

**Higher Ed Rewired**

**Season 1, Episode 8**

**National Higher Ed Leaders Share: What's Next for Student Success?**

**Host: Oliver Wang**

**Guests: Alexandra Bernadotte, Founder and CEO, Beyond 12**

**Doug Lederman, Author and Editor, Inside Higher Ed**

**Michelle R. Weise, Senior Vice President, Workforce Strategies & Chief Innovation Officer, Strada Education Network**

As a thought-provoking conclusion to season one, Higher Ed Rewired highlights a conversation on the future of higher education between three national higher education innovators and experts. Doug Lederman, Michelle Weise, and Alexandra Bernadotte tackle big questions like: How is higher education keeping up with our changing society? How can we change the way we support students to and through college? What is the relationship between higher education and the workforce? Where does higher education go from here? Listen in on this conversation on the changing landscape of higher education and reflections on what must happen to ensure student success in the future of our colleges and universities.

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Oliver Wang:

If there's one point we mention a lot here on Higher Ed Rewired, it's that college students are changing... and universities are trying to keep up with that change.

[music re-post - and under]

As we wrap this first season of our podcast, we talk with three national higher-ed thought leaders, who have some rather provocative thoughts on where we should be going.

ALEXANDRA BERNADOTTE

"Our system isn't broken. It was deliberately designed to ensure that power and influence remain the purview of a few."

DOUG LEDERMAN

"I don't think most institutions have felt enough pain to have to change. I think that's starting to change."

MICHELLE WEISE

"This whole idea of the non-traditional learner has just become moot. Most of our learners, most of our college going population, in fact, over 70% of them fit into the descriptor of a non-traditional student."

OLIVER WANG: On today's episode we ask: how can higher education keep up with where our students need to go?

I'm Oliver Wang. And this is Higher Ed Rewired.

[MUSIC POST]

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country. Each episode looks at exciting innovations taking place across the Cal-State -- Transforming the landscape of higher education for the 23 campuses and half a million students.

[MUSIC - FADE OUT]

INTRO:

OLIVER WANG: Welcome to Higher Ed Rewired. I'm Oliver Wang — professor of sociology at California State University Long Beach.

In our first season, we've looked at a number of innovations aimed at helping more students get college degrees.

For example, we learned how faculty reimaged math classes to help students graduate on time. And, how Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence helped to improve student retention and success rates.

We also learned about the lives of students themselves, how addressing basic needs such as food and housing can keep them in school... And that understanding the particular needs of first-generation college students can help them feel like they belong on a university campus.

But on this episode, we want to pull the scope back... What HAS changed in higher education... and how will universities need to evolve in the years to come?

These questions were literally on stage this past November at the California State University's Graduation Initiative 2025 Symposium held in Sacramento.

[post -AMBIENCE OF SCENE]

"Good afternoon everyone. (applause) Thank you to..."

The two-day event included three national education leaders who offered their insight on the future of higher education.

First -- we'll hear from Alexandra Bernadotte -- founder and CEO of Beyond 12 -- a non-profit that aims to increase the number of traditionally-underserved students who graduate from college.

Bernadotte took the stage in front of a room full of students, faculty, college administrators and higher education thought leaders. She identified herself like this:

**ALEXNDRA BERNADOTTE:**

I am an immigrant. I am the first person in my family to graduate from college. I am a Pell grant recipient. And English is my third language. I was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, and I grew up in inner city, Boston. I was raised by my parents, and my beloved grandmother, mommy Claire, who by the way is still alive. She's 104 years old.

Even though my parents didn't go to college, they stressed the importance of an education and a college degree in particular, as key to moving me and our family out of poverty. I went to Dartmouth sight unseen.... I completely bombed my freshman year. Even though I had a resume that indicated incredible preparation. I struggled with every aspect of college life, from the academic and the financial, to the social and the emotional. After the fall of my sophomore year, I was academically suspended and asked to take a leave of absence. With the generations of sacrifice, and my entire family's hopes and dreams hanging in the balance, I was in crisis.

Luckily, after taking some time off, I was able to return to Dartmouth with a new game plan. I reached out to friends and peers, I discovered that I wasn't alone that they too were struggling with the support of my family, but most importantly, the support of two mentors who bound their lives to mine and said not on my watch. I was able to turn things around. I regained my footing. I graduated from Dartmouth in four years, and I went to Stanford for graduate school.

