

Policy 360- Episode 74 – How to Make College an Engine of Social Mobility - Transcript

Judith Kelley: Hello and welcome once again to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy and today I am thrilled to welcome Michael Sorrell to the program. Michael is the President of Paul Quinn College, and he has turned the historically black institution in Dallas into what he calls an "engine of social mobility." He became President of Paul Quinn in 2007. At the time it was struggling. There were more than a dozen abandoned buildings on campus. Michael has since been named HBCU President of the Year three time for his contributions to higher education, and this year he was named to Fortune's list fo the World's 50 Greatest Leaders. Welcome to Policy 360.

Sorrell: Oh thank you Dean, how are you?

Kelley: I am good thank you. For those who are not familiar with your story, briefly, what was the biggest challenge that you faced when you got to Paul Quinn?

Sorrell: The biggest challenge, candidly, that I faced when I got to Paul Quinn was the lack of hope. Institutions that are struggling institutions, don't become struggling overnight. It is the culmination of a long steep relationship with decline. And people didn't believe that transformation was possible. So, it was convincing everyone around us that not only was it possible but that it was inevitable. You know I like to tell people "you have to believe in the inevitability of your success." And it was getting people to see the inevitability of our success.

K: And when you came you also didn't just come to Paul Quinn you came to a community.

S: Yes

K: And you set out to meet the needs of that community. What did that look like?

S: So it was interesting. As a college president, and you know this as a dean, like you are expected to serve multiple communities, right? So, we had a community of alums, we had a community of students, and we had a community of faculty and staff, and then we had the larger community.

K: Yes

S: And for us, our pathway to success was never going to be seeing ourselves in a traditional narrow sense. So, when we began to define community, we looked across the landscape for a broader definition and said, "Well our community are going to be anyone from under-resourced communities anywhere in the world. All right?" But our special focus was urban ... people from urban communities at that point. And, you know, what we found were people who had needs that frankly, we had no, I had no experience in really addressing. And then we just decided that we were going to need to turn the entire institution outward and build an institution that would respond to the needs that people actually had in their daily lives.

K: SO you talk about urban, and you also talk about the new urban college model.

S: Yes

K: So, what is the new urban college model?

S: So, the new urban college motto combines experiential learning, uh, project-based learning with entrepreneurial ... I guess entrepreneurial thoughts and actions, and then something we call reality-based education. So experiential learning is the fact that we are the first urban work college in the country. It's an acknowledgement that over 80% of today's college students work more than 20 hours per week anyway. So, we might as well incorporate their need to work into the academic experience. So we provide jobs for all of our residential students, and then they have a pathway for applying what they've learned in class to a professional moment, you know, faster than anywhere else.

The second piece is in all of our classes we require our students to do group projects where they are focused on solving real world problems. And then the component of reality-based education is the Quinnite Arts which out take on the liberal arts. Every class requires students to write papers, so we call that writing across the curriculum. Every class requires students to get up and give public presentations, we call that speaking across the curriculum. Uh, every class requires students to think critically to solve real world problems, that's critical thinking across the curriculum. And then, every class requires student to demonstrate digital mastery and build digital mastery, and that's building digital mastery across the curriculum. So, we have taken the things that people need to know today with the things that they care about which is the practical realities of managing their day-to-day lives, and we've combined them to use that to create a model that responds directly to what people need.

K: So I want to talk a little bit about leadership. So, in an acceptance speech for being an innovative leader, in one of your many acceptance speeches for being innovative leader, you said that higher education is not a welcoming place. What did you mean by that?

S: Well, Higher education- So, I have a fundamental philosophy that I think everyone is who they were in 7th/8th grade alright? So if you were popular in 7th and 8th grade you live your life trying to maintain your popularity. If you weren't popular in 7th and 8th grade you sort of have a bit of a chip on your shoulder because you want to prove to people that you should have been right? Higher education, my experience has been, typically is comprised of people that might not have been the most popular people in their schools in 7th and 8th grade right? They probably were the smartest, and couldn't figure out how to have that translate. And so, what happens is, you get to a place where people define themselves based upon the, the "elite-ness" of their institution or the "elite-ness" of their ideas and that is fine, but the problem with that is in order for you to be elite it means you must look down upon someone else. Someone else is being judged to be substandard in order for you to be deemed elite. There are some unintended consequences to that mindset right? And one of them is you tend not to respond well to people who you don't think match your portfolio.

