

Democracy's College, Episode 73

Micro-Urban Colleges, Quality Credentials, and Equity for Black Learners

With guest Terry Vaughan III and host Gianina Baker

Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in the P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

Community colleges in micro-urban spaces, which are small cities with big-city dynamics, play a pivotal role in expanding access, strengthening workforce pathways, and advancing equity for Black learners.

In this conversation, Dr. Terry Vaughan III highlights how these communities offer unique advantages, such as concentrated resources, reduced geographic barriers, and strong anchor institutions that can drive economic mobility. He explains to host Gianina Baker how the shift toward skills-based hiring reframes the value of credentials, emphasizing the competencies, experiences, and outcomes they represent.

Vaughan also outlines his job duties at Workcred, where he focuses on building a national system of high-quality credentials, work-based learning, and transparent data to better align education with labor-market needs.

Gianina Baker: Welcome to OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast, where we explore the intersections of education, workforce, and equity. Today, we're diving into the role of community colleges in micro-urban spaces, workforce development, and how these efforts impact Black students and communities. We'll also discuss insights from the Pell Institute's 2024 report on postsecondary value and hear from Dr. Terry Vaughan about his new role at Workcred.

Just to get us started: Micro-urban spaces—we look at them as smaller cities with big-city dynamics—are home to *many* community colleges serving diverse populations. These colleges are critical for workforce development and equity. We are reminded that college is *more* than a credential, and it's about economic mobility, professional networks, and collective value for communities. As we can see that these micro-urban spaces sit

between large metropolitan centers and small towns, what makes these communities unique in shaping workforce opportunities for Black learners and workers?

Terry Vaughan III: When it comes to providing quality education to learners, you really want to make sure that there's high access. What I think the micro-urban space represents is that it creates a greater access point to work with learners, to provide resources, and to offer them a vision forward.

When it comes to the role of community colleges and how they can support learners, particularly learners who are historically marginalized, underrepresented, such as Black learners, they have a great opportunity to access a *wider* range of learners in a more dedicated space compared to, for example, when it comes to the issues of serving rural students when you have to have large commutes. And so, there's an *advantage* there where the resources that the community colleges offer can really be leveraged and pooled into specific spaces.

Gianina Baker: It's interesting because we often talk about the urban cities and the community colleges that sit within them and rural. You don't often hear about micro-urban. And so, I'm hoping some of the listeners now are thinking, does my community college sit in a micro-urban center? And what are some positives that can be gained from that? So that's a helpful way to start some of this conversation.

We often know that community colleges are the anchor institution in these areas. What would you say, how do colleges in micro-urban spaces function as engines of economic mobility, particularly for Black students?

Terry Vaughan III: Well, I think it's about, again, we're going back into the question of access and the access to what? Access to opportunity to build skills. So, the role of community colleges within these micro-urban spaces is that it provides different opportunities for skill development. And this is *really* important because we're getting into a phase of postsecondary education, if you will, where the focus is not simply just on credentials in their own right. Do you have a, for example, a two-year or four-year credential? There is a large emphasis on skills and skills-based hiring and competency-based education. Community colleges provide a *great* opportunity for these specific learners to *get* that level of skill development that they otherwise may not have an opportunity to participate in.

Gianina Baker: We highlighted that you just moved over to Workcred, and in this space, you're now getting to not just bringing some of your skills from your previous position, but also get to think about it in a different space. Can you tell me just a little bit about what it is that you do right now?

Terry Vaughan III: Yeah, so I serve as the associate executive director at Workcred, oversee our major research components. Workcred is the affiliate of our parent organization called the American National Standards Institute, also known as ANSI. And so, ANSI works to build standards internationally, global. And standards refers to, for example, how products are built. Standards are about processes within the workplace. There are many standards. And ANSI represents the United States' interests in these global conversations.

Under ANSI is two affiliates, if you will. One is Workcred, which is where I represent. And we focus on the conversation of how the standards apply to quality credentials. And my job is to explore what quality credentials look like through three particularly different perspectives. One is essentially what are quality credentials, whether they're non-degree or degree credentials. Non-degree can include certificates, certifications. But also, we look at traditional degree programs, such as two years and four-year degrees.

Another area that we explore through the prism of quality credentials is work-based learning experiences. How do you make sure you build credentials that offer experiential learning opportunities for learners that allow them to be more ready for that skills-based hiring environment?