While my story has a happy ending, we know that it doesn't always end that way. Each year, hundreds of thousands close to millions of students with backgrounds and stories similar to mine, embark on their college journeys, believing like I did, that they are prepared for the road ahead. But the statistics tell us otherwise. I don't have to tell you what the statistics are. But I will Only 9% of students from the lowest income core tile can expect to earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s versus 77% of their higher income peers. African American students are in bachelor's degrees at one half, and Latinx students at one third the rate of white students. Students from homes where neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree are twice as likely to drop out before the start of their second year as a student with at least one college educated parent

**OLIVER WANG:**

That's Alexandra Bernadotte. She went on to say that she founded her non-profit -- Beyond 12 - - to improve those outcomes.

Using contemporary methods such as mobile apps and data analytics -- they've achieved an 85-percent success rate with the students they've coached.

Bernadotte talked about one particular student: Yesenia -- a first-generation student from Oakland who almost quit college after failing remedial math... TWICE...

But Yesenia got coaching -- stuck with it -- and graduated in five years...  
Here's Bernadotte again.

ALEXANDRA BERNADOTTE:

What if I told you that there is a 23 years span between my matriculation to college and Yesenia's matriculation? Why are we still having the same conversations about equity?

So I've been asking myself that question...and I'm asking lots of folks in the field. I'd love to share a couple of insights that we've learned so far. So the first thing is that our students are creative, resourceful, and whole. So many of our programs start from a deficit model. We tell our students that they are low income, that they are high risk. We tell our students that they are underprepared. As if the fault lies with them, and not with the education system that has consistently failed them throughout their lives.

We don't appreciate the assets that they bring to our campuses. So rather than start from this deficit based model, what if we acknowledge their perseverance, and treated their persistence and everything that they brought to our campus as assets. The second lesson learned our students to not experience their college as a linear path.

They talked to us about experiencing College in modes and if they are in an uncertain mode or a crisis mode, it doesn't matter if that moment happens in year three, or year four, they are just as close to the dropout line and just as vulnerable as if it happened in year one. A lot of times we Front Load the support, believing that if we can just get them through the first semester, where the first year that they will be okay. But what our students are telling us that the game changer is not time, but it's comprehensive support from the entire institution, from the time that they matriculate until graduation and entry into the first job.

The third...Our students have told us that they need three different kinds of support, navigational, transactional and inspirational. They've told us that we can automate the navigational and the transactional, they don't need a human for that. So let's reserve our humans for the support that is uniquely human. It's the inspirational Am I college material? Do I belong here? We need both, particularly if we're going to achieve equity at scale. Right. Humans can't scale but apps can't empathize.

The last one and probably the most profound one for me, systems achieve the outcomes. They are designed to achieve. For so long, I have been saying that our education system is broken and we need to fix it. Our system isn't broken. It was deliberately designed to ensure that power and influence remain the purview of a few.

It was deliberately designed to ensure inequitable outcomes. It is not a mistake, that at 38 of the most selective us colleges, more students come from the top 1%. Then from the entire bottom 60% ---This is in equity by design. So if we want to achieve equitable outcomes for all students, we have to do more than just educate students to thrive in our current system. We need to

inspire them and provide them with the tools to critically look at our current systems dismantle and to build new ones....

...At this stage, the question that I ask myself every day and that I'm going to ask you, what more will you do to ensure equitable outcomes? What more will you do to close those college persistence and graduation gaps? And I'd like to acknowledge the progress that we've made and the progress that everyone in this room has made already. But I would argue that it is not enough if we're not able to close those gaps. What more will you do so that in 23 years, one of our first generation college students isn't standing on this stage, telling you their story. And reflecting on the fact that in 23 years, nothing has changed for first generation college students. I would argue that equity is no longer just a moral imperative. My stance is that our country and our democracy depends on it. Thank you so much.

OLIVER WANG: That was Alexandra Bernadotte -- founder of the non-profit Beyond 12... throwing down the gauntlet.

Of course the big question is: WHY has there not been MORE change?