So, I arrive, I have no experience in higher ed, I didn't go to a historically black college, I had never worked at a historically black college, um, never mind the fact that everyone in my family did, I didn't, um [clarification] everyone in my family went to historically black college who went to college, and I didn't come to an institution, like, I wasn't coming to Duke, right? I came to what was determined at that point in time one of the worst institutions in America. So, there was nothing there that made people open their arms and say "Oh long lost brother welcome home" right? Now there were some people who were kind right? But by and large we were viewed with skepticism.

One of the things that I thought was just fascinating was, we were going through a process with something and it was clear that people were treating me as if I was at Paul Quinn because that was the only place that I could be. As if all of my accomplishments up until that point were somehow invalidated. And I had never experienced that before, right? Like I mean my entire life has been spent, you know, in the company of A-list moments, institutions, and people, right? This was the first time that I was in a non-A-list environment and to see how that experience translates, and you know for me I was like, "What the hell?" [laughter] Right? Like I mean, like I knew who I was right? And, but that experience was invaluable because what it did was it guaranteed that if I were ever inclined to become that person, that I would never be that person. And, I just think in higher ed we can do better, like how about we just judge people on the quality of their ideas and recognize that roses do grow from concrete, it doesn't make them any less beautiful.

K: Well, if we are who we are in 7th or 8th grade I would have loved to have gone to middle school with you. [laughter] Uh, so early in your days as a leader you met with college presidents and sought out their advice. What did they tell you? Was it useful advice? Were they on the right track or did you think differently?

S: So, there was some, just folks that were amazing. I mean, the, there was a segment of college presidents, and ironically it was those college presidents that were highly successful, that were incredibly kind to me and gracious with their time and their advice. I sought out fundraising advice from Patrick Swygert who was the president at Howard at the time and Gerald Turner who was the president at SMU, because I think if you're going to learn about fundraising go to people who are really, really good at it.

K: Right

S: They were fantastic. One of the best visits was, I took a trip out to Walla Walla, Washington and visited Whitman College, which is just this incredible community. First of all, it's no easy way to get to Walla Walla, Washington, right? Like I mean you go to Walla Walla, Washington you are committed to going to Walla Walla, Washington. And they were fantastic. I, I really enjoyed my visit to Portland State which is a fascinating urban college. I thought that, trying to think where else just really jumped out. I had a really interesting visit at Prairie View A&M which, you know, was doing some remarkable, remarkable work. Uh, It was just, the ability to sit and talk and talk and just see what things needed to look like, because for me it was a crash course in how to become a college president under really trying circumstances because, you know, we a year and a half away from closing. So, if I didn't get it right

quickly, you know, I was gonna be the last picture on the wall. We have, we used to have all the college president's pictures hanging up on the wall. And, you know, every day I would see the wall and my picture was the last picture on the wall, and I lived with the reality that if I didn't get this right, I would be the last picture on the wall. You know, the institution was founded in 1872. It survived reconstruction, it survived the depression, it survived Jim Crow. I did not want it to be incapable of surviving Michael Sorrell.

K: [laughter] Well you know it's interesting, I just finished reading a story about Stanford University and how the president of the university wrote in his report in around 1933 after the Depression, when the Depression had allowed the board of trustees to use Jane Stanford's own word -- that nothing should become subservient to the excellence of the university -- used her own words in a in a time of economic downturn to eliminate the cap that she had put in place on women. (Women had been kept at an enrollment of 500. and it was, it was devastating to the university let alone to the morale.) And in the, what he wrote in the report that year was, "Universities make advancement, make their greatest advancements, either when they have new money or no money" and so you were in a no money situation.

S: That's exactly right [chuckles]

K: And there is no choice. [chuckles]

S: You know I like to tell people "we were unencumbered by a history of success.

K: Yes [laughter] exactly. So, um, somebody gave you, you said the best advice you've ever gotten, uh is to lead with love.

S: Yes.

K: So who gave you that advice and what does that mean to you?

