Royel M. Johnson (00:00):

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples, panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash, and all indigenous nations, tribes, and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore (00:20):

In 3, 2, 1.

Royel M. Johnson (00:29):

Greetings, ASHE family, [00:00:30] and welcome back to another episode of the Ash Presidential Podcast, focused on purposes, politics and practices. That's a mouthful. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, associate Professor of Higher Education and social work at the University of Southern California and director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates. And shout out to the Rossier School of Education and my dean, specifically Pedro Noguera, for being a sponsor this year of the podcast. And I have the privilege of working with my dear friend who needs no introduction, [00:01:00] Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore (01:02):

Hi, I am your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, associate professor at Old Dominion University in the higher education and community college programs. And the only thing I direct is my anxiety. So we are excited to keep the conversation going. We're grateful to be back from last year, and so we're going to discuss today various elements of the purposes, politics [00:01:30] and practice of higher education. Specifically, we have some dynamic scholars here today and historians of higher education that will be having some dialogue with us and talking with us as we have a conversation about the purpose of higher education and the intended and unexpected outcomes of higher education. So we're pretty much asking what can we learn from what we already know and what can we expect in this next great era of higher [00:02:00] education?

Royel M. Johnson (02:01):

Join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Bryan Brayboy, is the new dean of Northwestern University School of Education in Social Policy, my home state of Illinois. And we also have Dr. Linda Eisenmann, who is a professor of education and history at Wheaton College and former ASHE president. So look, we start off every episode of the podcast [00:02:30] with an icebreaker. We call it this or that.

Felecia Commodore (02:32):

Okay. So Bryan, I'm going to start with you. I know that you are like me, a Quaker. You went to University of Pennsylvania, and so my question for you has to deal with Philly sports teams. So would you prefer the Phillies or [00:03:00] the Eagles?

Bryan Brayboy (03:00):

E A G L E S. Eagles.

Felecia Commodore (03:04):

Eagles. Yes. Go Jalen Hurts.

Royel M. Johnson (03:09):

Very nice. So Linda, I know that you are into sixties and seventies music, so I have two historic iconic groups for you to consider. The Beatles or Rolling Stone.

Linda Eisenmann (03:24):
Oh my gosh. I have this argument with my four and a half year old grandson. He has a Rolling Stone [00:03:30] shirt and I gave him a Beatles shirt and his parents have taught him to say, just to get me upset, "Rolling Stones are better than the Beatles." Clearly this child is wrong. Clearly I have ruined my opportunities to be a good grandmother. Clearly the Beatles, but not only that as proof, I'm old enough that I actually saw the Beatles in person.

Royel M. Johnson (03:54):

Oh, wow.

Felecia Commodore (03:54):

Oh, wow.

Linda Eisenmann (03:55):

In Cleveland, Ohio.

Royel M. Johnson (03:56):

In Cleveland, okay.

Linda Eisenmann (03:57):

I always use that as when [00:04:00] we do a little holiday party with our education club students and they try to have trivia, they want to say, what would you not know about one of your professors? I give them that, they never get it. So clearly the Beatles. No question.

Royel M. Johnson (04:13):

Very nice.

Felecia Commodore (04:15):

Love it. Okay, so Bryan, the word on the street is that you are a soccer fan or football for our international listeners, if we have any. So my question for you is Manchester United or Manchester [00:04:30] City.

Bryan Brayboy (04:31):

Oh, wow. You've put me in the cross-hairs here, Felecia, because I've got two sons. One is a City fan and one is a United fan.

Felecia Commodore (04:40):

Oh, wow.

Bryan Brayboy (04:40):

If they listen to this, I'm in trouble, but I am always inclined to go with City.

Felecia Commodore (04:46):
Oh.

Royel M. Johnson (04:46):
Very nice.

Felecia Commodore (04:47):
I'm a Man U fan. We'll let it ride though.

Bryan Brayboy (04:51):
Oh, so we're one and one at this point.

Felecia Commodore (04:53):
One and one.

Royel M. Johnson (04:55):
Well, fortunately we may not be at risk of your kids listening to the podcast. I don't know if we have that [00:05:00] sort of appeal at this point, maybe in the future. So last one for you, Linda. And this may be skewed because you're historian, and so I know you all typically publish in a particular way. So article or book. Do you prefer to write articles or books?

Linda Eisenmann (05:16):
Well, before I answer that, I'm not sure that I can actually be with Bryan on this by his choice of Man City. I live with a huge Man U fan.

Felecia Commodore (05:24):
Linda's my people.

Linda Eisenmann (05:26):
But I do understand, I've got two [00:05:30] sons as well. So I know you're torn, but you answered it. You did the best you could. So for me, I would say historians tend to think in books, and I think I do too. It's not that we don't write articles and we're usually fashioning a couple of articles to get us started towards a book. So I enjoy both, but I would say I'm always thinking myself about books I want to write. I've got a couple of ideas. [00:06:00] I have one article in mind, but three books. So it's just kind of the way we do it. But you didn't ask how many I've written in the last five years, so we won't go there. We all know how long those take, especially for historians.

Royel M. Johnson (06:15):
Yes, yes, yes.

Felecia Commodore (06:16):

Well, great. So as we sit and ponder and maybe judge a little bit everyone's responses to the "this or that," we're going to get the conversation started and one that I think is beyond overdue at this time [00:06:30] in the higher education sector. So the purpose of higher education has been discussed, debated, and deliberated since the first colleges and universities were founded. However, recently, this debate and discussion has not only become a hot topic, but one that is guiding everything from federal legislation to funding decisions.