Trying to tackle that question was Doug Lederman, the co-founder and editor of Inside Higher Ed -- a preeminent publication for higher education leaders. He says the way universities are structured presents a unique challenge in rapidly changing times.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

The decentralized nature of higher education has been a historic strength. While the Cal State is obviously an example of a system within a larger ecosystem, but we do not have a system of higher education, we have 3000 largely independent operators... But I think it's becoming a disadvantage, it is very difficult to get systemic movement in a non system. We are in part in a situation in which people are doubting the efficacy of higher education, because higher education hasn't been used to being asked and hasn't developed the mechanisms for measuring itself and then reflecting that outward

That's just got to change. The last sort of impediment is complacency. You can use lots of words for it: inertia. I believe that most of us as individuals do not change unless and until we have to... And so it's sort of not surprising that our organizations operate the same way, especially when things have been sort of working. Now we have terrible equity gaps. So higher education hasn't been working for everybody. But if you've had enough people coming through the door and the impetus to change -- I mean, that's a partial answer to Alex's question about why we're still having certain conversations. I don't think most institutions have felt enough pain to have to change. I think that's starting to change. And I don't wish it on anybody. But I think that maybe where we are...

...I am starting to see some new organizations and new structures crop up, that have the potential to sort of be mission oriented and to drive to sort of collective action, collective

behavior. And I think that's got to be part of the future much more than it has been. Very few institutions are going to be able to afford to be islands unto themselves going forward, and either to continue to do what they've been doing, or certainly to be better and stronger.

OLIVER WANG:

That's Doug Lederman - editor of Inside Higher Ed.

So we know universities must change... but what should that change look like? That's the topic that our final speaker tackles...

Michelle Weise is chief innovation officer at Strada Education Network -- a non-profit focusing on improving the link between what college students learn and what employers need. Weise paints a portrait of a future in which learning is truly life-long.

MICHELLE WEISE:

We can already sense that the future of learning is going to feel different because we're seeing our learners change right in front of our eyes. Right? This whole idea of the non traditional learner has just become moot. Most of our learners, most of our college going population, in fact, over 70% of them fit into the descriptor of a non traditional student. They are stitching together multiple part time jobs to make ends meet, or they're working full time. They have families, they have caregiving responsibilities. They are tied to a geographic region. They have a lot of life that gets in the way of their pursuit of learning.

Then we have to square that kind of data with what we hear from experts on aging and longevity and futurists who keep claiming that the first people to live to be 150 years old, have already been born. Let's just sit on that for one moment. Does that mean our work lives are going to become 80 or 100 years long. Right? Suddenly the idea of some sort of linear path from education to work, and retirement seems deeply inadequate. As this idea that somehow two, four or six years of learning on the front end of a 100-year work life -- that just doesn't seem to hold...

We already know from data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that even early baby boomers are experiencing 12 job transitions by the time they retire. We can only extrapolate how many more job transitions, we can all expect to navigate in the future... But then we think about the systems that we have at our disposal. Our current Education and Workforce Training Systems are ill suited to necessarily take us into the workforce of 2030 or 2040. and navigate Those 15 to 20 transitions that may be, we might have to expect. The systems are brittle, they are rigid, we don't have a lot of on and off ramps available...

...We are going to have to harness the power of education, over and over and over again throughout our working lives. Education is not that one and done experience, experienced on the front end of our longer work lives. And we have to think about how are we going to actually facilitate these very smooth transitions for us in that future we are going to be confronting. We pay a lot of lip service to this concept of lifelong learning. We agree with it conceptually. But we

need a new investment thesis, we need to actually invest in the systems and the infrastructure and the architecture to help us move in and out of learning and work.

Because what is happening is we are already leaving behind a huge swath of our American population. Today we have 44 million Americans who are working age, they are jobless or underemployed, they are not thriving in the labor market. They are not earning a living wage. They are earning less than \$35,000 per year as an individual or less than 70,000 for a family of four. And we are leaving them behind. And what is really striking is that these learners who have only a high school degree and no postsecondary are 50% more likely to live in poverty than those with a little bit of postsecondary training. And the effects are huge in terms of generational effects. Because from MacArthur Genius Award winner, Raj Chetty's work, we know that only two out of 25 children who are born into low income households actually make it to the top rungs of the economic ladder. But he also tells us through his research that if we were to do more to uplift more women, more minorities and children from low income families, we could actually quadruple the innovation rate in the United States. So we could have a society that would flourish.

