Jim Lehrer
Hosted by Steven Roy Goodman, UDC-TV

Higher Education Today

Jim Lehrer E-Booklet

Transcript of 29-minute conversation with Jim Lehrer, Executive Editor, PBS NewsHour

Hosted by Steven Roy Goodman, Educational Consultant and Co-Author, *College Admissions Together: It Takes a Family*

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Goodman: Hello. I'm Steven Roy Goodman, host of HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY, a production of the University of the District of Columbia. Welcome back to the education program that connects you to contemporary issues, people, and institutions involved in the world of higher education.

Today, we'll be talking about journalism and education with Jim Lehrer.

Jim is Executive Editor of the PBS NewsHour. He received his A.A. Degree from Victoria College in Texas and his Bachelor's in Journalism from the University of Missouri, before joining the Marine Corps, reporting for the Dallas Times-Herald, co-anchoring The MacNeil/Lehrer Report, and moderating 12 presidential debates. Jim is author of 20 novels and is a proud collector of bus memorabilia.

Welcome.

Lehrer: Thank you, Steve. I'm delighted to be here.

Goodman: We're delighted to have you, Jim. If you wouldn't mind, would you say a word or two about bus memorabilia? We've never had anybody on the show who has collected bus memorabilia before.

Lehrer: Well, there are only about three of us in the world who do it [he laughs]. It's a personal thing, Steve. I grew up in the bus business. My dad spent most of his adult life in the bus business. When I was going to Victoria College, a little junior college in south Texas, I worked as a ticket agent at the Trailways bus depot. I am a bus person. As a consequence, years ago, I started collecting things like cap badges that drivers wore in their hats, old bus depot signs, toy buses and all that sort of stuff. I can say with absolute certainty and pride that I am one of the leading collectors of bus memorabilia in the country. It's easy to be such a thing because, as I say, there are only about three of us.

Goodman: We're delighted that you're one of those three and that you're here in the studio today.

Lehrer: Thank you, Steve.

Goodman: Can you say a word or two about why you started at Victoria College and what that was like? We have a lot of people who are interested in your early years. What did you do early on that helped you with your career?

Lehrer: First of all, at every step along the way in my education, back to public schools in Kansas and in Texas, through junior college and to Missouri, I always had somebody who came

along to help me. There was either a teacher, a dean, or somebody who cared enough to give me a little push, to give me a little assistance.

I graduated from high school in San Antonio. My brother, who is two years older than I, was already going to the University of Texas. That's where I was supposed to go. We didn't have the money for both of us to go to four-year colleges at the same time. We moved to Victoria because my dad had a job in Victoria, which is a town about a hundred miles southeast of San Antonio, on the way to Houston. I wanted to go ahead and go to college. My dad said, "Hey, I think there is a junior college there."

So I go there [to Victoria College]. There's one building. I walked in and I said, "I'd like to go to school here." This wonderful woman behind the counter said, "Fine. What do you want to study?" I said, "Well, what do you got?" Then I said, "Eventually I want to go to journalism school. I want to go eventually to a four-year school, I just can't afford to do that now. What would it cost?" And she said, "Forty dollars." I said, "I don't have forty dollars." My dad had given me a ten… all I had was a ten-dollar bill. I said, "All I've got is ten dollars." She said, "That's fine."

I started taking a full load, so to speak. I guess you would say, in college terms, "15 hours," or, in other words, five, three-hour courses. I was working in the bus depot. I went to work immediately in the bus depot at night. There were only 300 students in the school. It was very small. I already knew by then that I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to be a writer. I found

the faculty advisor to the newspaper and I went over to him and I said, “Hey look, I’d like to work on the newspaper.” I’ll never forget this guy. He’s a professor of all kinds of things because at junior college you’re a professor of all kinds of things, not just one thing. He stands up and he reaches across, shakes my hand and says, “Congratulations. You’re now the editor of the paper.” Nobody else had ever just come and volunteered like that. So, I was the editor of the paper.

It only came out maybe once a month or so. I wrote everything. I wrote every headline. I did everything. It was a wonderful education for me. I also had a full class load and I was also working in the bus depot. Two years I did that. The combination of those three things was monumental in my life.

From the moment I woke up, and that was very early, to the moment I went to bed at night, and that was very late because I worked until 11 o’clock or midnight at the bus depot, I was busy. I was busy doing things that mattered to me and I saw what could lead to whatever my future was.

