

Democracy's College, Episode 60

Examining the Statewide Movement for Reform in Developmental Education in Illinois

With guest Lisa Castillo Richmond and host Lorenzo Baber

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 occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, OCCRL Director Lorenzo Baber talks with Lisa Castillo Richmond, who is the outgoing executive director of the Partnership for College Completion. Dr. Castillo Richmond has been with PCC since it started in 2016.

Lorenzo Baber: Hello. Thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College. My name is Lorenzo Baber, director of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign.

In today's episode, we are examining the statewide movement for reform in developmental education across Illinois. My guest for this important discussion today is Dr. Lisa Castillo Richmond, executive director of the Partnership for College Completion, otherwise known as PCC. Through policy development and direct collaboration with institutions across Illinois, PCC has been closely connected to the reform in developmental education. OCCRL has been involved with PCC in understanding the influence and status of measures associated with the Developmental Education Reform Act, passed in March 2021, to address inequalities and degree completion among students from underserved backgrounds by reforming developmental education, placement and delivery. Offering developmental education, a longtime practice in higher education, allows academically underprepared students to build skills that are necessary for preparation and success in gateway mathematics and English courses, as well as other college-level courses. An important bridge for equity in higher education outcomes and developmental education are stratified by racialized identities, economic status and geographic location.

Dr. Lisa Castillo Richmond is an entrepreneurial higher education leader and an equity practitioner with experience leading education organizations, policy and advocacy efforts, and national program teams. Her work is focused on organizations and growth phases, as

well as work with P-K-12 systems, colleges and universities, and governmental agencies. As a first-generation college student, she is deeply passionate about the issues of equity and college access and degree completion. Welcome, Dr. Castillo, Richmond. Lisa, it's great for you to join us. I really appreciate your time today.

Lisa Castillo Richmond: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Baber: Yeah. So, tell us a little bit more about yourself, PCC and the work you've been involved in reforming developmental education across the state. I know this is a very passionate project for you as a first-generation student, as a first-generation student from Illinois. So, you can talk a little bit how that has framed your leadership and the ways that you've led these efforts through policy development and reform at PCC.

Castillo Richmond: Absolutely. I'll start a little bit with our organization, the PCC, because I think it will help sort of frame how we have been, and how I personally have been involved in this work in the state of Illinois for the past several years. So, PCC is a unique organization. We are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that's based in Chicago, and our geographic focus is across the entire state of Illinois. We got our start in 2016 as an organization dedicated to addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities in our higher education system in the state. And as we got started and we started having conversations with leaders and equity practitioners and, you know, those in the state legislature that worked on issues of higher education and student success and so many different people who care about these issues, from those that are in high school and [have] faith in college to those that are working in our colleges and universities, we definitely saw an opportunity and a need in the state for an organization to focus on sort of understanding what is the state of our higher education system, how has the state been investing or disinvesting in it? You know, what are the kinds of things that an organization, independent organization like PCC, could do to effectuate college affordability, college equity, degree completion in the state. You know, connecting higher ed to, you know, labor market outcomes and, you know, economic prosperity in the state, retaining our students and, you know, quality of life for students and families in the state of Illinois. So those are really all the things that we were thinking about as this organization was getting started.

So, it really led us to our programming and our policy work. Our work really falls into three categories of action. So, in no particular order, these are policy work and advocacy efforts. So that's largely state policy and advocacy. Two: campus-level work, as you mentioned. So, we support policy implementation at the campus level. We convene colleges and universities and provide some technical support for institutions that are looking to address racial and socioeconomic inequities at the campus and student level and provide supports and convene institutions to learn from each other. And then our third area of work is really

about data and research. How can we understand data? How can we conduct original research or elevate existing research through partners at the state and national level to tell this story about what's happening in our higher education system, and what are some of the challenges we have, and what are some appropriate solutions for those? And I think as we got going, developmental education reform became an early focus of our work. Our policy agenda focuses on access, affordability and accountability in the system. And as we were thinking about ways in which we could effectuate change that would be significant, developmental education reform came up *early* as something that we should really focus efforts on.

