

**Season 4, Episode 5**  
**Millie Garcia on Why Higher Ed Needs Diverse Leadership**

**TRANSCRIPT**

**Ruth Watkins** [00:00:01] Hi, I'm Ruth Watkins, and this is “Lessons Earned.” Today, the president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, otherwise known as AASCU, Dr. Millie Garcia.

**Millie Garcia** [00:00:16] Our institutions have to be authentic and learn how to serve the students they have, rather than the students they wish they had, in order to lift not only the institution, but to also lift our cities and our communities.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:00:33] From Strada Education Network, this is “Lessons Earned: Putting education to work.”

Diversity initiatives are top of mind for so many of us right now, which has to be a good thing. But sometimes it feels like we're paying lip service to diversity — maybe when we don't fully understand what it would mean for us to put diversity first in shaping our institutions. Of course, the real impact of diverse leadership becomes remarkably clear when you speak to someone like Millie Garcia. Millie has had a long and very impressive career as a college president, first at Berkeley College, part of the CUNY system, and then at Cal State Fullerton. And now Millie is the president of AASCU. It's an organization that serves who Millie calls “the new majority” — low-income students, first-generation students, students of color. AASCU does so many things for so many of us, and I think Millie will be able to explain it best.

**Millie Garcia** [00:01:50] We're a presidential organization and a leadership organization in that we focus on making presidents the best they can be in order that students have an affordable, quality higher education and go off to have fulfilling careers and a fulfilling life with economic and social independence.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:02:09] As a Puerto Rican woman, a first-generation college student herself, Millie's background has always informed and shaped her work. So I really wanted to sit down with Millie — two former college presidents in an industry that is still very male and very white — to talk about why diversity really matters in higher ed leadership and what we can do together to make things better. Here is Millie Garcia.

**Ruth Watkins** You use the phrase “the new majority.” What do you know about first-generation college students at your AASCU institutions?

**Millie Garcia** [00:02:48] Well, let me begin by saying I'm one of those first-generation college students, and so we pay particular attention to those who are the first to become the ones that go to college. Because, as we know and through my own experience, not only do you change your life, you change the life of family members for generations to come. So, for example, my nieces and nephews never ask, “Am I going to college?” They ask, “Which college am I going to go to?” And that is a transformation that goes into forever. And in addition to that, we become engaged in things we are passionate about in our communities, in our neighborhoods. We vote. And so you're changing an entire spectrum.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:03:33] You know, Millie, it really sounds to me like what you just laid out is, in fact, the promise of higher education in America. How well are we doing at achieving that?

**Millie Garcia** [00:03:44] Not good enough, especially when you're talking about the students that AASCU institutions serve. And that's why we are focused on our institutions, our focus and, quite frankly, AASCU boards and presidents and their teams are focused on moving that needle and really holding a mirror up to say, what is it that we can do better? How do we get rid of those barriers? And how do we make sure that we are helping those students? Because they're not starting at a level playing field — we know that. And so we have to make sure that they have the knowledge, the skills, the tools, and what I call high-tech and high-touch support in order to be successful.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:04:25] And I think that point about leveling the playing field, I want to dig into that just a little bit. I've had the privilege of being in flagship institutions through my career as a dean and then a provost and a president at University of Illinois and then University of Utah. And we always thought we were not getting enough investment and enough resources. I don't think we've walked in the shoes of an AASCU institution, however. Tell me about your perspective on investment and resources and what it really takes to level the playing field.

**Millie Garcia** [00:04:56] Well, let's begin that our students are coming from neighborhoods where their P-12, through no fault of their own, are not solidly giving them the foundation in order to move on to college. And so that's where we are beginning. And what that means is that we don't have to support them and making sure that they get those skills in that first year. That's number one. Number two, making sure they have advisors because many of these students who come from these poor

neighborhoods think that college is not for them. And so we have to help them understand what is it that we can do to help them. So through support services, through advising, through tutoring, through helping them understand the financial aid process.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:05:42] So you're really talking about tools and actions that AASCU institutions put in place to break down barriers. I'm wondering if your commitment to this work is inspired by your own experiences. Tell me about the barriers you faced.

