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Ruth Watkins [00:00:01] Hi, I'm Ruth Watkins, and this is “Lessons Earned.” Today, the president of Chicago State University, Zaldwaynaka Scott, otherwise known as Z Scott.

Z Scott [00:00:16] I always tell people a strong Chicago State is a strong Chicago, a strong Illinois, and a strong United States.

Ruth Watkins [00:00:25] From Strada Education Network, this is “Lessons Earned: Putting education to work.”

In the years leading up to 2018, Chicago State University was in dire straits. The state budget had been slashed, operations rolled back. They'd gone several years without permanent leadership and a permanent budget — and they lost students. But Z Scott has never been one to shy away from a challenge. After an impressive career as an attorney, including more than 16 years as a federal prosecutor, Z decided to try something new, and she became the president of Chicago State University in 2018.

Chicago State is in some ways symbolic of higher education across our nation: Without meaningful structural and financial support, without stable and consistent leadership, schools will struggle. But with the right people and the right systems in place, Chicago State has become an engine for economic mobility, an anchor institution in the Chicago community, and a blueprint for other institutions who want to do and be the same.

Z would be the first to acknowledge that reforming higher education is only part of the equity puzzle, but transforming universities, especially ones like Chicago State that serve primarily low-income students and students of color, is a vital step in the right direction. Here's my conversation with Z Scott.

Ruth Watkins: You became president of Chicago State about four years ago. What a remarkable challenge. Tell me about how they recruited you to take that on.

Z Scott [00:02:30] Well, you know, I wasn't a stranger to Chicago State. I had been on the board from 2010 to 2013. I grew up in a neighborhood about a mile from Chicago State, so I was very familiar with the campus and I was very familiar with the university itself and the gem it was to the south side of Chicago and its importance in the higher ed ecosystem here in Illinois. So it wasn't a hard sell. I will tell you after about 30 years of practicing law and, you know, a practice that I loved, I was ready to do something different. I was ready for a new challenge and a new leadership challenge.

Ruth Watkins [00:03:05] Yes. Well, tell me a little bit about what that was like coming not from the academy, but from a life as an attorney, to make the transition to academic leadership.

Z Scott [00:03:16] Well, among the other things that I had done in my spare time was to teach in higher ed. So I had taught in various law schools across the city, including the University of Chicago and Northwestern. So when I came into the university, I did a very quick assessment of where we were. I put together a transition team that was run by a former university president and a retired federal judge. And I had about 30 professionals from all walks come in to volunteer their time, to assess where we were and our opportunities and challenges. And I also used a civic agency called the Civic Consulting Alliance here in Illinois that helps government do big things. They came on as the providing project management guidance through that process.

Ruth Watkins [00:04:08] Such a wise way to start. You're an important anchor institution in your community, engaging them in the future. I would think it's absolutely vital. So what did you learn in that process? What did you learn about your students and their needs?

Z Scott [00:04:22] Well, our student profile is indeed, I think, unique to higher ed. We are Illinois' only four-year, predominantly Black institution, and that designation comes from the U.S. Department of Education. Our institution is 70 percent Black, about 10 percent Latinx. Our average age is 29. Thirty percent of our students have at least one dependent, and over 60 percent of them are first-generation college students. So that's our student population. But you take a look at that student population and you look at the fact that we are a typical liberal arts university with five colleges, including the only PBI in the country with a college of pharmacy where we offer doctoral degrees. And you look at the fact that we're in the top 4 percent of all universities in the country for economic mobility for our students, so our students see an automatic boost in their income and income with our degree. And you look at the fact that we're in the top 2 percent of all colleges, universities, graduating Black students with degrees in physics. So you know that something incredibly wonderful is going on in our campus despite the challenges that come with our student profile.

Ruth Watkins [00:05:36] Yes, quite a remarkable story when you talk about your graduates and the accomplishments. And at the same time, we've seen enrollment declines, and I believe you mentioned that when you started, there was an enrollment decline. Tell me a little bit about how we reconcile this issue of how important a credential after high school is or a degree after high school, and yet we see enrollment declines in our institutions.

Z Scott [00:06:04] Well, you know, first of all, let's look at 2019. In 2019, Chicago State saw about a 10 percent increase in its enrollment. It's the first enrollment increase the university had seen in about 10 years. And so we could tell with the work that we were doing and putting into the institution and the programming and the student success initiatives were bearing fruit. And then we slammed into March of 2020, which means that we, you know, we had two to three weeks to prepare to shut the university down in order to move into remote learning for health and safety reasons. So what we saw was we saw our enrollments start to decline. Students told us, "COVID is hard. Remote

learning is hard. I have so many responsibilities in my life and in my career. Going to college is hard right now.”

