanish to know *Excelencia* is a great cognate. I am happy that that set a tone for who we are as an organization, unapologetically so. I think the pushback has been one where there is this perceived, superimposed by others, that by serving Latinos and focusing on this population, it excludes everyone else. And we have made a concerted effort to try to frame a focus and attention on this population in a way that shows, that talks about rejecting that paradigm of one of either-or into both-and. So we've gotten pushback, but part of the way we talk about that is what describes us doesn't divide us unless we let that happen. And so to talk about Hispanic students doesn't mean that we don't care about Black students, indigenous, LGBT, others at all. But that, too often we have been the footnote or the aside or not included, and we think by focusing on this population, we can look at issues as intractable in different ways because we are young and fast growing and

representative of what's more of a post-traditional. We're trying to reframe a way of understanding to create space for action and an environment and space and public policy where, you know, you have to pick a side and stick with it.

Ruth [00:11:59] So what have you learned about the needs of Latino students? What do students tell you?

Deborah [00:19:17] I'll tell you two quick things, Ruth. There's so much focus on public policy, on defining graduation, completion, success. It's been fascinating to hear students talk about what a college education means for them, because rarely is it just about getting that degree or that certificate. They talk about what it means to get back to their parents and to their community, and the ability that the education is the intermediary element they need, the stepping stone, to the kind of civic leadership and the kind of jobs and careers and life they want. And when you hear students talk about it, it really helps us put in context all these, you know, we're so metric-driven and whether institutions are doing or not, students talk about their lives and who they are and how they can contribute and be a part of something. That stays with us when we get into these minutia of details about regulatory things and all of that, we don't lose sight of that student voice first. And second, they talk a lot about the complexity of being engaged in this, in the system, in a structure of trying to advance and prove themselves and their family and how complicated it can be if you don't have the kind of social structure networks that already know how to engage. And so at Excelencia we spend a lot of time looking at not just what are the barriers, but what are some of the strategies and solutions that we hear from students

Ruth [00:13:40] So what does it really mean to serve to really serve Latino students?

Deborah [00:24:29] That's a simple question, Ruth, I appreciate it. And I'd kinda want to, like, to ask you the same question, because I think so much of what we've worked for for the 20-plus years that I've been in the space, we've had this construct of Hispanic Serving Institutions. And I've been fortunate to study this since I was in the Department of Ed at the time when they were first funded. Serving, to me, is at the crux of this political construct that is HSI, right? And, how do you go from being an enrolling to a serving institution? How do you deconstruct or codify serving? That, to me, I know I'm reiterating your question, but here's how I would try, how we've tried to answer that question at Excelencia. You might not control who enrolls at your institution, especially if you're a community college or open access. And you might not be able to control all the variables of success and the outcomes of students. But as an institution, you have a role to play in the success of that student. They've committed to coming to your institution because they want to get a quality education. So from our perspective, from outreach to enrollment, to retention, transfer, looking at financial investment and support, faculty, staff, representation, completion, the workforce, all of those are elements of serving that we can measure. And I think, ultimately, to serve — maybe this is my military background as such — but I think so many of us resonate with certain being more than just enrolling. It's a necessary, but not sufficient, precursor. And I think, giving meaning, what's authentic to an institution, what role do they play in the success

of a student? To me, that's serving. How do you, are you more student centered and make sure that they are able to push themselves and their potential to get an education that will advance their community, their lives, and their families.

Ruth [00:15:50] And so, I think this is the seal. Tell me more about the Seal of Excelencia.

Deborah [00:26:45] Yes, that's exactly the framework! So, again, this is the framework that we've come up. We know that this construct that is HSI, some institutions became HSIs because of demography and geography and not intentionality and impact. A Hispanic Serving Institution has 25 percent or more undergraduate, full-time equivalent Hispanic student enrollment, and they are public or private, and they are degree granting. And there were 189 in 1995. And there are 569 in 2020. The numbers continue to grow, and we kept asking, "OK, but what are you doing differently with this critical mass, this enrollment of students, at some point all of them, institutions, are going to be HSI, people have crassly said. And maybe that's true as the demography grows. But we created the Seal of *Excelencia* because we heard from institutions and others, and then working at the national stage, that we can find ways to try and codify some of what it means to serve in a way that others can understand who aren't directly involved in the process. So not to denigrate the 569 HSIs or 320 emerging, but if you can codify what it means to serve and we can as an independent organization certify that, these are the difference makers, the trendsetters for higher ed.

Ruth [00:17:27] Well, let's go back to some student stories, because I'd really be interested in if student stories for institutions that have earned the seal are different than student stories from institutions that have not earned the seal.