**Millie Garcia** [00:05:56] Oh, my God. So basically, I'm a first-generation college student. My parents came from Puerto Rico and settled in Brooklyn, New York, and they came with five children, and my brother and I were the surprises later on in life that happens in families. And they worked in the factories of Brooklyn, now in a neighborhood called Dumbo that nobody can afford anymore because those factories are now lofts. But when we lived there, it was really a poor, low-income, two-tenement building — very diverse, by the way — and it was wonderful. But in addition to that, you know, I was fortunate in that it was way after *Brown v. Board of Ed*, and they were integrating schools. And I went to the P-12 schools in Brooklyn Heights. And when I went to Brooklyn Heights, I was able to bring a — and it was public — a violin home. I was learning French from the second grade. I learned so much in that school that prepared me to go further on into college, although my father died when I was 12. And so we had to move to the housing projects, and my mother supported us on a factory salary, which we never felt poor, and I have to say thank you to her and her memory and my father's as well. But they always said something: The only inheritance a poor family could leave you is a good education, and that stayed with me forever. And so I had to work when I went to college. I thought, quite frankly, that college was for rich people. And so when I applied, I was scared, and I had to think about it. I was accepted to City University of New York. I was accepted to Hunter, and I was accepted to New York City Community College. And for me, it was I can go to community college, and it's only two years, and I'll have something at the end because maybe I won't be able to make it. And that's what over 50 percent of Latinos still do. They still go to community colleges. That opens the door for our population, and I worked myself all the way through my doctorate. But as much as my mom helped me, and I remember her heating my food when I came from work in the evenings, she didn't have the resources, the financial resources, to help me through it.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:08:16] Did you feel a sense of belonging when you got there to college?

**Millie Garcia** [00:08:21] Yeah, it's interesting. At the community college, yes. At the four-year institution, no. The community college was close to the housing projects, had

many students of color. I had my first Hispanic faculty member there, and so there I felt a cohesion of family. They were very supportive in that I got college work-study on campus. They trained me to be a financial aid student adviser and trained me. And so all of that gave me confidence.

The faculty were amazing. I still have a thesaurus from a faculty member who wrote in it to a very smart woman who needs to continue in college, and I had an amazing Shakespeare teacher who was blind and knew my footsteps. I walked in late once, and I remember saying, "Miss Garcia, you are late." And I never was late again. But he made Shakespeare alive, but when I transferred to my four-year institution is where I felt like I didn't belong.

And I remember really wanting to go into the master's Ph.D. program there and remember actually someone saying to me, "Well, you know, we only have two women here, and only one of them made it, and she got pregnant" — and really barred me. And I went back to my department head, and I said, this is what happened. He says, "Do you want me to fight it?" And I said, "No, because that department's going to make my life miserable. And I don't want to be miserable." And so I didn't go, and I then went to NYU and Columbia.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:10:14] You know, it's an amazing thing how powerful some of those experiences are, the messages that academics, faculty, role models give people about whether they belong and what their potential is and how salient that is in your life today. I have a story kind of similar to that with an undergraduate professor, and I transferred twice as an undergrad and was having such a hard time finding my way. And the third stop, I had a faculty member say to me, "Hey, you're smart. You should think about an academic career in graduate school, and I'd love to help you with that if you're interested." And what a game changer it is. It amazes me that you have that thesaurus from a person who wrote you that note.

**Millie Garcia** [00:10:56] I have kept it. It's really so important to me, you know, and I had it in high school. I think when I told the guy whose class I wanted to go to college, he said, "Oh, you'll never make it to college." So that story, still, the sad part is that the story still continues today.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:11:23] Let's step back and talk about Millie Garcia, the leader, the president. Certainly, if I'm doing this math correctly, I think you were president of Berkeley College at a really challenging time in New York. Yeah, I'm just kind of looking at the dates and thinking, that must be right. Tell us about that.

**Millie Garcia** [00:11:42] Well, my first week I experienced 911, where I lost 14 students. And I lost the husband of one of our faculty members, who was the one that called and said, “I love you” and brought down the plane so it wouldn’t hit the Pentagon. So every time 911 comes, I get emotional. Talking to families — it was very, very challenging. It was a challenging first presidential year, and yet I had an amazing team who focused on students. We lost a lot of students in New York City, and we lost a lot of faculty and staff who were afraid to work in New York. But we were able to regroup and come back and support those students along the way. And so it was a time where I learned that it's not if, it's when, you have a crisis that a leader has to be prepared for. You can learn processes and steps and compassion and authenticity. But quite frankly, you are never prepared in a way, and you just have to pull everything from your inside to be the cheerleader to get people through crises.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:12:55] Important threads there. I think the strength of team and that really great leaders build teams around them that will be able to execute the vision and the mission and and really thrive through difficult times because the difficult times are with us. So let's talk about Cal State Fullerton — very large institution with such a remarkable trajectory through your leadership, increasing graduation rates, better outcomes for students. What did you learn at that stop in your leadership journey?