One quick story about how important the junior college experience was for me, beyond all that: When it got toward the end of my sophomore year, I was trying to decide where I wanted to go for the next two years. They had an old typewriter in the bus depot and I wrote out letters to 35 universities. They were all state universities. I didn’t know about these big, fancy private schools at that point. I decided on the University of Missouri because of its great journalism reputation. I had never been to Columbia, Missouri or the University of Missouri.

To get to the point, I wrote a letter, applied, and got a letter back from somebody in the admissions department at Missouri saying, “Hey, forget it. We’ve never heard of your school. There is no way in the world we’re going to accept your credits or accept you as a junior,” which is what I wanted to be, which is what I would have been.

So I took the letter to the guy who was the dean, the guy who ran our little college. He was a big, old football player and it really made him mad. “Who do they think they are?”

So he said, “Jimmy, do you really want to go to Missouri?” And I said, “Yes, Dean, I really want to go to Missouri.” And he said, “Are you ready to roll the dice with me?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I’m going to write a letter to these wa-was and I’m going to say, ‘Hey this kid can do the work. You send some exams down here. We’ll administer them under any rules you want… on the condition [that] if he passes them, you’ll admit him as a junior.’”

Lo and behold, some anonymous guy in the admissions department says, “You’re on!”

So one Saturday and Sunday I did all these tests. Not only did I pass the tests, I aced them so much that they admitted me as an advanced junior! Can you imagine what a difference that made in my life? Otherwise I would have been what they called a “probationary sophomore.” It would have set me back. My education at Victoria would have meant nothing, is what it would have boiled down to.

A long answer, Steve, but what it did is it got me into Missouri. I did get a great journalism education. Without that who knows what might have happened. And it's all because of this dean and the people in that small school.

Goodman: I think that's a fair point. But it's also about the admissions officer at Missouri who recognized there may be some potential there, even though he or she didn't really know much about Victoria College.

Lehrer: Absolutely right. But the other point of this, which is something you know more about than I do, but I follow this because of my background… It's that, it was a wonderful place for me to go. I couldn't afford to go to the four-year school, but the professors and the people who ran Victoria knew I wanted to go on to school so they helped me. The English teacher, the Science teacher, the Math teacher… they all knew that I was there for two years to get ready to go to a four-year institution.

I've always believed that for those kids who cannot afford, initially, to go to school… There are all kinds of reasons to have community colleges. That's what they call them now. Back then they called them "junior colleges." They quit calling them junior colleges because it sounded bad. It sounded second rate. It is another function, a legitimate, serious function – junior colleges, or community colleges – for kids who want to go on to school. It can be a big step forward.

I worked eight hours a day while I was doing it. There were small classes. They cared about me. It helped me later on. That would be true of anybody today who wanted to go to community college, I hope.

Goodman: I think that's fair, but let's compare that to some of the elite schools. I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I know that your kids went to some very nice colleges. What do you think about kids today who have the opportunity to go to community college but then choose to go to the fancier schools?

Lehrer: Well, every story and every situation is different. There is not one way to go. I think some kids who go first to elite schools might be better off starting at a community college. Some of these kids, for instance, get out of high school without really having learned how to learn, how to study, how to read, how to write a theme – what they used to call "themes" – or how to write a paper, which is what they call them now. I just read a news story about this, where some of these junior colleges realized they can become prep schools, in a way, for some of these kids. A lot of these kids think they can get into an elite school, but then they don't do well because they're not ready. But, as I say, there's no "one thing fits all."

Goodman: You mentioned mentors. You had a mentor in high school. You just mentioned that you had these mentors at Victoria College. How did you mentor students at the NewsHour? Was there a mentoring process or is there a mentoring process at the NewsHour?

Lehrer: There is built-in mentoring into the process of the NewsHour. There is no way to do live, daily television journalism without there being a lot of people involved. As I tell people all the time, it takes 18 people just for me to say, "Good evening" and get it on the air in color so people can see and hear it. It just involves a lot of folks doing their jobs properly at the same time. All it takes is one little thing to go wrong.

Here's a mentoring example: On the NewsHour, we started 38 years ago, and we've always had either an internship program or what is now called a "Desk Assistant" program. These are kids who come right out of college – they can be older, they don't all have to be kids – but these are people who get minimum wage, they work for us for six months, and they rotate among our various things: editing, the clean editorial side, the technical side, the research, the administrative side… The moving around is a form of education.