The other area that we heavily focus on is quality data outcomes. There's a large emphasis on making sure not only do students and learners have access to quality experiences, that the experiences are *of* good quality, meaning they are teaching in a competency-based manner, but also what are the outcomes? And this is big, and you can see this in both state and federal discussions, is after participating in a particular degree or non-degree program, where do learners go? And what does their life look like after? And so, my role is to develop a research agenda to lead both academic and policy discussions looking at each of those areas.

In addition to Workcred being one affiliate of ANSI, another is the American National Accreditation Board, also known as ANAB. And while we focus on how standards pertain to credentials, ANAB focuses on accrediting certain organizations that are seeking, for example, certifications. So just to give you a wide landscape view of the ANSI enterprise.

Gianina Baker: That's extremely helpful. And for listeners who've never even heard of Workcred, I think that gives them even more to look into. And even knowing that this exists, I think is helpful. And so, I'm glad that you've expanded on what all of that means because there's so much in this landscape, again, that I hope people outside are hearing and understanding there's some really good work that's happening on behalf of us and trying to uphold quality standards as we think about certification. So, appreciate the work you do.

And I want to kind of build on this research-agenda piece because I love, you know, as one of your former supervisors-colleagues, I love that you haven't stopped writing. And in your recent piece "[From Signals to Selection](#)," you emphasize the promise of skills-based hiring. How does this shift resonate with or even disrupt the lived experiences of Black students navigating micro-urban labor markets?

Terry Vaughan III: So, I think, you know, skills-based hiring represents a number of different pressure points, I would say. On the one hand, you have learners who are coming with experience or need experience. But in either sense, this experience is useful in the marketplace, right, once they learn it. That's the one aspect is that we have to understand that learners are coming with or pursuing experiences that may or may not be recognized within a credential.

Another pressure point in the higher education area is, well, what do you do with that? And what does this mean for the *value* of, for example, two-year and four-year degrees? For example, do we do credit for prior learning? Do we have more student-centered programming to sort of help our degree programs reflect the lived experiences of students and their organic interests? There's another pressure point for that.

I would say a third pressure point is employers. It's very *hard* in this current market to understand which credentials are going to produce certain types of employer-employee experiences. And so there's this drive to try to make sure to get to the root of the concern is if I hire this person, can they help us achieve our mission and our goals?

And so, what I think the shift from a focus on simply credentials to skills-based hiring represents an organic push to say, hey, these are people. These people are able to do X, Y, Z. How can we help develop them to solve specific problems in the marketplace? If a credential can help signal that, if a credential can help point to that direction and say, yes, this person can help us, they have the right experiences, and they can help you solve that problem, great. But what this new discourse sort of reflects is a credential in itself is *not* the thing that is the object of value per se. It's really about what's inside. What does it reflect? And that's what the signaling refers to. Does it refer that the learner went through an experience? Whether they're bringing prior learning experiences and adding it to their, you know, more formal education or not. Maybe they didn't go through *every* aspect of a formal education; for example, getting a four-year and a master's. Maybe they only did a two-year. But what we are looking at is the competency of the individual and their ability to help the organization that they want to work for.

Gianina Baker: You said a lot there, and I appreciate your emphasis on what's in the credential, not just the credential itself. That's a really good question. And I want to kind of

push on that a little bit. So even with growing attention to skills and credentials, which is *great*, I mean, that we're having these conversations. We know that systemic barriers still limit equitable access to strong workforce pathways. What do you see as the most persistent obstacles and how can policy meaningfully address them?

Terry Vaughan III: Yeah, this is the million-dollar question, right? What do we do? And I think learners have a role. Higher education has a role. Employers have a role to address the barriers of access, to address the barriers of finance, to address the barriers of signaling quality experiences, and ultimately hiring. And so there's not going to be one thing that really solves all of that. What I think is you're going to have to see more collaboration and coordination among each of these stakeholders to try to break down these *silos* that's resulting in these systemic barriers.

Ask any of these key stakeholders: Do they care about learners? Do they care about quality credentials? Do they care about the economy? Everyone's going to, for the most part, say yes. What we really see is a breakdown of coordination. What we really see in the field is duplication without replication to prove, right? Simply just duplication. And so when I think about the systemic barriers that are afflicting, limiting learners' experiences, not just their experiences—we're talking about their quality of life. When I see the systemic barriers and how they plague big higher education institutions and their ability to be responsive to the needs of the nation, of the marketplace, or whatever the mission is. When I see how these systemic barriers affect *employers*—they're not getting a wide variety of talent that they otherwise would really appreciate. What I think about is the lack of communication, the lack of coordination, and the lack of intentionality to really work together on this to help make a system that actually works for *everyone*.