Millie Garcia [00:13:27] Well, if it was me picking up all I learned through my leadership journey and might have it in my knapsack, in my toolbox and pulling out all I learned and it is about no president does this alone. We all know that. It is about building teams. It's about making sure you are sticking to your vision and mission. It's ensuring that your team understands their place in reaching the goals that you set every year. And so it takes work, but it's important work because it's about the students and it's about accountability.

And from my days at Berkeley, where I learned that I go before a board every quarter and I have to show results, I learned how to do that in my public institutions. And I really think that being at a place like Berkeley taught me how to live through the horrific recession of 2008 in order to move the institution forward. And so that work we did at Fullerton was about all of us. It was how we move the needle, how we work together, how we held each other accountable, and I held them accountable in order to really focus on student success and understanding who we serve and what high schools they're coming from and what community colleges they're coming from and understanding who they are in order to help them reach their goals.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:15:10] You know, I think such important lessons there, and even as we recognize team, my own experience would say it's also kind of lonely being a

president, maybe particularly lonely as one of relatively few women leaders and women leaders of color. We've made strides in diversifying higher ed. We haven't made as many strides in the leadership roles. Tell me about that a little bit.

**Millie Garcia** [00:15:36] I do believe we have to have leaders that mirror who you serve. And so one of the reasons I left Fullerton ... I loved my job at Fullerton ... is because AASCU provides a national platform to diversify the presidency and the leadership of higher ed institutions. They started way before I ever got there in 1999, the Millennium Leadership Institute. I was in that first class, and I was the first one to become a president out of that first class. And now I am honored to be able to shape it, to move it, to adjust it to our new realities. And when you see our people who come to these programs — we've already graduated 695 individuals in those years. One out of five become presidents; others, other types of senior leaders. My mentee is the commissioner of higher ed in Louisiana, for example. So they're all going to these leadership positions that have student success and equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice at the heart of the program.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:16:51] So Millie, we know empirically that excellence requires diversity, and diversity brings excellence. What is holding us back in higher ed?

**Millie Garcia** [00:17:01] Lots of things. I would say No. 1, we need to really look at how we're interviewing and how we're recruiting. We're in an elitist business. And we keep saying things like, well, if you worked at a community college, you can't work at a four-year institution; if you worked at a regional comprehensive, you cannot work at a research intensive. Well, what about the skills the person is bringing? What about the experiences? And what about the accomplishments these individuals have brought rather than pigeonholing people throughout their career? I mean, that's the first thing. The second thing is, looking at what is it the institution needs, right? So as a president, yes, you have to show that you understand the faculty life, that yes, you've taught, and yes, you've done research and you've gotten grants, but do you have to be the top of the field? Because the role of the faculty is very different from being a president, a provost, a dean. And so we need to kind of think through that we have to look at our search committees. We all know that we tend to hire people that look like us. And so what about those search committees? What are they looking like? How do we work with appointing authorities? How do we work with boards in order to start looking at the real value of what an individual can bring? And is that the right match for the institution rather than looking at old ways of hiring people?

**Ruth Watkins** [00:18:44] You know, as I listen, Millie, there's a thread running through this conversation, and it's striking me with a little bit of sadness that we, me, in some

cases have put up the very same barriers to faculty rising into leadership roles and to others writing into leadership roles that we have placed on students as they seek to enter postsecondary ed.

**Millie Garcia** [00:19:08] Right. Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:19:11] So we stand together in this moment of change, we hope. We want better higher ed, and we think higher ed can lead. Let's talk a little bit more about millennium leaders and about what you try to do in that initiative to change this story.

**Millie Garcia** [00:19:27] What MLI does — it was the most important leadership development program I went to — and the reason of that is they talked authentically what it would mean for me to be a president as a Latina woman. And so it's not only the skills of the budgeting and curriculum and understanding the academic Senate and the governance. Yes, every program does that. But what does it mean to be an other? And how do you manage that? And how are you authentic about who you are? And at the same time, as I always tell them, you've got to take care of body, heart, and soul in order to be a good leader.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:20:11] You know, Millie, I would love it if you could tell me a little bit more about that. People are always asking me for advice — aspiring presidents, people that want to be presidents. And it sounds like those experiences were very powerful for you. Tell me a story or two, if you can, about the kinds of things you were prepared for in the MLI as that experience of being “other.”