In terms of my personal mentoring, I'll tell you a story. We were in a studio, like this, ready to go on the air for the NewsHour one night. This is back when it was the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and I was sitting by myself. It was before we had computers sitting right there by me at the table. There was a kid, a desk assistant who was assigned, the same as there was for every day, to kind of hustle the script for me. So the kid was hustling the script. About that moment I hear in my ear, three minutes before airtime, that a story has just moved on the wire. The newsroom was on the floor above us from where the studio was and the executive producer or somebody said, "The story just moved. There is news on a story that we [are] going to report on."

So I said to the kid who is fooling with the copy, I said, "Look, go get me the copy of this script and I need it now because I'm about to go on the air." And he said, "I don't think I can make it by then." I said, "Oh. You don't think you can go up there and get it and come back here by then?" He said, "No." I said, "I tell you what; don't worry about it. When 6:00 Eastern Time comes – which is going to be now in less than two minutes, as the clock runs – if we're not ready at 6:00 I'll just look at the camera and say, 'Good evening. I'm Jim Lehrer. I'm not quite ready yet. Go ahead and have a drink or something. We'll play music.'" And this kid, of course, turned purple-red and he says, "Oh, fine, I'll get it Mr. Lehrer!" and *choonk*! Within ten seconds he was back. And that was what I call mentoring. That's how you learn.

I always met every one of our classes of interns and when we started I said, "Look, you get out of this what you want. You learn what you want to learn. The important thing is to pay attention to what's going on and, for God's sake, ask questions. We are nice people working here. We don't hire bad people. We have a 'good person' rule in our organization. Feel free to ask them questions, including me. Just don't ask me while I'm on the air [he laughs]. But if you want to know why something was done – 'Why did you do that story?' 'Why did you do this story instead of that story?' 'Why did you ask this question instead of that question?' – be my guest." And, for the most part – I mean it's scary for these kids, there's no question about it – but they do [ask questions]. [So] there is no mentoring program directly that you would call "mentoring" but the whole system is based on that.

Goodman: What about the military? You wrote for, I believe it was called, "The Boot" when you were in the Marines?

Lehrer: That's right.

Goodman: How did that help you?

Lehrer: I was in the Marine Corps for three years in the 1950s. I was a platoon commander for the most part. It was at a time where I didn't have a choice. The draft in the 1950s, it was between the end of the Korean War and the beginning of the Vietnam War. I fired no rounds and angered anybody and nobody fired any at me. I was strictly a Cold War Marine. But the experience of having to depend on others, and for them to depend on me, to realize a responsibility we all had…

First two things they tell you in the Marine Corps, "There is nothing more useless than a dead Marine. If you want to stay alive, you take care of the Marine on your right, and the Marine on your left, and he will take care of you. And if you don't do that, buddy, you're not going to last."

Suddenly, by telling you this, it doesn't really matter who the guy on your right is – what he looks like, what the color of his skin is, how smart he is, how big he is, how tough he is – it doesn't mean squat. What it means is, I'm dependent on him! And he's dependent on me.

The Marines had this attitude, which is, "The difficult will be done immediately. The impossible will take a little longer." Somebody tells you to do something and your first reaction is, "Do it!" – not to come up with all the [reasons you can't].

My thing with "The Boot," I did that for about four or five months. I had come back from the 9th Infantry Regiment in the Far East. I came back to Parris Island six months before I got out of the Marine Corps and when I reported for duty at Parris Island the Colonel looked at my thing and said, "I see you have a journalism degree." They'd had problems because some recruits had died in training at Parris Island a couple years before and the Marines were very careful about their PR. [So the Colonel said], "Yeah that's what you're…" and I said, "No, no, no. I'm going to do that for the rest of my life, Colonel. Sir. I don't want to do newspaper work." I wanted to be a serial officer and take the recruits through training. And the Colonel said, "I guess you didn't hear me, did you?"

So, I was the officer in charge of the paper. Which meant, basically, drinking mostly at night and helping people write the stories, the enlisted men who were professional journalists, and then taking the paper down to Savannah and getting it published and all that. That part of the Marine experience was kind of a dessert to the learning part, the serious part that I had, which, I've got to tell you Steve, was like what happened to me at Victoria College. That's why I'm so fortunate. I've had help. And the Marines helped.

I was a punk. I was wearing white buck shoes and I had never been on an airplane when I joined the Marines. I got on an airplane in San Antonio, went to Washington and to Quantico

for training, which is boot camp. Officers' training is like boot camp for officers. I mean it was hell. I was like, "What the hell am I doing here?" but the Marines taught me all kinds of things about myself that I didn't know.