S: So, this is a story, not the most flattering story about myself, but it is the honestly to goodness truth. I, it was during the first summer I was a college president and I was stressed out all the time. And I got into a yelling match with a student on the middle of campus. And you know, it was -- we were not flattering each other. And so we're yelling at each other and we yell at each other inside the administration building up the stairs all the way into my office. We're in my office, we're still yelling at each other, and we're followed by one of my staff members, Ms Evelyn Dickerson. And the student just abruptly stops yelling and breaks down in tears. And I have no idea what to do at that. right? I mean I was too far gone in my machismo at that point right? And you know I'm looking at him, and you know, I was like "What, what is wrong with you?" Right? Like I'm not -- like there was no compassion, like I was too far gone. And for me it was, you know, he had tapped into this place where he was challenging my, you know, my masculinity. And, and look I mean I grew up in an amazing family in an amazing life, amazing communities in Chicago. But you grow up in a city, you are always three or four block away from things

that aren't so amazing. And, and I was an athlete so I knew how to carry myself in more challenging environments, and I just, I couldn't because I never would have broken down in tears like that.

So, I didn't respond well. My staff member stopped it, consoled him, comforted him, escorted him out of the office, then comes back in and sits down. And, the thing you have to know about Ms. Dickenson is that she is the quintessential southern mother right? Like I mean just, she is just this amazing you know older lady, and she sorta plops down in her chair, looks at me over, you know kinda looks at me over her eyeglasses and or just kinda eyes and says, "Baby, I know you love him," she said "and I know you believe in tough love," she said. "And I met your mother. And your mother was tough on you, but your mother loved you." She said, "In fact one could argue your mother might have over-loved you" right? And I'm sort of like, "Did you just talk about my momma?" You know? She says, "You have never spent one second of your life wondering if you were loved" she said, "but if you've never known love" she said, "If you use tough love, [and if the child has] never known love, how will [s/he] hear anything other than tough?" She said "I know you love them, but if you want them to know you love them, if you want them to follow you and to trust you, your gonna need to lead with love." The single best advice I have ever been given because it transformed my leadership style, right?

It transformed ... actually I would argue and say my presidency, because what it did was, it really show me that I needed to show all of me, right? That it wasn't gonna be enough to show my intellectual capacity, it wasn't gonna be enough to display my fundraising acumen, that what people really needed to see was my humanity. they needed to know that I was with them, right? Because I was coming from places that they had never seen, and someone like me didn't automatically resonate with them. And so, what it did was, and candidly I wasn't comfortable initially with that. You know I mean I had been practicing law, I worked in the White House, I mean I had been in places where people weren't necessarily leading with love right? And, um, I needed address those own issues within myself to be able to get to a place where I can say to my students I love you and I'm here for you, and to show that love, to show that co- I mean I was always compassionate but this was something different. People needed something different from me, and I would have never really known to do that if she hadn't taken me to task and I'm so grateful that she did.

K: Wow, thank you for sharing that story, that's so profound and I'm sure that many of our listeners will listen to it and, uh, find it equally transforming. Um, so, what lessons do you think we can learn from Paul Quinn about educating young people from poverty, and do these lessons translate to all settings of universities?

S: Oh I think they do. I think well, so the first thing I think institutions have to realize is 54% of today's college students depend on Pell Grants which means they're coming from poverty.

K: I was one of them. [chuckle]

S: Even more disconcerting for folks is, and I know there's some debate about data on this point I am about to make, but I would submit to you, the fact that the data is debatable still indicates how big of a problem this is, but depending on what data you believe, the majority of students in public K-12

education now rely on free and reduced lunches, which means that they're coming from poverty. So our entire educational system is now defined by poverty. That is easy to forget at Duke, right? Because there's nothing about this place that feels as if you have any relationship with poverty. But there are students here who do, and when you step off this campus onto other campuses, you see that. So I would tell you one, more of our students will respond to it because more of them are in poverty, but secondly, everyone responds to just a couple of critical things.