So that's how I see the systemic barriers. And so, we can get into the details of specific issues. Is there financial aid? Employers can have a role in that. Higher education has a role in that. State and federal governments have a role in that. Whatever the solution is, I can tell you one of the key things that will stop it all from being solved is that no one's talking enough together and not enough people are on the *same page*. And I think *that* is the negative effect of siloing. It's very familiar to higher education institutions, but we can see it everywhere—that how siloing is really affecting our ability to come up with concrete solutions.

Gianina Baker: So, you're new in your role right now, although not new to higher education and policy, making that, none of those things. You are very well versed in that. So I won't ask you about some good examples right now, but maybe we'll come back to you in a year (laughs).

Terry Vaughan III: Yes (laughs)!

Gianina Baker: Because I'd love to hear, you know, what you're seeing from these good examples. What are some of those common threads? It sounds like, again, being on the same page is a great start to hopefully these partnerships building on that. And we know, ultimately, that partnerships are often described as the backbone of local workforce systems, especially ones that do well.

What role do you see colleges, employers, and policymakers playing and building systems that are *truly* equitable for Black learners in micro-urban spaces?

Terry Vaughan III: For each of these key stakeholders, if you really want to support Black learners or really *any* learners that are going through the system, you have to focus on coalition building. Coalition building means having a clear mission. It means understanding *capacity* and resources. It means understanding the key players and the focus is on learners.

When I think about the role of higher education leaders or employers who are often busy running businesses, but they still have a role in this conversation, or even students, and we've seen many students *lead* movements to try to change things. At the core of it, I see the word coalition. There has to be coalitions that are really trying to coordinate to solve these systemic problems, particularly those that are affecting Black learners in urban, rural, or micro-urban spaces.

Gianina Baker: As you were talking, it makes me think of the saying, if you want to go fast, do it alone. If you want to do it right, you know, do it together in many ways, right? We often think we've got to do it fast. And so we do move alone, whether that's personally or through, like, an organization. And within that, it often doesn't, you know, bridge that axis that we're talking about. And so I like that you're bringing us back to, you know, we *have* to work together. We have to build a coalition to be able to move to what we say that we want, especially for, like you said, not just Black students, but all students.

So, given your background—and we know that it crosses student affairs, career development, and now even credentialing research—how do you see high-quality credentials addressing equity gaps for Black students and other historically marginalized groups?

Terry Vaughan III: High-quality credentials, and this goes back to the question of what's, you know, a credential in itself is not a value. It's what does it reflect? What is *in* the credential? And this is, you know, a shift in our thinking. It's not simply seat hours. It's not the 120 credit hours, therefore this is a good credential.

I think what we're seeing now, and this is reflected in the skill-based hiring movement, is that we want to make sure that credentials have clear learning outcomes, as both of us are colleagues of the work together at the [National Institute for Learning and Outcomes Assessment](#). We want to make sure where obviously credentials have a clear vision of what they're trying to achieve in terms of what students or learners are going to acquire. And we want to make sure that from the learning outcomes to the *actual* outcome that there's enough *experiences*, competency-based experiences, and various forms of formative assessment that can demonstrate to both the learner and to those who will be seeking to hire that learner that they have the ability to perform X, Y, Z abilities. Whether that's cognitive, behavioral, situational. A quality credential has to be able to sort of paint the picture about what is the intention, what is the experiences, and how are they vetted, and how are they packaged and articulated, *signaled*, if you will, upon completion.

And so when I think about the type of programs, if you will, that would particularly be supportive for Black learners or learners that are historically marginalized, we want to make sure they have access to the most rigorous programs because when *they* spend their time, when *they* commit their resources, they may not get a second chance, or a third chance, to go pursue a credential. We have to make sure that when they go the first time or second time, that it's the right program. And we don't want to keep trying to put up multiple safety nets, when if we can get it right the first time, it would be the best situation.

And this has a magnitude of effects, right? Because if a Black learner, particularly if they're coming from a low-income background, if they pick the wrong credential program and it doesn't lead to a good opportunity in terms of experiential learning that signals to an employer that there's a job, they may have spent all their federal and state money on a program that doesn't get them anywhere. And so, this is why it's so important to think about quality credentials, because it's not just for higher education to say we produce good quality credentials. It's about the learner experience. If we produce good-quality credentials, our learners will have a better outcome.

