

Dr. Jason Altmire ([00:05](#)):

Hello everyone. And welcome to a summertime edition of Career Education Report. I'm Dr. Jason Altmire. And we have a guest today that I know you have heard and read. Michael Stratford is one of the leading higher education writers in all of Washington, DC. He is the senior education writer for Politico. He's been doing that for about six years. Before that he was at inside higher ed, and he's also had bylines at the associated press, the Chronicle of Higher Education. And Michael, you've been a journalist your whole career. You started at Cornell University. You were the managing editor of the Cornell Daily Sun. You could have gone any direction in journalism, it's obviously your passion. What is it about education and particularly higher education that made you want to go in that direction?

Michael Stratford ([00:57](#)):

I fell into education reporting a little bit. I've always been interested in policy and politics and came to Washington, I guess, a little over a decade ago now. Got an internship at the Chronicle of Higher Education, which was a really great place to learn the ins and outs of higher education journalism, and learn from some really great reporters there. And always focused on the intersection of higher education policy and politics. And I got to cover the 2012 election for instance, at the Chronicle of Higher Ed. And that's of course now what I do a lot of at Politico, we're at this intersection of looking at education policy and the merits of different policies, but also with that political angle of understanding how politics are shaping the policies that come out of Washington at Politico, on a wide range of issues. But of course I focus on education.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([02:09](#)):

And I think that is one of the things that separates you and your work from some of the others in the same field and who are covering higher education, is you do a very good job of working in the political discussion, the politics of the issue. And that's very important. We obviously at CQ, career education colleges and universities, we represent the proprietary sector and there's a lot of politics that goes into the discussions of our issues. And we'll talk a little bit about that, but you've been doing this now through three different presidential administrations, two of which were fairly similar. And in fact, many of the same people are at the department of education. I assume, would be your same sources on some of these things and obviously you're pushing many of the same policies, but that administration in between of course, was quite different than those two. How have you seen from a reporter's perspective, the difference not just in policy, but in access to information and the way you do your job as a reporter?

Michael Stratford ([03:12](#)):

I think actually some people might be surprised at how on that issue, it's usually the case that the government has their policies and agenda and information, and they want to manage that information regardless of what the policy agenda is. Obviously as you're alluding to the Trump administration at a very different vision for a lot of different things, including education policy, then do the Obama and Biden administrations. But, I am a reporter trying to get access to decision makers at the education department. And that is consistent in that the department wants to be in control of the message and release information on their schedule and their timetable that serves them. My [inaudible 00:04:00] requests haven't been answered anymore slowly or quickly during any three of those

administrations. While the substance of the policy changes, I think that dynamic between reporters who are always trying to get information and the government that doesn't want to give it, remains.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([04:22](#)):

We have found in the last year and a half an incredible amount of coordination that exists in the administration between the issues that they happen to be covering or pushing out, or having a hearing before Congress or the negotiated rule making sessions, whatever the topic of the day happens to be. Miraculously, there will often be a story about that very issue in the media on that day or a study will come out from a think tank on that issue on that day. Have you found that this administration is better or does that more than previous administrations? Is it unusual or is it something that they all try to do?

Michael Stratford ([05:04](#)):

I think they all try to do that to a certain extent, and sometimes it's hard to know exactly what the coordination is. I caution when I read a story, sometimes people will try to take guesses at who my sources are or where the story originated or came from, and oftentimes they're wrong. And then people assume that something is like a strategic leak or a trial balloon that was intentionally floated. And sometimes that's not the case. Sometimes I want to say like, "No, I worked really hard to pry that nugget loose." Of course has been the case across many administrations. There are times where they will strategically give something to a reporter ahead of time. But in terms of coordination, I think it's probably certainly the case that in the Biden administration, as you've mentioned, some of the education policy folks have been around for a while, have worked with each other for some time.

Michael Stratford ([06:06](#)):

And so there's bit more of a apparatus, I would say, than there was in the Trump administration. First of all, I think the education policy apparatus for conservatives is a little smaller in general than it is for Democrats. It just seems like there are a lot more people in the democratic world who work on federal education policy issues. And then certainly in the Trump administration, there was that further divide of whether you're like a Trump person or not a Trump conservative. And that split across the education world as well. The universe was just smaller, I guess, for that type of coordination to happen. And there's a smaller world of there's only a handful of outside sort of think tank world type people on the conservative side. That's a bigger universe on the democratic side. I guess there's more opportunity to coordinate to a certain extent during this administration. That might explain some of it.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([07:08](#)):

And keeping with that theme, but more issue oriented on something that you were reporting about recently, you reported on the Republican lawmakers who accused the department of education of colluding in the dark with the CFPB. And you covered education news during those three administrations, and I was just curious if the US Department of Education and Consumer Organizations like the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the FTC, if that has changed, have you noticed a difference across administrations?