(06:54):

And so the question we see that's coming up a lot is what is the value of college? [00:07:00] Who should and shouldn't have access? And really questioning the mission of higher education and the role of equity in institutions fulfilling their said mission. And so as the mission and purpose of higher education is debated among its various stakeholders, we want to talk to Linda and Bryan about the purpose of higher education, the challenging social and political forces that impact colleges and universities from fulfilling their mission. [00:07:30] And how can we use this moment to chart a more equitable and just future? So let's get the party going with our first question.

Royel M. Johnson (07:39):

Sure. So maybe to kick us off, maybe you could just tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you have been engaged in.

Linda Eisenmann (07:47):

Felecia, that was a really great introduction to a lot of the issues, all of the issues actually that we're facing right now. And you're right that they're all balled up together. They're all mixed up together. It starts with purposes, [00:08:00] but it goes to value, it goes to equity, all of the things that you mentioned. So I would say just a little bit about background on me and how I got to this point in my career that might inform what I say today. I'm a first generation college student myself, for whom the opportunity to go to college was life-changing. And I think because it was, that has brought me to this field, I never knew that you could study higher [00:08:30] education. I was lucky that I got to higher education, but I didn't know you could study it and make sense of it, and think about, as you said, the purposes and the politics and the practices.

(08:40):

I was an English major for a while. I thought I was going to be a lawyer, all kinds of things. But it occurred to me that I was getting so much out of having gone to college that I wanted to devote a career there. And it was only later on that I realized, oh, you could study this. You can study politics of education and history [00:09:00] of education, all these kinds of things. So that's really the way that I've gone into this material to think about how is it and why is it that college can make such a difference for individuals, and how is this happened over time For me, I became a historian because to be perfectly honest, when I got into a history of higher ed class with Patricia Graham actually at Harvard, it all kind of fell together because I'd been an English major, studied some history along [00:09:30] the way.

(09:30):

So this kind of liberal arts background I had suddenly had a place in the study of higher education. So that's been what has guided my questions and my thinking about it. So I know we'll go into a lot more specifics, but just to jump into what I'm doing now that relates to arts topic for today, I probably will tell you about a course that I put together with a sociology friend of mine for first year students, a first year seminar course called 'What Good Is College?' [00:10:00] And we've taught this, I've taught it for three years in a row at Wheaton College. By the way, it's the Wheaton College in Massachusetts, unrelated completely to the Wheaton in Illinois. Were two completely separate colleges. Wheaton in Illinois is an evangelical school, Wheaton in Massachusetts is not. So just because people sometimes often get them confused, including students, but in this course, 'What Good Is College?', we have looked at the good of college in several different ways.

(10:29):

The [00:10:30] first being, what is college good for? Felecia, that's where you were getting us started. And how is college good? What does it do? How do you think about the meaning of grades, the meaning of course evaluations, the meaning of curriculum, the relationship of the extracurriculars, and even things like dining and those kinds of opportunities and housing that we're learning an awful lot about how important that is to students. And then because it's a first year seminar, we actually do a fourth unit, which has helped just for the students [00:11:00] to say, okay, you've learned all these things about college. How would you fix something? What needs to be fixed? And actually dining was one, mental health supports have been another. So that's the work that I'm doing right now, both as a teacher and I'm thinking about turning that into a book.

Royel M. Johnson (11:20):

Of course you're thinking about a book.

Linda Eisenmann (11:23):

Yeah. See, I told you. For other people to teach a similar course rather than just one more book about the good of college that [00:11:30] you pick up at the airport. So it's on the list.

Felecia Commodore (11:33):

That would be great.

Royel M. Johnson (11:34):

Wonderful. Thank you. How about you, Bryan?

Bryan Brayboy (11:37):

Well, I would buy that book.

Felecia Commodore (11:38):

So would I.

Bryan Brayboy (11:40):

Let me start by saying to you all that I'm coming from Evanston in Northwestern, which sits on the traditional homelands of the people that Council Three Tires, Ojibway, Potawatomi and Odawa, as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk. And I start that way because I'm a Lumbee [00:12:00] person, which really informs much of the way I think about my work. And I can just say to you in some ways, to Linda's point earlier, for me, my work and my thinking about what I do has largely been informed by what I've seen in front of me and my mom and my dad's experiences. So my dad plays baseball, graduates, they become teachers for a bit, and then my dad becomes [00:12:30] a naval officer in public health. We start following him around in all kinds of places. I went to three kindergartens for example.

(12:38):

We were moving a lot. And as it turns out, both of my parents ended up being activist. My father was a health activist and my mom was an educational activist, but in very different ways. These weren't folks who were marching, just to be clear. They both worked at some point for the federal government and utilized the structures of the federal government [00:13:00] to make available to native peoples the possibilities to start clinics, to access resources, to become doctors and dentists and nurses and affiliated healthcare responsibilities. My mom spent her life helping tribal nations and communities prepare teachers. What I've later written about is the idea of self-determinations to solve education, which is what does it mean to have our peoples educating us and what does it mean to have [00:13:30] our folks taking care of our health needs? And so the way I think about my work, if you just look consistently throughout the last 25 years, has been really focused on building programs that help create access for folks and the conditions for folks who often aren't welcomed into institutions of higher education to be there and to thrive.

(13:53):

I mean, I should say, even though my parents went to college, I showed up at UNC Chapel Hill [00:14:00] having no idea how to do college. And it wasn't until my junior year, end of my sophomore year, a friend of mine says to me, "You are working so hard, I don't understand why things aren't easier." And I said, "I don't know either." And so we talked and he said to me, "I want to talk to you about the rules and how this works." And so he helped me understand what a syllabus is, how to take notes, how to study. [00:14:30] And it just fundamentally changed my future by having someone just say to me, there are these rules. And no one had ever said that to me, and I just sort of thought, if I just show up and work like crazy, I'll be good.