Baber: I appreciate that perspective because I think a lot of times developmental ed kind of falls in the cracks between secondary and postsecondary education. And when those conversations happen, they actually exacerbate the tensions between those sectors as opposed to providing a bridge. And I think your work around policy and your organization around policy, advocacy, institutional practices and data and research really helps provide, not only a bridge, but kind of a strong support beams for those bridges in thinking about those three areas.

So, tell us a little bit about what are some of the key findings that you've seen in developmental ed across Illinois, across those different areas of policy practices and data.

Castillo Richmond: I think one of the things that makes developmental education reform so challenging is miscommunication. I think that, as you stated in the opening to this conversation, developmental education was designed to support students, right, in developing necessary skills, often in English and math, so that students can be successful in their first credit-bearing college courses. *However*, the reality of developmental education historically is *not* one of success. The vast majority of students across institutions across the state and the nation were not being served well by traditional developmental education courses. And what I mean by that is we saw 70%, 80% in some institutions higher than that of students in these courses, not being able to pass them. And when we see those consistently across different kinds of institutions, historically year after year, we have to look to: This is not an issue of what the students are or are not doing. This is a structural issue with our system. And so I think that miscommunication forms a lot of the tension in this work because I think both the reformers and the faculty in the classroom with students want what's best for students, and they're sort of approaching this from opposite sides of the conversation. So, I think *that* creates a lot of tension early on in these conversations.

You know, we saw that play out both at the campus and the state level and, ultimately, you know, that created an opportunity for us to, back in 2019, to get started with a task force.

So, there was a bill, Senate Joint Resolution 41 passed in [the] Illinois legislature, creating an advisory council to sort of study the issue. So that's where there was kind of a formal body that was tasked with looking at the data, looking at the evidence both within the state and from the campuses, but then also looking nationally across the country at other laws and what their impact had been. And I think that really started the conversation, but the miscommunication, I think, has not only impacted, you know, the work that went into moving towards a bill that eventually passed in 2021. HB 2170 passed in Illinois, and part of that omnibus equity bill, passed by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus's leadership, was inclusive of the Developmental Education Reform Act.

And I think part of that has continued, part of those miscommunications and the challenge of this and how contentious it is, has played out because, unlike some of the other reforms that PCC and others have worked to implement, connected to our higher education system, this one is *extremely complex*. You know, it implicates different departments and units and parts of the college and university. It implicates what happens at the classroom, the coursework, the sequences, how students are brought into the institution and enroll in their classes. So, it is among *the* most complex kinds of reforms, and it requires so many different people and human beings in the institutions to do things differently. And I think that's why, even though, you know, we started this work back in 2019, this bill passed in 2021, implementation took effect in 2022, we still have so much work that lies ahead of us. We've seen tons of progress, and it's really exciting, but there's so much work ahead because of the complexity of this kind of reform.

Baber: Yeah, that complexity, I mean, that goes all the way back to my previous time at OCCRL, 2009, 2010. We were looking at developmental education, and particularly in math, as part of the [Race to the Top](#) grant award. And so, you know, you're talking 15 years in and it's that complexity of it. And it's also the idea of, like, if you move *this* piece, how does it affect this other piece and how do we recalibrate it so that it's a little more balanced in terms of the approach? This is not an individual problem or a student-centered problem. This is a structural problem and I think that's also an important conversation to have—that you're not blaming the students for *needing* developmental education, but we're actually thinking about ways in which the structure can reduce that need through policies and practices that's ...

Castillo Richmond: Right.

Baber: ... [a] sustainable structure and baked into policy, not just one-offs. And that takes a while, right, to do that.

So, thinking about what we've been doing at least since 2019 and 2021, when the bill was passed, and we're about four years into that work formally, from your perspective, where are we at with developmental education reform across Illinois? Are there things that we can point to as strong momentums? Are there things that, from your perspective, still need improvement? Just provide us with a general snapshot of where we're at in the state.