And so we saw, what we did was we continue to move forward with some of our success initiatives to support students, and that included providing laptops. We saw the digital divide in real time — providing hotspots for technology assistance, making sure, you know, moving emergency grants into the hands of our students to support their emergency financial needs. And in some instances, we paid off debt using some of the money that we've acquired through federal funding to support our students. But even with that, you know, the Black community has been very hard hit, and our students are no exception. And so we have seen some, some declines.

Ruth Watkins [00:07:36] One of the narratives that emerged over the pandemic was remote learning is going to take over all of higher education, some thinking that this would be a silver lining. What are your thoughts on that?

Z Scott [00:07:47] I disagree because I think in order to really touch our students during the pandemic, we were constant surveys. How are you doing? What do you need? How is this impacting you? And what we heard is from the majority of our students through these surveys, “we don't like remote learning.” Not only did they tell us this in response to surveys, they also told us that and in some of that fact that students didn't come back. They wanted us to reopen so they could get in front of a classroom and really engage with peers. And so we're fighting for that. We've done everything that we can to keep our campus and our students healthy and safe because that is what we need to thrive.

Ruth Watkins [00:08:31] What do you think about the people that think remote learning might be the panacea for higher education going forward?

Z Scott [00:08:37] Well, see, I think you have to treat — and Ruth, I'm sure you agree with this — you have to treat your campus like it is an individual business. And so you have to make policy decisions and structural decisions based on the community that you're serving. My community wants face-to-face learning. And so I'm fighting for that.

Ruth Watkins [00:08:57] So we know it's not remote learning. But have there been any silver linings to this in your experience?

Z Scott [00:09:04] You know, I think every valley, you know, has a peak, right? And I think that what we're learning is how we can better support our students in moving to and through college. The rate at which Black students are going to college in Illinois has dropped 34 percent since 2013 to 2019. So we formed a statewide working group to take a look at those issues and deliver an action plan that would support all of Illinois in bringing Black students into our systems for not only the experience of college, but also increase graduation rates. So I think that given that the spotlight that, you know, many of our, the civil rights issues that had come forth during the same period of time. It's so, so what many people say is that, you know, Black America is experiencing multiple pandemics: the financial crisis of a pandemic, the health crisis of a pandemic, and

access points to move into a better life. So I think that spotlight being put on so many systems that have worked to the disadvantage of our students has served to be a major benefit for Chicago State. We have seen multiple corporate partners come forward and say, "I want to help. I want to mentor. I want to create classwork that makes our students 21st century ready. We want to teach on your campus. We want to provide economic support to your students." And I think that's the silver lining. It is really the increased participation of America in the role of higher education.

Ruth Watkins [00:10:43] So maybe we're at a turning point. I think the 34 percent decline in the college enrollment of African American students — wow. If that doesn't get your attention, that's, that really suggests that the system of higher education that we've established is not equitably serving people. Some individuals, certainly Black Americans, have faced great barriers. Let's talk more about this turning point, the corporate engagement, the recognition from so many that this will not lead to a strong America. Tell me more.

Z Scott [00:11:23] So the recognition comes in the fact that on my LinkedIn account, people reach out to me and say, "I see the tremendous work going on at Chicago State. I want to be part of it. I want to contribute." I got an email like that just two days ago from a major insurance company in America saying, "I want to be a part of what you're doing to support college attainment for our Black community." But it is ... But we also have to look at how we support, right? We can't keep doing the same things the same way as you talked about. So if you look at the continuum, entry into college and then graduation, what happens to our Black students along that timeline, and look at how you can change the trajectory. So first of all, we coined something we call Cougar Commitment and we start with high school students. We start with giving our high school students a college experience through dual enrollment, and that is tuition-free. Then we build what's called our Rise Academy. It's a free college program. Students spend five weeks with us earning a college-level course credit but also going through a series of workshops that encourage college attendance and completion with an understanding what the experience is going to be. We've already seen significant gains in retention just, even through COVID, through that Rise Academy. And then you move in through the college experience itself, offering increased advising —, intensive advising — increased scholarship support, mentoring, and really helping to make sure that our students are staying the course as they move through. Then we get to graduation, and what the data tells you is that a Black student with a college degree is going to earn less than a majority student with the same degree. So that means that your relationships with employers who are interested in hiring your students have to be more intentional. That means that your students have to have internships in environments that are ready to receive them, that appreciate difference, that welcome diversity. And so that when they go into those jobs, the salary is consistent across the board, and the experience they have in the workplace will also be consistent.