(14:42):

And so for me, part of it is not just creating programs for folks to thrive, it's really about starting to expose the structures that allow individuals and by extension communities, because I'm really focused on community and broader work. It's not [00:15:00] that individuals are unimportant, but the movement and movements happen with groups of people rooted in relationships, it's just making some of those rules and resources more apparent and visible. So I think there are these assumptions that if you're a second gen college student you know that already, and what we know of course is that's not true. And so let's work to make those things more explicit.

Royel M. Johnson (15:27):

Bryan, your comment makes me think about higher [00:15:30] education as a culture. And so many students whose culture of origin is fundamentally different from how we operate in higher education. There's so many things that are endogenous to higher ed. What is a Bursar office? What is a office hour? If you're not inclined to sort of know what these things are, then you need assistance navigating this new sort of cultural terrain in ways I think so many people take for granted.

Felecia Commodore (15:57):

Yeah, I agree. And I had [00:16:00] sisters that went to school, college and my mom went to college and I still can remember having a co-op where my boss's husband showed me how to schedule classes so I could be successful. And it changed my GPA for the rest of my time. And I was like, this was something so simple that I just didn't even know I was just picking classes that I needed to take and not thinking about how to go together and things like that. And it's just those little things that can make [00:16:30] the difference between you being successful or, quote on quote, successful or not. And also, Linda, I fell into higher ed too. I wanted to be a music executive when I went to college and somehow took a wrong turn somewhere, ended up here. But thank you all for sharing that and talking about your work. And could you explain what you believe the core purpose of higher education is?

Linda Eisenmann (16:56):

I'm not sure these are exactly my own words, but they're words I really like.

Felecia Commodore (17:00):

[00:17:00] Okay.

Royel M. Johnson (17:00):

Okay.

Linda Eisenmann (17:01):

I'm working with some colleagues over the summer on our fifth year report for our accreditors in New England. And I noticed a line that one of my colleagues had done in a kind of an abbreviated way that I wrote down because I thought it was really cool. It's Wheaton specific in a way, I'll tell you, but that the purpose of higher education is to educate students for purposeful abundant lives and evolving [00:17:30] careers. Now let me parse that just briefly and then give Bryan a chance to weigh in. For me, the purposeful life is everything. It's about being a global citizen, is being a national citizen, is being a regional citizen. As Bryan said, it's recognizing that you're part of many communities and working on behalf of that community. So you need to understand through higher education sort of what is your purpose and how do you think about the purposes around you.

(17:58):

The abundant life is actually [00:18:00] kind of a religious thing, even though I mentioned Wheaton College is not evangelical, its motto is that they may have life and have it abundantly, which is from the Bible. And so we think about an abundant life which is really full for you. So not just only purpose isn't enough, but abundance. But tying in evolving careers I think is a recognition. And I know Bryan and I are going to talk about this historically, that a lot of people come to higher ed [00:18:30] for a job or to think about where they're going to go next. So it's not just for any career, it's evolving career and it kind of the purposes come back on themselves that just to me, just a career isn't enough. But I don't think I'm a very good higher ed professor or specialist if I ignore how many students and their parents are thinking about college for what the next step is. So that's...

Royel M. Johnson (18:59):

Absolutely.

Linda Eisenmann (18:59):

... private good.

Bryan Brayboy (19:00):

[00:19:00] For me. I think the core purpose of higher education is helping people ask meaningful questions and giving them the wherewithal to answer them. So for me, the seemingly simple purpose has really powerful resonance across a couple of areas. Aspirationally, it means that graduates are prepared to do whatever they want, whether it's to be a teacher or an engineer or a doctor or some other job that hasn't even been invented yet. It means [00:19:30] that there's economic viability. Asking good questions and answering them is a remarkable skill and it opens up all kinds of economic possibilities to be able to create lives of abundance where economies are concerned. I think asking and answering questions is civically really important. If we're asking questions about the world around us and deciding how we want to engage as informed citizens, it frankly I think makes society better. It allows us to be critical.

(20:00):

[00:20:00] And for me, I find a real power in asking why or even better how come? And this becomes profoundly critical because it creates conditions for if you ask these questions and people generally engage them, a why or how come, it creates the conditions for both sides to be thoughtfully engaged with one another. And then I think the last piece about this for me, asking questions and answering them takes us from being expert learners to expert doers. [00:20:30] It helps us engage in the process of service, I think to ourselves and our families, but also importantly to others. And that for me, there's something important about having this for ourselves but also in service to others to open up this question of abundance really.

Royel M. Johnson (20:49):

I love that last point, Bryan, that you mentioned about being able to ask good questions and shout out to Bill Trent at the University of Illinois, who was my professor, who is the reason [00:21:00] why I pursued doctoral study. He pulled me aside after class and said, "You ask good questions and pursuing a doctorate will give you the tools to answer those questions." And that has been the reason and motivation for me getting my PhD almost 10 years ago now. Gosh.

Felecia Commodore (21:16):

You didn't have to say that.

Royel M. Johnson (21:18):

So I'm glad that we're having this conversation in the current moment. The social political context right now is rife with so many challenges and things that aim to sort [00:21:30] of suppress the purpose and mission of higher education. Can you talk a little bit about some of those challenges and perhaps what opportunities there are for us to deliver on the purpose of higher education today?