We know that the future is already here, but it is unevenly distributed. We have to begin prototyping toward that virtuous cycle of learning and work. The future is here but we cannot include clinging to the status quo as part of how we move forward. We have spent enough time admiring the problem. It is time to build. Thank you. (applause)

OLIVER WANG: That's Michelle Weise. She's chief innovation officer at the non-profit Strada Education Network.

All three of our speakers participated in a forum during Cal State's Graduation Initiative 2025 Symposium -- held in Sacramento this past November.

After they spoke... they took audience questions. We're going to feature one of those interactions... here's the question from California State University Board of Trustee Lillian Kimbell and what she wanted to know was this:

POST – QUESTION

LILLIAN KIMBLE:

Not to put you on the spot, but give us some concrete bit of wisdom, because you've all studied different things and have different experiences, that can help us move forward with this incredible institution, the CSU.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I don't think I have any wisdom, go ahead. (chuckling)

MICHELLE WEISE:

I don't have wisdom, but I...the thing that we try to think about as we as we think about envisioning this new learning ecosystem... we need better assessments and tools and



resources for us to understand: when I, as a 45 year old male truck driver who's been doing this for 20 years and is suddenly seeing his job become obsolete, how do I understand all the capabilities and assets that I bring to bear with that 20 years of experience? None of it is codified in any sort of formal credential. But I have lots of hidden skills and credentials....

...And then, you need precise education. Sometimes more college or more graduate school is not the answer. Sometimes it's going to be that boot camp or some sort of alternative learning provider or a cluster of competencies here plus a MOOC there. I need a way to find and navigate my way through that.

And I also need the right kinds of human and tech enabled 360-degree supports to get me there because I failed out of college many times before, and now I have kids to take care of -- how am I going to stay accountable? How am I going to find childcare, transportation? And then I need to make sure that as I take that it's going to be understood by an employer, that this signal is going to mean something, that it's not just something that I'm taking, and I'm wasting my money on, but it'll give an employer the understanding that they can take a chance on me and hire me.

ALEXANDRA BERNADOTTE

...Wow, what would I add to everything that you've already said that so comprehensive. I guess something different is to also think about: as institutions, that institutions try to go at it alone, right? And so I guess my plug would be: think about partnerships, right? Think about partnering with other organizations that have the core competencies, that are doing some of this work really, really well, that are outside of the institutions, right? So what do those kinds of coordinated efforts and coordinated partnerships look like? So that you don't have to develop the expertise in house?

DOUG LEDERMAN

So one of the things I guess that is important to say in all this is that the goalposts have moved. We, society, are expecting so much more from these institutions than they ever have. And that's part of why, I mean...when I talk to audiences of corporate, tech people and all that, defending higher ed to the hilt. So, I do think it's important when I'm talking to a higher ed audience to acknowledge that what is being asked of you: to provide mental health coverage and care, and childcare and emergency grants so people can fix their tire and fix their car -- let alone making sure that people are prepared for jobs. So, again, it is not surprising that higher ed is struggling under the weight of all this. This is an enormous set of obligations, some of which are pretty recently added to your plate. So, I guess I would say, I just wanted to make clear a lot is being expected some of it reasonable, some of it not. And frankly, you just got to deal with the cards you're dealt.

[music - sneak in]

OLIVER WANG: That was Doug Lederman, before him Alexandra Bernadotte and Michelle Weise.



[POST - MUSIC - AND FADE UNDER]

On the first season of this podcast we've explored some of the innovations that are dealing with those cards dealt -- as Lederman put it.

And in our second season -- we'll continue that exploration -- examining ideas that can transform students' lives by improving equity, access and graduation rates.

This includes promise programs. They're partnerships between k-through-12 schools and colleges, ensuring students have a place at a four-year university.

And we'll visit Project Rebound -- a program designed to support formerly incarcerated students.

That and more is coming up on our second season - which gets under way this spring.

CLOSING:

Higher Ed Rewired is produced by the California State University Office of the Chancellor. This podcast is made possible, in part, by the support of the College Futures Foundation: *more graduates for a thriving California*. Learn more at 'college-futures-dot-O-R-G'. To hear more stories like this, subscribe at [HigherEdRewired.com](http://HigherEdRewired.com), iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts.

OLIVER WANG:

I'm Oliver Wang, and from all of us here at California State University -- thanks for listening.

[MUSIC POST AND OUT]