When I first had to go hand-over-hand over a steel cable, you know my head like this, my legs over the cable, over a wide river with a full pack, helmet and rifle… If I fell I was going to fall, not only a long way but into the water, in front of all my fellow Marines. They said, "Okay!" [he claps]. I said to myself, "There is no way in hell I could do this." But I did it because I had no choice. I am a qualified expert in hand-to-hand combat. I had never done anything like that in my life. I'm now an expert rifleman, an expert with a .45 and an expert with an automatic rifle which is a machine gun. I had never held a weapon, much less fired a weapon, until I joined the Marines.

All of those things that I learned to do got into my head forever that, "There's nothing I can't do." I've been so fortunate to have these experiences at a time when I needed them to take me to the next step.

Goodman: That strength of character that you built through that perhaps really helped you when you met the Shah and you met all the political leaders and you did all the interviews that you did.

Lehrer: It did in one way, Steve. I realized that, because I was in the Marines, even though I was "no combat," I had proven myself to myself. In other words, I knew what I could do. I knew what my limits were and what my strengths were. I knew how tough I was. So I didn't have to do it on television. I didn't have to prove on television how tough I am and beat up on someone. It's so easy to beat up on somebody on television. I have zero tolerance for my colleagues who bring people on television and then beat up on them. MacNeil and I agreed 100% and that's why we're close friends and partners and all of this. He used to say, "Somebody comes on your television program, he or she comes as your *guest*." And you treat them that way. And yes, you can ask tough questions, but that's different. A tough question is a content issue. To be tough on somebody, to be rough, that is an ego issue. You're showing how tough you are.

When I get through running a debate even, somebody might say, "Oh well you did a great job. You asked a really tough question!" It's not about the questions. It's not about the conduct of the moderator or of the interviewer. The point is always the person who is doing the debating or the person who is being interviewed. That's what it's all about! It isn't the person who is actually doing it. And that's one of the good things I've learned, and it's just inbred in me, as a result of my Marine experience.

In the Marine Corps, somebody who wants to be a showboat… You're in an infantry platoon and you got 42 guys and one of them wants to be a show off? Ha. That guy is doomed. I mean doomed in ways – he may not make it alive – but on another line he may not make it as a Marine because we're all together. Strength comes in being together and being low key and being kind of invisible as part of a team.

Goodman: As someone who is a relatively new host compared to you, one of the things that I struggle with is how to ask pressing questions without being rude.

Lehrer: That's it. It's very easy to do. At least I think it's easy to do. First of all, think not in terms of questions, but think in terms of subjects. And you're having a discussion. You're not having a grilling. This is not a courtroom. You're not a prosecutor or a defense lawyer or whatever.

For example, I'm interviewing you. You're an expert on higher education admissions. I'm interested in the value of the SAT tests. There are two ways of doing that. One of them is to sit and write 50 questions about, "The SAT, is it really *this*?" "Billy Bob says *this* about the SAT. What's your response to *that*?" That kind of thing. Or, [the other] attitude is, "I'm going to interview Steve for 15 minutes about the SAT." You don't say it, but you do it with your body language: "Okay. Let's talk about *this* now. What's the problem with SATs? What do you think the problem is?" In other words, you don't tell him what he is supposed to know. You ask him. And then, "Oh is that right?" If you've done your homework then you listen. The number one thing for an interviewer is to do his or her homework. Not so you can ask "gotcha" questions. So you can listen to the answers. You'll be relaxed enough.

My favorite made-up example is, I'm interviewing a senator and I say, "Senator, do you think we should sell more grain to Cuba?" [In senator voice] "Yes Jim, I think we should sell more grain to Cuba. But before we do that we should bomb Havana!" And I say, "What kind of grain, Senator?" because that was my next question. That was the question I had written down. And so as a consequence, "Chooooooooo!" the answer went right by me. If you do your homework designed to make you relaxed enough and that is not easy... This is easy to say but it's not easy. You're doing what you're doing, we're taping this, but you're taping it timed. That means you want to get it right the first time, because there isn't going to be a second time or a third time, which is particularly true of live television. There is tremendous pressure on you to begin with. And you want to take that pressure off. The way you take the pressure off of you is by knowing the subject cold so you can engage. "Oh is that right? Oh, the report on the SATs that was in '86, have you read that statement?" And in the process you say, "No I haven't read that." Well that is a harsh thing, maybe. But it was asked. It flowed. Not as a "gotcha" question but as a natural flow of information in the interview.