Number one, being seen, right? And not being seen from a numerical standpoint but actually being acknowledged, people looking at you realizing that you exist that they hear you, they hear your story that they're willing to incorporate your story into their lives. I think one of the things we do mistakenly in higher ed, and we're getting better, much better about this, and I actually, one of the places I learned this was here at Sanford, is this idea that you constantly have to ask yourself if you're getting it right. You know, just because you've done it one way all the time doesn't mean that it makes sense. And so, um, I think one, the first thing to do is to actually listen to the students. And not just about what they're talking about in the class, but what are their lives like right? Because their lives produce what you're seeing in class. So get to know the students, so I think that works.

I think secondly, um, designing systems that acknowledge the realities of their lives. We came upon the work college model because everybody was already working, you know but they were working, you know, we had a , we have a Fed Ex office not far, and the job that paid the most money was the midnight shift. And every student that worked the midnight shift was failing school, right? But they needed the money.

K: No wonder.

S: Right, right, I mean I would have failed right? Um, so what we realized was if we don't find a way to help them, they're not going to be successful. And if you, you know, I always tell students, "Don't let pennies get in the way of your dollars." But, that even presumes that you have the luxury of time. If you don't have resources, those pennies feel like dollars. So we had to find a way support them. That allowed us to do it. Um, the other thing is to create institutions that don't make people feel like they're not wanted. If everywhere you look around you see nothing that resembles you, you see nothing that reflects your experience, that's not a welcoming place. One of the things we're doing now is, I'm changing the artwork all across the institution. And you know, and it's a really very grassroots effort. Like, literally I'm just at night time going through images and just picking out images of you know, famous women and famous Latinas and Latinos and famous African Americans and ordering them and then you know, getting them framed and putting them up in our classrooms and in the hallways, and framing pictures of students, um because, even those things send messages, right? And I think the thing that I've learned most in my job here is you have to really know who you're educating. And immersing yourself in their backgrounds and their lives allows you to educate them in a wholistic fashion that I think is just better. Now it just so happens that students from poverty respond really, really well to that, but I didn't come from poverty, I came from privilege and I know what it felt like to have people see and hear me. So I think everyone benefits from that.

K: So what do you think needs to change for universities to become engines of social mobility?

S: Oh, I think their ambitions need to change. It starts just right there. Um, you know I spoke at the [Duke University] Founder's Day about you know really challenging Duke to do more, and that's not to say Duke doesn't do a lot, right? But, Duke is one of the few institutions in this country that could take on really important social issues and solve them. I mean listen, at Paul Quinn our institutional vision is to eradicate poverty right? Like we want to end intergenerational poverty. We don't have the resources to end poverty. But we have the ambition to end poverty, we have the determination to end poverty, we have the will to end poverty, so we are going to find a way to end poverty. Imagine what would happen if Duke said, you know what? We are the least likely place in the country to wage a war on poverty, so we're going to do it. We have the resources to do it, we have the intellectual capacity to do it, we have the network to do it, we have - we, we're- this is what we're going to do. Institutions like this could permanently change the course of American and societal history by deciding that they want to wade into the deep end of the pool, right? Not produce journals that talk about it, not hold symposiums that, you know, talk about the issues right? But to actually say "we're going to hold a symposium and we're looking for the 10 best ideas for ending poverty. And then we're going to go out and we're going to implement those ideas. It's an activist mindset. And what I would encourage higher ed to do is to become activists. Because that's what our society needs, that's what our country needs, that's why people are frustrated and angry with us, because have so much and yet we've done so little. And we've done so little that translates into the day-to-day lives of people. And, we may think we do a lot, but in the quiet of night we know that we haven't done all that we can. And I'm waging a war on the quiet of night.

K: Michael it's such a privilege to speak with you and to hear your inspirational work and congratulations on all the work that you have done.

S: Thank you, thank you. And congratulations to you. I think being the dean of the Sanford School is an incredible opportunity and I am just thrilled to know that you're going to make the most of it.

K: Well you will be my inspiration.

S: You're very kind.

K: I didn't mention this before though Michael hinted at it, but Michael Sorrell received his Master's in Public Policy from the Sanford School as well as a law degree from Duke University. He's on campus to receive the Distinguished Alumnus Award from Duke University. Congratulations to you and thank you for joining us. Michael Sorrell is the President of Paul Quinn College and we'll be back soon with another addition of Policy 360, I'm Judith Kelley.