Ruth Watkins [00:13:47] You know, I really want to dig into that equity in first jobs problem that you highlighted. And when I was a president at University of Utah, I would visit our corporate, major corporate sponsors and partners in the region, and to a

person, they would say to me, “Ruth, if you don't produce more diverse graduates in these STEM fields, we aren't going to be able to keep our headquarters here. We're facing pressure. We want to hire diversity.” And of course, I wanted that, too. You are pointing out that they have a role in this as well. Tell me more about that.

Z Scott [00:14:26] So the data tells us, you know, this, “I can't find the resume.” Or, you know, we've heard that over and over again, not only when it comes to diverse ethnic diversity, but also gender diversity. Diversity is right under your nose. I mean, we're sitting in Chicago on the south side of Chicago, and we are one of the biggest producers of Black graduates in the state, but yet our corporate engagement has got to be focused on and promoted in order for it to happen. But once people engage with our students, the interest in Chicago State for talent becomes also almost insatiable. For example, we have a partnership with a global PR firm, and they created a boot camp within one of our existing courses. And as a result of that boot camp, five of our students went into their workplace for internships, and then those students who were graduates, two of them got full-time jobs. And now the same company has come back to us and said, “we want to teach our own course. We're lacking diversity in so many fields within our company, so we want to build it ourselves.” It's that kind of intentional partnerships that's going to really change the trajectory.

Ruth Watkins [00:15:48] Yes, I think what a fabulous example, because the big question on this is, how do we scale and sustain this change and this energy? Do you have advice for fellow presidents on that topic, and/or your corporate leaders?

Z Scott [00:16:02] Well, first of all, like I said before, it has to be very intentional, and it has to be focused and you have to put resources, time, and sometimes money behind it. You can't expect a student who's living below the poverty level to take an internship with you in the summer and not pay them. So you have to provide that kind of support to make sure the person can get to work, that they have the resources they need in order to be productive.

(Music)

Ruth Watkins [00:16:44] Tell me about the big vision you have for Chicago State, maybe it's 2025 or beyond.

Z Scott [00:16:50] Well, the big vision for Chicago State is that we will be widely known for what we are doing well. And as I said, you know, we are sometimes the state's and the nation's best-kept secret. And so that's part of our strategic plan. Also, we're focused on academic excellence and, again, student enrollment and retention. And we're also focused on our culture and we're very much focused on our relationship with our community. We are the largest employer on the south side of Chicago. We sit on the largest landmass in the city on the south side of Chicago. So that tells you what an influence — an outsized influence — we should be able to have on economic development in our community. So part of our strategic plan has a very outsized focus on community engagement. One of our communities near us recently committed a

quality, or finished, a quality of life plan. Chicago State has been written into the quality of life plan. We have a new memorandum of understanding with our transit system that sits near our campus for a \$19 million renovation that's financed by transit dollars. And that transit stop has set basically in disrepair for over 30 years. But through the influence of Chicago State, they've now agreed to renovate, and it will benefit not just Chicago State, but all of the community. It really is about using who we are to benefit everyone.

Ruth Watkins [00:18:24] Let's build on that just a little bit. It seems like you are thinking so much more than the university as just a place of learning, instead thinking about the infrastructure that you need to build out around you as an anchor institution in your community. So talk more about that.

Z Scott [00:18:44] You know, there's a saying: To whom much is given, much is expected, and Chicago State is a tremendous resource. We sit on 161 acres of land on the south side of Chicago. We have some of the most intelligent, smart, and engaged community-sensitive faculty in the country. We're 73 percent diverse. That's a high level of diversity for any college campus. Just think about the fact that all of, you know, most of our faculty members are Ph.D.s. They are active in their areas, are active in research, and writing, and in student engagement. So we have so much to give, so we should get about giving it.

Ruth Watkins [00:19:28] Are you getting the help you need, Z?