Goodman: Well, as someone, Jim, who is an expert in natural flows, we're going to have to say goodbye.

Lehrer: Okay.

Goodman: You have flowed brilliantly throughout your career. We thank you very much for coming on the show today.

Lehrer: Thank you, Steve.

Goodman: If you would like additional information about Jim Lehrer, please visit:

http://www.pbs.org/newshour

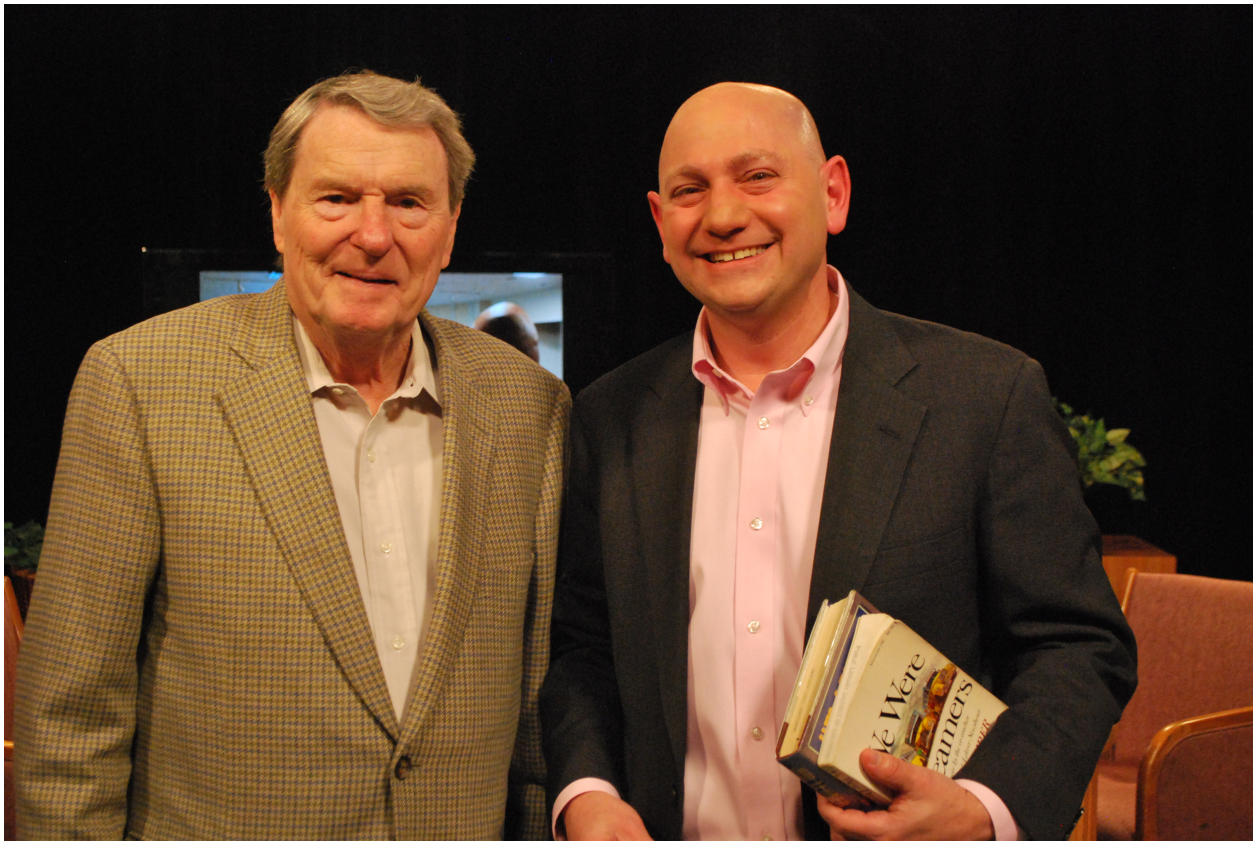
or

http://macneil-lehrer.com

If you have comments or suggestions about HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY, please send an email to our viewer mailbox at:

highereducationtoday@topcolleges.com

Thank you for watching. We will continue to bring you quality discussions about important matters in today's college and university world. Please join me again for another edition of HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY. I'm Steven Roy Goodman and you've been watching HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY.



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3554 Appleton Street, NW
Washington, DC 20008
(202) 986-9431
steve@topcolleges.com
www.topcolleges.com