Linda Eisenmann (21:43):

I wanted to come at it from something that I saw in the papers just two days ago, which is the most recent Gallup poll about people's confidence in American institutions. And [00:22:00] it turns out they haven't been asking for very long about people's confidence level of in higher education. They've been asking about the Supreme Court and Congress and public schools and such. But I actually wrote down, because I was so struck by it, they gave three different years. So again, this is a Gallup poll. Back in 2015, 57% of respondents said, "Yeah, I have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education." So 57%. Three years [00:22:30] later by 2018 was down to 48%. So less than half of people are saying a great deal or quite a lot. And then the 2023 figure is down to 36%.

Felecia Commodore (22:43):

Yeah.

Royel M. Johnson (22:43):

Wow.

Linda Eisenmann (22:44):

So only 36% of their respondents said they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education. And to me, this kind of crystallizes what we're talking about and what you've described as this challenging moment that [00:23:00] my biggest worry is that people generally, Americans, are losing faith in what we've just been talking about, and what higher education can do for individuals, what it can do for communities, what it can do for the country, literally what it can do for the world. And if you don't have faith that it can do that, and you're also concerned, well, will it even get me a job, then where's higher ed going to go? It doesn't have that base of support. [00:23:30] I mentioned earlier about the course we put together about what good is college and we think about college as a public and a private good. I believe it's a mix of both. But if the public isn't seeing it as an important public good and they're beginning to doubt it as a private good, then I think we've really got an issue on our hands.

Bryan Brayboy (23:51):

This is such an important inflection moment as I think lots of moments are for higher education. And I think to be perfectly [00:24:00] frank, we're losing the narrative here about what the benefits of higher education are. We've in some ways kind of succumbed to these larger political conversations about what colleges do and don't do, and there's a narrative that's certainly misguided, but people are consuming rapidly about the fact that what college does is just create wokeism and lead people to all kinds. I don't even know what that is, honestly. But it's become this really negative thing. And [00:24:30] so for me, we've got to get really clear about what that narrative is. You can see, I mean, I think that there are lots of inflection points. We're going to talk about the history of this, but in economic crisis in 2008 and nine, you see states really pull back on their support of higher education, and then our institutions continue to claw back at that.

(24:55):

There's increasing amounts of debt that students take [00:25:00] on, and yet we've not really kind of looked at, well, what are legislatures doing? Who appropriate money? So in some ways, there's a really interesting critique here about a focus on lowering taxes without a really meaningful set of conversations around what do those taxes do and what do they go toward? Because we pay taxes. I mean, we are in this larger social construct and contract, I should say. [00:25:30] The social contract suggests that if we pay into something, we will get something out of it. And if we have an educated citizenry and populace, what that means is they do everything from help care for us, whether it's care for our children or care for our health or care for the roads and the infrastructure of our local roads and buildings and the national ones. And somehow we've lost that in the narrative of what higher education is actually doing.

(26:00):

[00:26:00] Instead, what it's doing is helping us live longer lives. It's helping us have more abundant lives for some of us. I actually think that in some ways, one, we've not responded to the critique and the narrative very well, and two is I don't know that we have actually focused outward as institutions of higher education in a ways in which I think we should, in terms of responding to communities who need us to weigh in, they need our expertise, they need [00:26:30] for us to see them. I think there are lots of communities that frankly feel invisible and I think have become invisible to us.

(26:39):

So there's an opportunity here for us, us to ask our questions and get some clarity around purpose and to two of your Ps, purpose and practices, as a way to respond to the third P around politics because I think we're just missing it. So I think there are lots of opportunities, which I'm happy to [00:27:00] talk about here, but if we don't grasp a narrative here in a really easy functional way to say what institutions do is they invite the ability to have difficult conversations, to ask good questions, to answer them, and to be able to advance society in meaningful ways so that everyone's lives are better. We're in a whole bunch of trouble that's not going away.

Felecia Commodore (27:26):

No, that's really great. I'm glad you brought up the narrative because one of the things I [00:27:30] think I've always said we have challenges with as higher education scholars I think, is we all know these things that we're talking about the value of higher education and purpose, and I think we do a really bad PR job as people who have all this knowledge, I feel like we often are just talking to each other and we have kind of the information to shift the narrative. I just don't know that we always, as a field, understand how to take that narrative outside [00:28:00] of our own community and use it to go against kind of this anti-intellectual, anti higher ed kind of narrative that's clearly been having an impact based on what Linda shared. And I'm glad that you brought up the Gallup poll. I wanted to use that to kind of talk about, or lead us into our next question.

(28:22):

There was a Gallup poll a few years ago that showed us that black students that graduated from HBCUs had a higher [00:28:30] quality of life than black students who went to PWIs over a long period of time. And so just thinking about that, and you all were talking about the purpose of higher education and abundant life and communities and things of that sort. When we think about colleges, particularly minority serving institutions and community colleges and the role that they play not just for students but for the communities that they reside in, can we talk about that a little bit? How important are community colleges, [00:29:00] HBCUs, tribal colleges and universities? How important are they in the current moment and what might we learn from them in this moment?

Bryan Brayboy (29:08):

So I think they've never been more important, to be perfectly honest with you. So let me just sort of say this and hope that folks don't get overly worked up about it. I actually don't think that everyone should go to college. I happen to think that everyone should have the opportunity, however, to go to college and then make those choices rather than have our [00:29:30] institutions at an early age because of structures around how we think about what counts as knowledge and smarts and future opportunities. We should be preparing K through 12, pre-K through 12 students to make a choice about whether or not they opt in or not.