Castillo Richmond: I think that a reform this complex where there is not one recipe or one playbook you can just take a page out of and then layer it into your institution and then it's done, right? These are ... equity work, developmental education reform, any education reform, a lot of it is just a long-term commitment of year over year progress that you're making. So, I would say that's true both at the state level and at the campus level. There are a lot of things that we're really excited about and I'll talk about those. I do think these are really early days.

We had a conversation. One of the things that we like to do in terms of supporting implementation of policies, such as the DERA reform, is to convene institutions that are at different places in their reform work so that they can learn from each other and talk to each other. And a couple of months ago, we had a conversation where we had a few different institutional leaders and the head of our state agency, the Illinois Community College Board, in conversation on a panel discussion talking about where they're at with these reforms. And one of the college presidents who had fully implemented developmental education reform—they had phased out zero credit courses and developmental education in their institution—and they were deploying methods such as corequisite models of support, fully, for all of their students who needed those kinds of supports. And, you know, we went through a 25-minute conversation with these institutional leaders. There was another one there who was talking about their early work. They were about a year and a half into their reform work. And at the end of the conversation, I asked the one who had fully scaled, I asked the president, you know, how long has it taken you to get here? And he said, 'We've been at this for just over 10 years.' And, you know, I pointed out that the children benefiting from these reforms now were in elementary school when they got started doing this work at the community college. And I think that just goes to illustrate how complex these things are, and that you have to sort of set these incremental goals.

On the positive side, I think we have seen tens of thousands *less* students in the state of Illinois being placed in developmental education. That is incredible. Because as I mentioned earlier, these are courses *typically* that are not helping students to develop the skills they need. You know, up to 80% of them are not being able to pass out of these courses in the first semester they take them. And we've seen tens of thousands less students in these courses.

Additionally, you know, the bill really has two components. So, there's the placement reforms that give basically a multiple measures approach. Institutions have to look for students to qualify for college credit courses, college level courses in one of multiple ways. It cannot just be a placement test. It cannot just be, you know, one of these high-stakes measures. If they have the high school GPA, they qualify. If they've taken another equivalent course in another institution, they qualify. So, there are multiple ways for students to qualify so we're no longer over placing students in developmental education coursework.

And the second component of the law is really model scaling. Actually, Illinois' law is flexible. It's flexible, especially compared to a lot of other states that mandate a particular model. But it just states that Illinois institutions must implement and scale developmental education models that are most likely to maximize students' likelihood of completing a gateway course in both math and English within their first two semesters in college. What PCC has done to support that is to provide supports for institutions to develop a particular model because it is the model with *the* most overwhelming and compelling evidence of doing that, and those are the corequisite models of support that I've been discussing, which look like a lot of different things, but essentially, it's the 101 introductory course in a particular math or English sequence, with some additional supports. And those can look different. A lot of institutions do implement those differently. Some of them offer one model, some offer more than one kind of model depending on the needs of their students. But we are seeing more and more institutions implementing those models and they are, you know, much more highly effective than traditional developmental education or other comparative models.

And so we have specifically been trying to support the implementation and scale of corequisite models in institutions across the state. While we saw a real dramatic drop in students placed in traditional developmental education, we were not seeing a commensurate placement into corequisite models in the early years of the reform. Now we are seeing that. And so that's really heartening for us. And I think we're going to continue to monitor that. We know the state is doing that. Illinois Community College Board releases their reports on a regular basis, but we're going to continue to monitor that. But we also know that it doesn't just happen on its own, and that's why we're not just writing reports or collecting data. We are actually on the ground, at the campus level, trying to deliver these supports so institutions can make these changes and have the resources to do so.