Deborah [00:33:12] Yeah. So that's such a powerful question, Ruth, because at the end of the day, if we're not doing it for students, I don't know why we're doing it, right? But we have heard from students that are at SEAL certified institutions, an awareness of the value the institution has had on their education as students. Whereas, we've had conversations with students who were at predominantly white institutions, PWIs, and from HSIs, frankly, that have said, you know, I don't know what the institution, I'm doing well, sometimes, despite the institution, not because of it. Or students who've said to us, like, until you ask, I've never thought about it, but I've never had a Hispanic faculty member in all of my time outside of language. And so there is, I think there is a sense of belonging when you can see an intentional institution that students can also articulate, that we don't necessarily see in others

Ruth [00:18:44] I wonder if there's a student you've met whose story really exemplifies what you're trying to do with the seal.

Deborah [00:18:53] Yes, I mean, absolutely. So one that comes to mind immediately is a young student that was in Sussex College, a seal-certified institution, who was single parent, a young, became a parent at a young age, and didn't think that college was possible for her, and had two children and was working and had the institutions reach

out to her because she saw all these other people who were advancing professionally and others, and asked them where they'd gone to school and people would talk about it casually. And it happened at a community event where the college was there. And they reached out to her and asked her if she wanted to know more. And in doing so, she had a conversation to see what was possible, and they walked her through the entire process. What you need to do to apply. What kind of assistance she could get to support, just not the tuition fees and going to college, but the child care and transportation and other needs. And it had such a powerful impact for her that when we talked about being seal certified she said, "To me, they provided a holistic approach to me as a student and said, 'I'm valued. I mattered. I felt like I belonged. And I didn't know what it would take, and they showed me it was possible."

Ruth [00:20:26] You've pushed a lot on data and the relevance and the importance of data. At Strata, one of our biggest priorities is trying to move the field past stopping data at completion and assuming that work is done when degrees are conferred or credentials are earned, instead saying we have work to do to make sure that there are equitable outcomes after completion, beyond completion. Do you think that's at all relevant for *Excelencia* as you look forward?

Deborah [00:43:22] Absolutely. Earning a certificate, a degree, is an element to a goal that is bigger. And that is getting an opportunity to be employed, to contribute, to support themselves, or family and community. That has to be linked to the workforce. And at *Excelencia* we are doubling down on that because we hear from institutions. If you are truly serving, it doesn't end with that sheepskin and crossing the stage.

Ruth [00:21:32] I hear you loud and clear, Deborah, that serving Latino students is a lot more than just enrolling Latino students. Of course, if we don't enroll students in the first place, we won't get a chance to serve them. The pandemic has been hard on enrollments, particularly for Latino students. What's at stake if we don't address this?

Deborah [00:21:53] So, you're right, Ruth. I mean, it's clear the data from the National Clearinghouse, but also everywhere we see, all communities have been hit hard, but our communities of color have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic, I think at stake is at the very heart of who we are as a country and as a community and as a citizenry, is are we living up to our ideals of the American dream and the potential? I think that's why so many Latino families with different countries of origin that have come here — some 16 generations ago and some much more recently — that American dream, I think, is only as true as we invest and support it. And what that means for everyone, not just those that look like us or sound like us, but I think that's the living up to our ideals as a community society. That's what this is about. And I think those of us that are privileged enough to work in this space have a responsibility to make sure we give back, but also create the space so it's maybe a little bit easier or more meaningful for others that follow.

Ruth [00:23:04] Deborah, you were so personal talking about your parents and your family, their commitment to you to stay in the states and be able to pursue college, your

dream, their dream. What do you think they'd say if they were with us today about the work you've done since that time?

Deborah [00:23:23] I think, well I know because I talk to them regularly, they're proud. I think to this day they're not even really sure exactly what it is I do, but they know in big strokes, just like, "I don't know how to get to college, but you're going to get there. I think in the same way, I think they're proud that their commitment, their common cause continues to and through me and through my siblings, to give back. Again, my dad, my parents, military family, service is ingrained in who we are. And to be able to contribute and give back, they've always told us growing up, that's our charge, to take care of self, community, and family and be able to give back to those that don't have the privilege we've had. I remember growing up, I kept thinking I can take chances, I can try to do things, because if I fail, I know I have my family there and they will pick me up, they will give me a hug and give me a kick in the booty and say, Get back out there, you've got to keep trying. And I'd like to think that that's provided the kind of stamina and commitment to do the kind of work I do. And I think that's been the case, all four of their children have at least a graduate education because of that focus, and I'd like for others to see that's possible.

Ruth [00:24:56] That was my conversation with Deborah Santiago. Thanks for listening to Lessons Earned.