(29:49):

And then I also think we've got to get really careful about what the pathways are and ensuring that students understand and start to bright line pathways for [00:30:00] students in whatever choices that they make and begin to change some of what we think is important. So we often focus on graduation, which is important, but what happens if we think about the connections between graduation and wellbeing? Are we graduating healthy and whole students? What's happening with underrepresented students in these elite so-called elite institutions? I actually want to suggest that there's a whole bunch of elite things happening in the community colleges and HBCUs and TCUs [00:30:30] as well. So that's another set of conversations what those places do. One is they allow each of those three institutions, community colleges, HBCUs, and TCUs, allow students to move in some ways at a different pace. They allow us to be, in some ways, they force us to be a bit more pedagogical in terms of outlining the structures, but also helping students in terms of what it is they need to do.

(30:59):

The biggest piece [00:31:00] for me about what these institutions do is they create a profound sense of belonging and so that students get to actually enact their whole selves in the process. For those of us who've gone to predominantly white institutions with these long histories and these institutions that weren't frankly made for many of us is that we have to, in some ways contort ourselves. There are these rules, there are these structures that aren't easily shifted. Community colleges and [00:31:30] TCUs and HBCUs bake some of that into it.

(31:33):

Now I think we do a terrible job of funding these places and recognizing their profound expertise in preparing a next generation of leaders and doers and thinkers. I think vice president Kamala Harris and her connection to Howard opens up a whole new set of conversations about what's possible. And while she's the most prominent example, there've been lots of others who've gone [00:32:00] through those systems and those types of schools. So what does it mean for us to belong and to be able to bring our whole selves into this? We've got to do better. Schools, universities, institutions that are predominantly white and rooted in a particular set of epistemic beliefs can learn a whole bunch from these places.

Linda Eisenmann (32:21):

Bryan, I really like what you said about the fact that because of their missions and their approaches, HBCUs, TCUs, [00:32:30] community colleges take pedagogy and sort of bring it to a different level of importance and awareness, that sort of constant awareness. And I think you're right. We each had examples. Royel's was about moving into doctoral work, but Felecia had an earlier one. I've had students say the same thing, what's an office hour? I don't know what it is. Felecia said, she came from a family that had some experience, and yet there are still [00:33:00] so many things students don't know. Compound that if you're looking around and saying, "I don't really fit here." So as you said, Bryan, we have some models of how certain types of schools, privilege pedagogy, if you will, and say reaching out to these students and making them feel they belong.

(33:24):

I think it's harder in a community college because those faculty are moving [00:33:30] all the time. They don't have the kind of supports that I would have for example, at a place like Wheaton, where it's hard enough to reach all my students, but in my experience, colleagues who work in community colleges, and when I taught at UMass Boston for a long time, that a lot of community college faculty and administrators, they understand the mission of what they're trying to do. So they will reach out to students, they will make a difference. They will be the ones [00:34:00] who would say, as Bill Trent did for Royel, you asked some really good questions. Or if you try to think about, as you said, Bryan, why are you working so hard at this? So I think you are right. I was going to talk about their sense of mission, but I think you phrased it better in saying the way they honor and recognize the importance of pedagogy.

Bryan Brayboy (34:23):

Here's an opportunity is for these institutions to lead.

Felecia Commodore (34:27):

Yes.

Bryan Brayboy (34:28):

Places like Northwestern, [00:34:30] and to lead our other institutions, whether it's ODU or Wheaton or USC in interesting ways. And lead doesn't necessarily mean one is in front of the other. It really means who's steering ways of imagining what's possible. The other thing about this, and I can't actually speak to HBCUs because I'm not deeply embedded in it, but what community colleges and TCUs do is also make higher education accessible [00:35:00] in really important ways, not just pedagogically, but financially, which creates all kinds of issues because always hustling to be able to make things work even as students are finding opportunities and start pathways there. But what would it mean for us to be led in terms of how we think about pedagogy or to Linda's point in terms of mission?

(35:24):

How might we reimagine what our missions are, even if we're founded in 1701 [00:35:30] as an institution or earlier than that, is it time for us to think about what our mission might become and evolve to if we're working toward just futures, as you all encouraged us to do, we have to think about this a little bit differently. And so I think there's an opportunity there for that.

Felecia Commodore (35:47):

No, and I think that's really a great point, Bryan, and this might be controversial, but I did that last year and I still have a job.

Royel M. Johnson (35:58):

And you're tenure now.

Felecia Commodore (35:59):

I'm tenure [00:36:00] now. I've been taking it for a run lately, but it's very interesting to me. I even think that some of the practices or programmatic kind of initiatives that we've seen pop up for underrepresented groups or marginalized groups at PWIs, if we really unpack them, practices that were already happening at community colleges, at HBCUs, at tribal colleges [00:36:30] and universities, but because we don't often see them as models and leaders, these PWIs get a lot of the law for coming up with these innovative things and initiatives and practices. And I think a lot of the members of the HBCU community, TCU community, community college community are like, that's not new. We've been doing it for 30, 40 years.

Royel M. Johnson (36:56):

Literally.

Felecia Commodore (37:00):

[00:37:00] This PWI becomes the gold standard of this successful practice for these groups of students. And I think it comes back to that thing that you mentioned was we have made a decision about who can be leaders and who cannot be leaders or who can be models and who can't be models. And I do think that's something that we have to begin to turn on its head and really examine. I did want to take a moment kind of in the spirit of thinking about people kind of going [00:37:30] through spaces and acting like they know things, but maybe not. So I wanted to define pedagogy because we used it a lot, and I remember not knowing what that word meant for at least a year of my master's program and just being like, yeah, sure. For our listeners, pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching, and so just wanted to make sure I'm going to do that. But I think Royel has a question he wanted to ask.