And you can see some of this emerging in conversations, particularly when it comes to, for example, Workforce Pell discussions. There's now an increase in this opportunity for Pell money. But what does that *mean*? Because if it goes to programs that are of low quality, that produce a bad credential, we might witness a mass wasting of public funds, but more importantly, students and learners not getting the experiences they need to achieve the economic mobility that they are aspiring to.

Gianina Baker: You know what? I might have to have you back on again to talk about this whole Workforce Pell and where it's going because I think we don't know enough yet to be

able to kind of forecast out what we're seeing happening. So, you're a very valuable resource in many ways and appreciate your time that you gave to us thus far.

I want to just go back real quick and help the listeners think about Workcred because we know that we all have a vision for strengthening credential quality, transparency, and alignment. You know, as we've talked about these micro-urban spaces, Black learners, how does that vision from workforce intersect with the needs and realities of community colleges and workforce development in these micro-urban communities?

Terry Vaughan III: I think, you know, at Workcred, my job is to make the complex simple. And so when I think about the needs of learners, particularly Black learners or learners who are struggling, when I think about our mission is to build a credential system that allows them to gain the skills they need that can lead to the type of jobs or nonprofit opportunities that they want to seek.

As I mentioned before, we are really just trying to build that credentialing system, particularly with our nation, through that lens of *quality* credentials, *quality* work-based learning, right? Quality internships, apprenticeships, and quality data-outcome systems. And it's through these three areas that we really believe that we'll be able to help different key stakeholders to build that coalition I mentioned that we can help to lead people and lead leaders in a way to say, this is how we can put together a good educational package for the people that we care about in our community. This is what that looks like.

And so, you know, Workcred's mission *is* to build that system. And we're doing it through different ways and different opportunities. We have different partners, both at community colleges and at the national level. We're just trying to, in each of these different engagements, work one or all three of those angles to achieve that objective.

Gianina Baker: So, in looking ahead, what innovations or research priorities excite you the most when it comes to aligning credentials with real economic opportunity, especially for Black learners in micro-urban contexts?

Terry Vaughan III: One of the things I'm really excited to continue to develop since joining Workcred, in terms of working with different stakeholders, teaching and educating folks *are* quality credentials. And coming from the American National Standards Institute perspective, where *standards* play a very important role in helping to build coalitions and mobilize economic activity, one of the key innovations and research priorities that we are looking to explore is the combining of degree and non-degree credentials as a way to figure out how learners can get the largest value out of their educational experiences. Currently, we have a project with the Strada [Education] Foundation, where we are exploring college students who also have non-degree credentials, whether they attain them prior or during.

And what we want to do is help to build that *profile* of learners who have degree and non-degree credentials to better understand where they come from, what's their motivations, and what are their interests. And I think it's through projects like these where we better understand the different *profiles* of learners that we'll be able to help build that quality credentialing system that we're achieving because we're helping to align the system to current learner motivation and needs and *interests* that other key stakeholders *in* the credentialing system, whether that's the actual education provider or the employer, will be able to look to understand and adapt for their own systems.

Gianina Baker: It does sound interesting and I'm sure lots of things will develop off of that. So, we will be watching to see what else comes out.

I'm so grateful to one of our grad students who was just doing some work and came across one of your pieces. And that led me to reaching out to you to invite you on, not just to talk about micro-urban spaces and community colleges, but to really even hear more about your role, what you've been up to and researching and thinking through and seeing how past experiences like NILOA have kind of played a role in helping you understand credentialing today. So, I'm so grateful for your time and thank you to all those who've been listening to this conversation. Hopefully you'll follow Dr. Vaughan, not just Workcred's initiatives, but even read a bit more of the work that he's done, not just here, but also at the Pell Institute.

Before we wrap up, let's maybe reflect on a little bit of what we've learned. We know that community colleges are critical hubs for equity and workforce development, especially in micro-urban spaces where opportunity and challenge intersect. We've heard more about Black students and how communities benefit most when education delivers more than economic value. We need professional networks, personal growth, and collective impact. They all matter.

We know just from, I'd say, more recent research that credentials are a bridge to opportunity. But I think what Dr. Vaughan emphasized today, they *have* to be designed and implemented with equity in mind. If you take anything away from this conversation, policy and partnerships are essential. Institutions can't do this work alone. Collaboration with state agencies, employers, and organizations like Workcred ensures sustainable progress.

And so we thank you for joining us today, Dr. Vaughan. And until next time, keep pushing for equity and opportunity in every space. Thank you for listening.

Sal Nudo: The Democracy's College podcast can be found on the OCCRL website under the section labeled Our Products. Be sure to check them out for further exploration of the intersections of education, workforce, and equity.

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