Michael Stratford ([07:44](#)):

I think the dynamic was different towards the tail end of the Obama administration. There was a lot of pressure from the CFPB on the Education Department, basically trying to push the department on certain issues. And that was the dynamic at the end of the Obama administration. A weird position at the beginning of the Trump administration, because as you'll remember Rich Cordray who was then the director of the CFPB actually stayed on for, I think the first 8, 9, 10 months of the Trump administration. CFPB at first, during the Trump administration was led by an Obama appointee. That I think, created an interesting dynamic that letter you referenced was in part about these information sharing agreements that the CFPB has with the Education Department, that the Trump Education Department canceled over the protest of the CFPB during the Trump administration though, while it was led by an Obama appointee.

Michael Stratford ([08:46](#)):

There was an interesting dynamic there. And now in the Biden administration, of course, it's obvious that some of the people who are working at the CFPB during the Obama administration are now working in the Education Department, led by FSA Richard Cordray, and he has other folks who he's brought in. And at the CFPB you have the agency led by Rohit Chopra, who of course had a stint at the Education Department at the end of the Obama administration as a special advisor, working on some of the issues that affect your sector and some student loan issues. The coordination, I think certainly is there, because some of the issues have changed and where Democrats want to go on it, these issues I think has changed, but also just the alignment of people is different.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([09:40](#)):

We have found, I'll just say for the listeners, first of all, that Michael, I believe in my year and a half with CQ has always been very fair. He calls for comment. He takes into account our point of view. When I ask this question, it's not about Michael, but I have to ask because our members would certainly want me to. Our folks in the proprietary sector are frustrated at times when the media seems to focus on issues that happened a decade or more ago. And it seems like again, often well timed with whatever happens to be being talked about on Capitol Hill or in negotiated rule making at that moment, there will be a student story, sometimes from 2011, an ITT student, very bad situation, a student that was taken advantage of and bad things did occur, but it frustrates our schools who are doing the right thing and are serving literally tens of thousands of students every day.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([10:46](#)):

And they see these same stories come up over and over again. And we've had a lot of difficulty in working with the media, in getting the exponentially more positive student stories. The media doesn't seem to want to focus on that. And I guess I would just ask, are we reading that correctly? What seems to be the issue with that? And what advice would you give us in trying to tell those stories and having folks in the media be interested in hearing more about the life changing opportunities that some of these students have received through the proprietary sector, then rehashing things that happened a decade or more ago?

Michael Stratford ([11:28](#)):

I guess I'll only speak for myself my own reporting, but I think sometimes in talking to folks in your sector, people assume that there's an ideological bias. But I think, we are interested in telling compelling stories and often focus on places where there is tension, or places where there are problems more so than where things might be going well. I think that's a bias that much of the media has. I think the usual analogy is like my editor doesn't send me to the airport to write about all the planes that successfully took off and landed that day. But of course we would be there if something went wrong. I think sometimes I write about the things that happened during the Obama administration with Corinthian or ITT, for example, because... Well, in some cases there's a hangover from that.

Michael Stratford ([12:24](#)):

That's still active in terms of the loan forgiveness of students who went to those institutions. But it does, I think, inform the politics and that's where folks are focused on. We had this whiplash of the Obama administration took a position on these issues and the Trump administration went almost 180 in the opposite direction. And that back and forth dynamic recounting that history I think is important. And just in terms of my own personal reporting, we don't do that much reporting on what's happening at the campus level or different practices in the field. Some of the other trade publications, I think do that with more frequency and put more resources into that. We're, I think, focused more on what is happening at the department, on the hill and among policy makers or people shaping the policy conversation in Washington. That's why I focus on that more so than the other things you're talking about, which is like evaluating a particular program or showcasing some areas where students are happy or doing well or things like that.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([13:42](#)):