Royel M. Johnson (37:55):

So I used to watch the news every day. I was a big Rachel [00:38:00] Maddocks fan, but every day there is a new attack on higher education, whether it's the attacks on racial truth telling and what pedagogies we can employ in the classroom to educate about the past and oppression, whether it's the attacks currently on diversity, equity and inclusion and diversity offices, and most recently affirmative action. How do the current attacks align with past subversive efforts? Historically, I think it's important that we're not ahistorical [00:38:30] and just sort of treat these as outliers, that there's a long history that's sort of a through line that connects these efforts. What might we learn from history about their connectedness?

Linda Eisenmann (38:41):

I think the important thing to keep in mind about the history of higher ed takes me back to what Felecia was saying a minute ago about just who gets to lead. It's always been the PWIs, the longstanding institutions. We know who the leaders are. Probably a lot [00:39:00] of us in our doctoral programs, if you are a doctoral student listener, read a book early on by David Reisman where he talked about the academic procession. He talked about a snake and certain leading schools were always at the head followed on down. We know who it is. So we are exactly right that we know who the leaders have been. But that's where the history helps us too, to recognize that it isn't just Royel that you've seen this particular attack before or [00:39:30] this or that, which we often have, but more that higher ed has always been limited in who it serves, how it serves them, who it supports.

(39:40):

It's been narrow as much as we might not like to think it's been narrow in its goals and its missions, and it has been exclusionary. It has been exclusionary from the beginning. If you're a historian of higher education like I am, that the early history of Harvard, Harvard would like to brag about the fact that there were poor students there [00:40:00] and we had students whose way was being paid. Well, yeah, we had a few. We did, and they were all nice white Christian men. So the history of higher education has been built around how do we keep a sense of exclusion, and when a group pushes long enough or hard enough for the zeitgeist change that we think, "Oh, maybe we oughta let women in." We change a little bit, but we can trace [00:40:30] that whole history. It's the activism. I really like what Bryan said at the very, very beginning, if you remember him describing his parents who were activists in a certain way, that's actually a whole stream of my own writing.

(40:44):

I look at women who were active in higher education in the late forties all through the fifties and the early sixties. So when we think about women's activism in higher ed, we think about, oh, after Betty Friedan in 1968 and 73 and Title IX. So I've [00:41:00] studied what was going on in the fifties, and they were the activists of the sort that Bryan described his parents. That is, I even quote, Esther Rauschenbusch was a president of Sarah Lawrence College in the late fifties, and she talked about it as our respectful way of working within the system.

(41:19):

So some activists realized that this system is there, we got to do something about it. So they've sometimes pressured from within, but why do we have TCUs and HBCUs? [00:41:30] We have them because we didn't want those students in mainstream higher ed. Just like women's colleges, those schools have built their own sturdy strand, but they started because they weren't welcomed, and that's why we have community colleges too. So that's a long answer as a way of thinking rather about specific times that racial truth telling or challenges to access occurred is just a kind of an overall framework [00:42:00] that it was always exclusionary.

Bryan Brayboy (42:04):

I'm a little hesitant to weigh in here with a historian on the line. I'm an anthropologist, so I'm going to be real careful and just say upfront that I'm not a historian, but I'm interested in it. And I want to say a few things about this. I want to tie a specific moment into this as I'm thinking about it, but in terms of just thinking about the UNC and Harvard cases, which [00:42:30] we just got recent opinions on, and in some ways what for me feels like an over-reliance on O'Connor's, what felt like actually a throwaway comment in 25 years in the greater cases. I think that there's something really important here when we start thinking about history in terms of when is the beginning and when is the start and what happens when those are very different kinds of things. So I started with a land acknowledgement.

(43:00):

[00:43:00] One is a way to think about the genesis of this place that I'm on. I mean, back over my shoulders, Lake Michigan, there've been indigenous peoples here forever. This was an important part of trading and a place of convening. So there was all kinds of learnings happening here forever, before Northwestern is established here, and there's a whole history of that. But if we think about land grants and we think about land grab [00:43:30] university that was written a few years ago, that demonstrates where the land for land grants came from in the indigenous communities. That's in some ways a beginning. And what happens now, we think about the current cases, is there's not a focus on the beginning, it's on the start. So what happens when you start at 2003, so 25 years from there. Without going back to the beginning, I think time [00:44:00] and larger questions of the linearity of time, but also the ways in which we disrupt time as we think about history becomes really important.

(44:11):

In the early eighties, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are the respective heads of England and the US. And they start engaging higher education as something that is about the individual and individual opportunities. And if you think [00:44:30] about, it was only 15 years before that, 17 years before that John F. Kennedy's encouraging us to ask questions about asking, not what our country can do for us, what we can do for our country. That shift, that values shift becomes really important in terms of what purpose higher ed serves. So of course, Linda's right, the institutions weren't made for us. I've written about that and I fully agree, [00:45:00] but there's also something about the shift about what the role of higher ed is and when is the starting point versus the beginning point that I think we need to start to interrogate. The goals keep getting moved and shifted. The purposes keep getting moved and shifted, and so we continue to have these roadblocks up that then create the condition so that folks can't actually access higher ed, let alone move it. And this move to destroy it is profound.