Baber: Yeah, so [what] I'm hearing is that really this is the connection between the research and data and the institutional practice, right? And the bill doesn't necessarily define a particular model. And I think that's important for our audience to be clear about is that

there's not a particular model that the bill emphasizes like some other states. But from your work, you've seen the best practice from the data says this corequisite model seems to have a unique impact on developmental education and reducing that inequality. And then institutions can continue to match that data as they build out that model to make sure that that actually is happening on their campus. And if it's not, there is still space in the legislation to say, you know, maybe there's unique variables to adjust the model, but the base model is that corequisite model that's emphasized by the research that says it's successful, but certainly institutions are limited by that. Is that pretty accurate in terms of the summary?

Castillo Richmond: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that captures it.

Baber: And then placement. So, [what are] some of the challenges that remain in terms of the building out [of] the model? Because I know a lot of work that we've done with you all seems to be that the conversation is less on placement and more on the model. Is that a good place for us to be with or should we keep our thumb on the pulse of the placement as well in trying to recalibrate that as we move forward?

Castillo Richmond: Yeah, I think that is an accurate assessment. One of the things, PCC did want to see corequisite models in the actual legislative language. Originally our goal and our advocacy was focused on that. Ultimately, like I said, the more flexible version of this bill passed. And so our approach to that is to say, well, let's see how this plays out. Let's see how this affects students. Let's see how this affects campuses. And see overtime if that's the right answer that we would amend a bill, or not. And we want to use sort of resources in order to deploy and scale that model.

I think we have focused less on placement. I think that there is a big opportunity there. I think the state agency, the Illinois Community College Board, specifically has deployed funding to institutions to implement developmental education reforms. This year they started having convenings across the state in different regions, talking about these issues, talking about resources, elevating, doing some of the things that PCC was doing but doing them at the state and regional levels, which is really powerful. Because I think the reality of this is that PCC cannot do this work alone, right? Campuses cannot do this work alone. The state agency doesn't have the resources to do this work alone. But *collectively*, I think we can do this work together, learning from each other, you know, deploying resources where they're needed. And I do think, as you point out, we need more resources on the placement side, and we do need more resources on the implementation and the model side, the actual coursework. So, you know, we're trying different approaches. We work with the Illinois Community College Board. We work with coaches. So PCC has found philanthropic funding to deploy coaches in a number of our partner institutions.

You know, one of the things we want to do more—we've done some evaluation work with OCCRL—but a few things we want to do is to continue to create resources to try to make those widely accessible to institutions, including the ones we never directly work with or who are not working with another third party provider, so that people can see and access what other institutions in the state are doing. Because, you know, this is just one piece of a much bigger puzzle that institutional leaders and faculty are tasked with doing in their institution. It's always difficult work, but this is a very hard moment for higher education in 2025.

Baber: Sure. Yeah.

And so many demands, so many worries and concerns. And so I think we need to come together in community as, you know, practitioners and educators who care about these issues, learn from each other. I think the spirit of this is more, 'How do we do this better for our students?' rather than sort of punitively, how do we say what we're not doing or what we haven't done yet. But how do we come together because, you know, reforming developmental education, ensuring students can *move* with momentum through their college course work *is* really important and ultimately will determine a student's trajectory in college and their ultimate college and career outcomes.

Baber: Yeah. And I think that's one thing we've seen in terms of our work with the convenings that you've supported through the collaboration. And I had the opportunity to go to the southern convening at Rend Lake, the [Illinois Central College) convening in Peoria. I know there was a third meeting I wasn't able to make it to in [the] Chicagoland area, but I know from the notes that there's a lot of consistency, and I think that's important for ICCB to hear, the Illinois Community College Board. But also among institutions that say this is not a competitive landscape. This is a very collaborative. And now you're even seeing the innovations that are happening outside. So, as you said, the bill started out with placement, with model, but now we're seeing in these conversations the sharing of innovative practices, particularly around curriculum and pedagogy, which I think is really, really nice to see because in the developmental ed literature and scholarship, I don't see that nuanced conversation happening.

Castillo Richmond: Yeah.