Yeah. And your job is to cover what's happening in Washington. You're a Washington based reporter, as we talked about, you're covering federal education policy and the politics related to the decision making and policy making that goes on on Capitol Hill and the administration. And we have found our schools educate 8% of students in higher education. By definition, 92% of the students are in other sectors, but in the news coverage, I think it's very fair to say any reasonable person would look at it and say, we are a greatly disproportionate share of the news in higher education.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([14:24](#)):

We are certainly not 8% of the stories or the news coverage, and often it's negative coverage. And I would guess based upon what you said and just knowing you and the work that you do, that that is driven by the fact that we have an administration and a Congress that views the issues related to the proprietary sector is very important to them. And thus you, as a reporter, you're covering what's happening in Washington. And that's going to be disproportionately stories about the proprietary sector, because those are the politics of the decision makers at this time.

Michael Stratford ([15:00](#)):

Yeah, I think that's right. And that's not the only... If you're looking at coverage based on enrollment, for example, that's not the only imbalance that you might see. There's some schools that occupy disproportionate amount of news coverage. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale probably are in headlines way more than the number of people who attend those institutions, proportionate to enrollment there. But I think your point is right, that we're reflecting the political conversation that's happening in Washington around these issues and where the department for example, is putting its regulatory focus where lawmakers on the hill, how they're deciding to shape legislation in making these distinctions. I think that's another thing I hear from some of your members sometimes, that I understand that the sector's views that the institutions should be treated the same regardless of their control of the institution, but that is a position and not a universal truth.

Michael Stratford ([16:05](#)):

Democrats for the most part, feel strongly that there should be distinctions made and that the Higher Education Act creates different definitions for different types of institutions. And that's the right approach. I feel like it's my responsibility as a reporter to cover that as a policy, as a dispute, as a political debate, which I think it is, rather than take a position on whether there should be a single definition of an institution of higher education or whether there should be distinctions according to the type of control.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([16:42](#)):

And when you do write about that, I know you know this but, the Higher Education Act does in fact give the authority to the department to hold accountable all institutions and apply those metrics across all sectors of higher education. All students can have the same protections and all schools can have the same accountability measures applied to them under section 454 of the Higher Education Act. And we have that discussion with the department all the time. They always focus on GE. They selected GE specifically because it does talk about our sector and certificate programs in other sectors, but they ignore the fact that under section 454, which is much more expansive in scope than the GE measure, they do have the authority.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([17:31](#)):

That's not your issue. And I know you're aware of that, but we do have that discussion with the department and with Democrats. I would just wrap. It would be interesting to hear, we're about to head into an election in the fall. We're here in the summer, kind of the calm before the storm, politically. There are some major, very significant higher education issues that are hanging out there. What are you as a reporter going to be focusing on over the next several weeks?

Michael Stratford ([18:00](#)):

Well, as I'm focusing in this decision on loan forgiveness and loan cancellation, I think will be the biggest higher ed issue, just certainly in terms of the numbers, the amount of debt and the number of people it affects. And we'll cover the fallout from that. Whatever the president decides ends up being a

boost to Democrats at the polls this fall, or whether some of the concerns of more moderate Democrats are born out about the effect that might have. Loan forgiveness is one.

Michael Stratford ([18:36](#)):

The other thing that we will watch closely is any change in control of the House, or maybe the Senate will mean for the leadership of the committees overseeing education, as you know, we will likely see in either... Well, certainly in the Senate side, because Senator Burr's retiring, we'll see some change in leadership there. It's a little more up in the air what's going to happen on the House side. So what that new dynamic might look like come January between the department and the congressional committees, obviously will be a more contentious relationship focused on oversight requests and hearings over much of the Biden education agenda, if Republicans do take one or both chambers of Congress.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([19:26](#)):

Do you have a Twitter or website that you would like folks to know about to follow your work?

Michael Stratford ([19:32](#)):

Sure. My Twitter is MStratford. You can check out our work on Politico at politico.com. I write a lot for Politico Pro, which is our subscription service, and we have a morning email called Morning Education.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([19:46](#)):

Which everybody reads in town, I can tell you that. Michael's very well known, he does a great job at higher education reporting, one of the most prominent journalists in that field in Washington. Michael, we are grateful for you being here today, and that has been Michael Stratford, the senior education reporter for Politico. Thank you, Michael.

Michael Stratford ([20:07](#)):

Thanks for having me.

Dr. Jason Altmire ([20:10](#)):

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