Royel M. Johnson (45:29):

Yeah. [00:45:30] Bryan, your point makes me think about the cultural clash that some students experience when they come to higher education, that higher education rewards and prioritizes in many ways, individualism, and the first to the finish line when you have folks whose culture of origin prioritizes community and collectivism, and what does it mean to show up at a place that is essentially asking you to devalue what you've been socialized to believe is the importance of education in [00:46:00] community uplift versus what we prioritize in higher ed.

Felecia Commodore (46:04):

And I like this idea of us thinking about what is actually the start or what's actually the beginning. And even in the recent decision that was made against affirmative action, one of the things I was having a conversation with someone is, "This didn't just pop up on us?" To Linda's point, higher ed was created to be exclusionary. And in some ways we've [00:46:30] been pushing to make it more inclusive. And at the same time, the system in itself has wanted us to push back against that in certain ways. And so if we really look through time, there have been slow erosion of this principle of diversity and inclusion that led us to this moment. I remember myself being in college and undergrad and marching in DC [00:47:00] for affirmative action with the Michigan cases, and I was like, wow, we were still here. We just knew we had won and we had moved on. But the reality is that system at its foundation is still created to reject at some point, there's a limit of how much inclusion it wants to handle. And so we always have to remember that and keep pushing against that.

Royel M. Johnson (47:27):

Oh my God, that makes me think about Derek Bell. [00:47:30] And what he talks about is peaks of progress that we sort of swing back and forth on this pendulum and we have what feels like Herculean sort of milestones. And he traces it historically from MLK birthday and how important it was to have a federal holiday designated to him. And then these other moments that are only met with regression shortly after, even in summer of 2020, all of these [00:48:00] companies committed a billion dollars to advancing racial equity, doing equity audits. And then shortly after we have the January insurrection that this sort of pendulum just swings back and forth.

Felecia Commodore (48:11):

And all of those folks are now losing their jobs. They were seeing this mass firing or layoff of all the DEI people that got hired during that time.

Linda Eisenmann (48:22):

And I would say, if I may, that some of the shrinkage is around finances and resources.

Felecia Commodore (48:29):

Yes.

Royel M. Johnson (48:29):

Yes.

Linda Eisenmann (48:30):

[00:48:30] Because I'm a historian who works a lot on the fifties and the sixties and the seventies, what I've come to believe is that in the sixties, so if we go back before Ronald Reagan and we think about the sixties and the Johnson years and the Higher Ed Act and all of this money, there was enough money, there were enough institutions, there was enough for everybody, and there was the will. There was the will, a belief in education, including higher education to make a difference. For example, on what they called [00:49:00] the war on poverty. So you go to the sixties, as I said, I worked at UMass Boston for a long time, and I think about these urban land grants, these schools that just boomed because there was enough money for everybody, everybody could get in.

(49:14):

But then as things start to tighten up for all kinds of financial reasons, Reagan being a little bit related to it, but we didn't do ourselves any favors by costing as much as we do. So as things begin to change, suddenly there's not as much room for everybody. [00:49:30] And there's a lot, especially if you're a private institution, large or small, but even some of the publics. So there's more competition for students who can pay, et cetera, et cetera. So that peaks of progress that you talked about, Royel, I think the sixties and the early seventies when it was flush, Richard Friedland calls it academia's golden age. I mean, there was money for everything. There was support for all, and students were just pouring in. And now we've got a long-term contraction that has happened. [00:50:00] And as I say, in many ways, our field has not done itself some favors

Felecia Commodore (50:05):

Agree. So what key lessons do you think we can learn as we reflect on all of these things from the past to inform efforts, as we mentioned before, charting a more equitable and just future in the purpose of higher education?

Linda Eisenmann (50:24):

I'm not sure this is a lesson from the past, but I think it's a lesson for us today, which is we have to have [00:50:30] more conversations like the one we're having right now for a wider variety of people. One of the things I like that ASHE has been doing in the last many years, I was ASHE president way back in 2008, was a long time ago, but ASHE, as Royel said, I think we kind of talked amongst ourselves. We talked to each other because our field was still pretty new. We have to remember how new the study of higher education is as a field. So we had things we had to learn from one another, but little by little, I think [00:51:00] ASHE as an organization as well as some others, I just think about some of the work with the early affirmative action cases and the effort to say, what do we know?

(51:09):

What do we know about what diversity means for students on a campus? Little by little, we have started to interpret what we know for the public. So I'm hoping that those of us in the field, not just people, but those of us in the field can become more comfortable talking about and [00:51:30] interpreting what's going on in higher ed for a wider understanding. So not in a way that someone reads our first line and says, "Oh," and writes us off because, "Oh, they're just being woke. They're just being woke." So we don't want to be written off if we mean what we say we met 30 minutes ago about pedagogy. We should be helping people understand these issues. So more op-eds. I was driving to my campus a couple of months ago and hearing this wonderful [00:52:00] program on NPR, so I know that would write me off immediately for some people, but this person was talking about, it was right after Florida was making its decision about what to do about the advanced placement tests on African-American history, the course.

(52:16):

And this person who they were interviewing was talking very thoughtfully about the history of education and how that fit in. And you have to listen for a while sometimes and say, who's that guest? It was Adam Latz, who's a colleague of mine who [00:52:30] does a history of education. And I thought to myself, what a great opportunity to have somebody like that who really knows history and could sort it through. So I think if we can be more comfortable, not assuming we have the answers, but Bryan's point about knowing what the questions are to ask and how to approach them, I think we can be more helpful, whether it's the use of history or whether it's our understanding of contributions around equity. So I think we have some work [00:53:00] to do is what I would say.

Royel M. Johnson (53:02):

What keeps you engaged in this work?