Baber: And we're doing that both at the institutional level but also across the state to say, 'Okay, what is this, for example, cultural responsive pedagogy and how do we infuse that in these courses, whether they're, you know, traditional developmental education courses or corequisite model or another kind of initiative that the institution is starting?' And I think that's really some of the ways in which this particular act and the ways that your

organization, PCC, along with ICCB and OCCRL have kind of modeled in terms of, like, we work *with* not *to*, right? And as we work with, we can hear the ideas and then recalibrate that. Let's say what does it look like when you shift curriculum and pedagogy through the data, through the research? And hopefully that's getting to the individuals and communities who, again, we want to center, right? Which are underrepresented populations with the emphasis on black students and other students of color, as well as students from low-resource communities. And so I think that's where the metaphor of the 'rubber meets the road' sort of speaks.

Any final thoughts about kind of where we're at with developmental education, you know, your work that you've seen over the last really six years plus of being involved in these conversations from the policy development through the support of institutional practices and the collection of data. Just final thoughts.

Castillo Richmond: Well, first, I could not agree more with you. I think we have spent *a lot* of time in the past several years making the case for these reforms, you know, and that doesn't stop even after a bill passes, right? A bill passes and, you know, it doesn't automatically get implemented, right? It's deeply dependent on human action and we spent *a lot of time* making the case for why these reforms are important and why they matter to students. And I think what you just said is what's exciting to me. You know, I think in a lot of cases, we're able to kind of move past those opening conversations about why we've been doing this to say, 'Look at what we can think about when we think about the unique kinds of pedagogy and curriculum and support and how do we engage students in their first semesters in college and let them know they have a place here.' Especially in community colleges, students regularly reflect on the fact that they *love* their community college experiences. So many students who have spent time as community college students say that their faculty are so caring and they felt so connected to them, and they helped them in all these ways outside of the coursework and classroom material. And so I think this is part and parcel of that. It's very exciting because we can think about, you know, how can we do this differently? Who is doing these things in ways that are really resonating with students? Because, like I said, I think, you know, our team was doing some research to sort of look at how many students do we think have been impacted over the past three years of implementation by this bill, and our early calculations show it's maybe about 62,000 students. I mean, that is *profound*, right?

Baber: Yeah.

Castillo Richmond: Every single one of those students probably will have a different opportunity and experience now in higher education *because* of some of these reforms and not getting stuck in a cycle of coursework that they can't get out of.

Baber: Yeah.

Castillo Richmond: It's their first and last stop in higher ed. So I am most excited about that. I'm most excited about continuing to be a partner in this work and thinking about and elevating. What are some of the innovations that are working the best and how can we spread those to peer institutions across the state?

Baber: Thank you so much. I mean, you think about that 62,000 students and the impact that it's making, you know, on communities, right? So 62,000 students who now have a little bit better idea of the road map to a college degree and how they are then getting that message back to their communities, right? Sixty-two thousand folks. Or, on the other side, 62,000 folks who are now in a placement for a high-wage earning job *sooner* because they have less time to [focus on] that degree or credential completion. I mean, the *magnitude* of that impact is really, really important to consider both from a community perspective, economic perspective and, of course, this podcast from a democratic perspective, which is the name of this podcast. Democracy's College is working well with this effort.

So thank you so much for your support and engagement. And I encourage our listeners, if you want to learn more about the Partnership for College Completion and Dr. Castillo Richmond's work, their website is partnershipfcc.org. That's partnershipfcc.org. And of course we always encourage you to go to the OCCRL website too, which we have a number of collaborations with PCC. And we can be found at occrl.illinois.edu.

Again, Lisa, thank you so much for your time and I hope you have a great day and thank you all for listening.

Castillo Richmond: Thank you.

Nudo: Tune in to the next Democracy's College podcast when OCCRL senior research assistant H.M. Kuneyl talks with LaDrina Wilson about the challenges that can arise at a community college that is located on the border of two states: In this case, the states of Illinois and Iowa. Dr. Wilson is the founder and CEO of Iman Consulting.

Background music for this podcast is provided by Pixabay. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice and excellence in education for all students.