**Millie Garcia** [00:20:34] You know, I think the presidents talked about their authentic selves and said that they got a lot of criticism and at that time as an African American president for being African American. Right? And he would say, you have to have thick skin if you feel you are moving the institution in the right direction. And that you have to be able to, yes, talk to people about what you're doing. But at the end of the day, you're not going to make everybody happy, and that you have to, as a new president, go in and get the quick wins and demonstrate those quick wins because they are looking at you like you don't belong. And so that stayed with me, and I've had in my own career people saying, oh, she — at Cal State Fullerton — she's going to turn the institution to just a Hispanic institution. Well, that was far from the truth. And so I had to demonstrate that not only was I not doing that, but also to talk about the wins we had for all students and for all faculty, which is something an Anglo person wouldn't have to do.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:21:49] Yeah, Millie, did you ever feel like you had to work harder, faster, more better? Be more things to more people?

**Millie Garcia** [00:21:55] Always. I felt that through college, I always felt, especially at my four-year institution, but I always felt in college that I had to get a Super A on that first exam in order to be recognized, that I had to be super-prepared. And that has happened throughout every presidency, every senior leadership position I've had, is to work harder in order to be seen on the same level.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:22:24] Yes, I'm reflecting a little bit on my own experience too. And of course, at University of Utah being the first woman president, there were at the very superficial level, so many times I would go places and be introduced and people would turn to my husband and say, "Oh Bob, it's so great to meet you and congratulations on being president." And those are just the tiny things. That is a work in progress, I guess, for us all.

**Millie Garcia** [00:22:52] It is a work in progress. And you know, you said your experience. it just brought me back when I was at Dominguez Hills, I went down to one of the beach cities. I walked in with my vice president for university advancement, and they were there and they go ... Now, my last name is Garcia. His last name is Kratz. They walked up to him and said, "Oh, President Garcia, so good to meet you." And he is, he does not, is not Hispanic at the least. So it's those experiences. And yet that's where I tell people, you need a trusted group of people away from campus mentors and supportive friends to call and say, Would you believe I went through this?

**Ruth Watkins** [00:23:43] Yes. Yes. Your friends around the country become very, very important, and probably a bit of a sense of humor helps, too. I know my husband developed many good lines, and by the end he would just point to me when people would do that to him, or he would say, "It'll take you about 20 seconds to realize I could never be a university president."

Well, I think let's dial up just a little bit and talk about this moment in America and what has happened over the last couple of years and the hope we have for the future for a better and more diverse, higher ed system. There are moments that are very sobering where we realize rather than addressing and ameliorating inequality in many ways, higher education has perpetuated it. We must be better. And I think we need to lead. This is a view we both share. What more can we do and what do you see in the next phase?

**Millie Garcia** [00:25:00] I really believe that we are at a crossroads. And I think we must use our bully pulpits more often. I think we need to prepare our leaders to be able to have difficult dialog with skilled candor on race, class, gender, and social justice. And



that's really hard. It's an uncomfortable situation. And as long as we can have these honest, deep dialogs that, yes, it will make us uncomfortable. We do have a history that we cannot whitewash. We do need to talk about how do we learn from history in order to have a better nation. And so I think in addition to all that we do, our institutions have to be authentic and learn how to serve the students they have, rather than the students they wish they had.

It doesn't matter what institution I worked at, and I did work at a research-intensive institution. Every institution wanted the A students. Well, no we need the state, the students in our communities and our neighborhoods in order to lift not only the institution, but to also lift our cities and our communities and our states. You know, I think there is a place for all the research-intensive elite institutions, but it is much harder to educate and graduate the students that community colleges and AASCU institutions serve than one that is guaranteed to make it at Harvard. And I also think that the resources that we give out should be to those institutions that not only serve them but show accountability in graduation and moving on in a career or graduate school. I am passionate about that because that is who we must educate. If America is going to be vital.

**Ruth Watkins** [00:27:09] The stakes are pretty high. If we don't succeed, there's an ethical imperative, an economic imperative and an excellence imperative for our nation.

**Millie Garcia** [00:27:17] And a moral imperative. I had a president say to me, "If my institution was not in this community, this community would not exist."

**Ruth Watkins** [00:27:26] Well, Millie, you're a steward of leadership and an incredible ambassador who I've I've seen use the bully pulpit many times and I'm cheering for you every step of the way. Thank you for your leadership and for everything you do for higher ed.

**Millie Garcia** [00:27:41] Oh, thank you for your leadership, and I look forward to partnering and continuing what I call the battle together.

## Music

**Ruth Watkins** [00:27:56] That was my conversation with Millie Garcia. I'm Ruth Watkins and thank you for listening to "Lessons Earned." "Lessons Earned" is produced by Strada Education Network in partnership with Antica Productions. You can subscribe to "Lessons Earned" wherever you get your podcasts. And of course, we always welcome

your ratings. For more information on today's guest and to listen to other episodes of "Lessons Earned," please visit our website, [LessonsEarned.org](http://LessonsEarned.org).