Linda Eisenmann (53:05):

So I'll give two answers. The first, if you could see me on this zoom and not just hear me, you would know that behind me is my prized set of about four bookcases full of higher education, don't laugh.

Felecia Commodore (53:19):

Lots of books, folks.

Linda Eisenmann (53:21):

Oh, this is after I downsized. I gave away 250 of them. But these are the ones that kind of made the cut, if you will, on the purpose of [00:53:30] higher education and the history. So my part A of answer is I stay involved in this work because it engages me with scholars like you three today, the people who are listening, like the members of ASHE, but all the people who are writing books. We don't stop with the questions. I love it when people say, "Oh, you're a historian. Well, facts don't change. So what's the big deal?"

Felecia Commodore (53:53):

Oh.

Linda Eisenmann (53:54):

I take it as a pedagogical teaching moment and explain that sure, facts don't change, but [00:54:00] do they? We talk about what a fact is. It's Bryan's point about a beginning versus a start.

Royel M. Johnson (54:04):

Yeah.

Linda Eisenmann (54:05):

So that's my first answer. I get a lot of joy out of being a scholar in a community with other scholars, but secondly, it's working with students and seeing that it does make a difference. I was mentioning before we came on air to Bryan that most of my teaching career when I wasn't being an administrator was teaching doctoral students, which I loved.

(54:29):

And [00:54:30] early in my career, I taught undergrad. So now that I'm finished being provost at Wheaton, for the last seven years I've been teaching undergrads. We have no doctoral programs or master's programs at Wheaton. And I wasn't sure how that would feel, would I feel that I was kind of in the thick of it, the kinds of questions that I just said. But it turns out that teaching is teaching and making a difference with individual students is making a difference, and I'm loving it. So for me, the joy comes also in working with 18 year [00:55:00] olds and 20 year olds and introducing them to these questions and seeing what questions they bring and how they're challenging me and the things that I'm learning from them. So that's my two part answer.

Royel M. Johnson (55:10):

Thank you. That's beautiful. How about you, Bryan?

Bryan Brayboy (55:13):

I wake up singing and I sing badly, but I sing. I go after it. I roll out of bed, and I'm just singing. I'm really an eternal optimist in spite of my responses here. So I just feel like there's something important [00:55:30] about being optimistic and kind of seeing possibilities in the world rather than barriers. It doesn't mean the barriers don't exist, but for me, all of these things generate and create possibilities. So if we're asking questions and we've got the wherewithal to answer them, we might think about how do we go around or through or break those things? And so I tend to see the world in the ways in which Linda started us with abundance, but also in a [00:56:00] world of possibility. But I also think the unique privilege of working in an institution of higher education is in some ways it keeps you young, and there's a necessity about the optimism because of where young people are and how thoughtful and smart they are.

(56:21):

These narratives about how young people aren't like they used to be. I don't know what young people, I sort of know what young people used to be, and this generation of [00:56:30] young people I'm working with are way better than where I thought I was. But you just see unbelievable promise in them and their commitments to each other and their commitments to what a just future might look like. And so for me, thinking about succession planning and with a fundamental understanding that these young people we're working with at some point are going to be in charge and have the reigns, what does it mean for us to create the conditions for them to be able to thrive [00:57:00] and to imagine and do differently? That's the best. That's me waking up and just starting to sing. And so that's the piece of it.

Felecia Commodore (57:08):

So one final quick question. How are you finding and creating joy these days?

Linda Eisenmann (57:17):

I think with Bryan, we're singing The Beatles. Remember The Beatles?

Felecia Commodore (57:22):

That's right.

Linda Eisenmann (57:24):

I'm ending on that one.

Felecia Commodore (57:25):

Okay. How about you, Bryan? Other than singing in the morning.

Bryan Brayboy (57:30):

[00:57:30] Long walks and deep breaths.

Royel M. Johnson (57:32):

Yes.

Felecia Commodore (57:33):

Yes. I love that.

Royel M. Johnson (57:34):

And what better place to do it than Lakeshore Drive on the beach.

Felecia Commodore (57:38):

Yes.

Royel M. Johnson (57:39):

South to Chicago. Thank you all so much for joining us for this conversation. It's an honor to be in community with you all and to learn so much. Thanks for agreeing to embark on this journey with us.

(58:00):

[00:58:00] Thank you to our guests, Dr. Bryan Brayboy and Linda Eisenmann for joining us today and educating us on the purposes of higher education, both historically and contemporarily, as we consider and chart new possibilities for the future of higher education.

Felecia Commodore (58:12):

At the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called scholar soundtrack as we reflect on what musical selections rang in our minds as we think about the day's conversation. Today, the song that came to mind was "Questions" by Common because as our guests share today, the more we grapple with the start [00:58:30] versus the beginning of a thing, how history gives us insight into the present and future, and what intended and unintended outcomes have occurred and will occur due to our action or lack thereof, we find that our questions lead to more questions. However, our hope is that as scholars and as a community will find the answers together.

Music Track - "Questions by Common" (58:52):

[Singing]

Felecia Commodore (59:00):

[00:59:00] Don't forget that there will be both a scholar soundtrack and syllabus for today's episode and all of the episodes in the ASHE Presidential Podcast series. The conversations lined up are going to be thought and inspiring. We're just getting started.

Royel M. Johnson (59:24):

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next week as we continue to discuss the [00:59:30] purposes, politics and practices of Higher Education with Dr. Dmitri Morgan and representative Harold Love. Until next week, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore (59:37):

I'm Felecia.

Royel M. Johnson (59:38):

Until next time, be fearless.

Felecia Commodore (59:40):

Be fearless.