Z Scott [00:19:32] It depends on who you're talking about (laughing). Do I, you know, you know you've been there, Ruth. No university president would ever say, "I have all the money I need. I have all the resources I need and my buildings are spectacular." I will tell you there are so many critical infrastructure needs on my campus, and that comes from the need to update our laboratories, the need to overhaul some of the crumbling fixtures that still live and exist with us. There are, you know, we have tremendous infrastructure needs on our campus, and we have needs that some of our curricula, we want to focus on. We want to focus on making sure our students have the latest when it comes to artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data analytics, all of those kinds of sophisticated programs that some universities can stand up overnight. We need resources to support some of that curricula-building.

Ruth Watkins [00:20:33] Yes. And I, you know, I think as I reflect on the narrative around Chicago State over time, you are so energetic, visionary, and so much ahead for this important institution, its community. For such a long time, the narrative around Chicago State was one of the school's deficits — low graduation rates, low completion rates and, tell me about how that coverage is perceived, how you feel about that coverage.

Z Scott [00:21:04] Well, first of all, I think that the negative narrative about the university is unfair. If you look at the outsized influence we are having on the lives of our students and every data point I talk to you about, when it comes to our students, creates a barrier

to college access and completion. And the fact that given our size, that we are able to produce one in 10 Black graduates in the state tells you that the negative narrative needs to move in another direction because of the incredible positive influence we're having on the lives of our students. It is not easy to be in the top 4 percent of all colleges and universities for economic mobility. Something right is going on in our campus. We're number one in the Midwest in producing diverse graduates for doctoral degrees in pharmacy. So the narrative needs to shift from half empty to half full when it comes to the conversation about Chicago State.

Ruth Watkins [00:22:11] Nothing is more important than what you're doing, and I think also maybe thinking about with me, why do you think that unfair coverage took hold and became the narrative without seeing the whole story?

Z Scott [00:22:27] I think that what America has acknowledged, what many Americans have acknowledged, is that when it comes to how we have treated our Black citizens, that it is nothing short of systemic racism. And if you start with the narrative that appreciates that bias exists in news coverage, in assumptions, and in outcomes, then you can get to some of the answers. But I am hopeful. I am so incredibly hopeful that given the outpouring of support that we have received post George Floyd, that there has been a shift in how we look at the experience of our Black citizens.

It is not a crime to be poor. Many students do not choose low-performing schools to attend. But that has been the experience of many of our students coming from some of the most, you know, some difficult neighborhoods. But when they come on our campus, we're one of the safest campuses in the state and they have this quality education experience and they're exposed way beyond what sometimes their Zip codes and their income status would permit. You can see how things can change.

Ruth Watkins [00:23:50] Certainly, we have so much more work to do, and we are acknowledging that higher education has not served everyone equally and everyone well, you're doing that work every day. I don't want to overreach, but I do want to acknowledge some of the things you've said, which are maybe we're at a turning point. Maybe the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests around our country have made people wake up, step up, and step in. Are you optimistic about this moment and do you think real change can happen?

Z Scott [00:24:26] I always have to be optimistic because without it, what else do you have? What else can you promote if you're not optimistic about the future?

Ruth Watkins [00:24:37] I think it's kind of a lonely, hard job being a university president, having been one.

(Laughter)

Z Scott [00:24:46] That's another show and another podcast, right?

Ruth Watkins [00:24:49] Well, we'll try to just go at this from the perspective of clearly you have incredible energy and passion for what you do. What keeps you going in those lonely kind of sad moments?

Z Scott [00:25:02] You know, I don't dwell on valleys, because if I did, I wouldn't be where I am right now. I grew up in the Jim Crow South. I was the product of lawsuits that led to integration. My mother and father were educators. My mother retired as a high school librarian. What they really promoted was the value of education. And so what keeps me going and what drives me every day is pushing our communities and our country to equity. And as you can look at my resume, it includes a long stint as a federal prosecutor, which tells you how much I love and care about this country. We can be better. We can do better. And so, like I said, it's a story of hope and resilience.

Ruth Watkins [00:25:58] And on that note of hope and resilience, what's Chicago State's role as we look to the future?

Z Scott [00:26:05] Well, first of all, I always tell people a strong Chicago State is a strong Chicago, a strong Illinois, and a strong United States. So the idea that we must think about ways that we can strengthen and sustain an institution like Chicago State, and it has an important role in the higher ed ecosystem and in the sustainability of our city and our state. So I think what we have to think about is what we can do to strengthen Chicago State.

(Music)

Ruth Watkins [00:26:45] That was my conversation with Z Scott. 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.