

Democracy's College, Episode 70

How Data Can Drive Equity, Student Success, and Institutional Effectiveness

With guest Sadya Khan and host H.M. Kuneyl

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.

In this episode, OCCRL senior research assistant H.M. Kuneyl talks to Dr. Sadya Khan, the executive director of institutional research, planning, and effectiveness at Moraine Valley Community College. Their conversation is a part of the Democracy's College special-edition series covering OCCRL's Illinois Community College Leadership Institute, which Dr. Khan has participated in.

H.M. Kuneyl: Howdy, everyone, and welcome back to the Illinois Community College Leadership podcast. I am *your host*, Kuneyl!

As you know, the Illinois Community College Leadership podcast started in 2023 as a way of continuing the work of the institute. The institute is in partnership with ICCB and OCCRL and is designed to address the widening gap between aspiring community college leaders and the current and future openings in those positions. This series is a part of the Democracy's [College] podcast to continue the work of the Leadership Institute over the year and throughout. We have guest speakers that come from across the state, and really across the country, to help us continue the work and continue expanding our knowledge of leadership and practice.

As I mentioned before, I am your host and coordinator, Kuneyl. Today, I am joined with a Leadership Institute alumni, Dr. Sadya Khan, executive director of institutional research and planning and effectiveness at Moraine Valley Community College. Welcome, Dr. Khan.

Sadya Khan: Thanks so much for having me here today, Kuneyl. I appreciate it.

H.M. Kuneyl: *Absolutely.* I'm excited about it. Dr. Khan is an alumni, so you may recognize her if you are a community member. *But*, if not, would you mind telling our listeners a little bit about yourself?

Sadya Khan: Hi, everyone. My name is Sadya Khan. As Kuneyl mentioned, I currently serve as the executive director of IR planning and effectiveness at Moraine Valley—Go Cyclones. I have spent over 15 years helping colleges use data to improve student success, advance equity, strengthen their institutional effectiveness systems.

So, not only am I an alum of this Leadership Institute, I'm also a U of I alum, so go Illini. My degrees are in English and economics. And I always say I'm an English major at heart, but my econ background is what really kind of sucked me into this world of numbers and data. But what I found, though, is my English training or background is really just as valuable, if not more so, because no matter how good that data is, it doesn't matter unless you can tell the story, right, and communicate it clearly. So that's really been such a valuable part of my training.

I came to Moraine Valley through an opening they had about 10 years ago for an assistant director of research position. And since then, I've moved into the position that I'm currently in. I really enjoy at Moraine Valley the opportunity to collaborate with many of my colleagues and lead some of our major initiatives like our inaugural equity academy. We also have an equity academy—I know OCCRL has one as well—an assessment academy, various retention conferences, strategic planning efforts.

Beyond my role at the college, I also serve on the board of a nonprofit that provides mentoring, educational, and social opportunities for refugee girls in Chicago and Austin. It's called Girl Forward. So I love the opportunity to serve on that board as well.

I'm the daughter of immigrants from India who came here back in the '70s to further their education, make a better life for their family. So, I'm really passionate about making higher education accessible, impactful for *all* students, which is really what led me to working in the community college sector.

H.M. Kuneyl: Thank you for sharing. There's a lot to unpack there. I can really see how the multiplicity of your background guides your work and how it shows up.

I couldn't agree more. It doesn't matter how great of researchers we are or how informed we are in our practice; if we can't communicate it, there's always going to be that missing component.

And *love* that you gave a shout-out to the Cyclones. My community college back home in Houston, Texas, was the Hurricanes.

Sadya Khan: Oh, okay!

H.M. Kuneyl: So that regionality there –

Sadya Khan: Very cool.

H.M. Kuneyl: – which is we *know* that we're in weather-problematic areas and we're just gonna trust [laughs] that lighthearted way.

Let's just jump right into it. Within your work, I think everybody knows someone who has a similar title to [the one] you have. I feel like we might struggle to really pinpoint the different aspects of your work. Can you kind of share what types of data do you work with in your role and how do you go about selecting those types of data to answer certain questions?

Sadya Khan: It's funny you mentioned that about, you know, knowing people who work in this field. I had an old boss and she used to say, whenever someone described the work she did, it would be like, 'Oh, you know, she works on surveys.' And she said, 'Oh, I do a little more than surveys.' You know, but it's just funny the impressions that people have of the work, if they have one at all. You know, sometimes it's hard to tell exactly what people do.

But I'll start off by saying I really feel fortunate to work with an amazing team of researchers on my staff, so [I] just wanted to give a shout out to them. We're a team of six, so we're a collectively small but mighty group, I like to say. And I start off with that because everyone has different strengths that are utilized in different ways for different types of research projects and requests throughout the process. So whether it's the cleanup of messy data or digging into analysis or presenting the information, all of those steps are so important no matter what type of data set you use just along that continuum.

But typically, we have different types of data that we work with, most commonly student enrollment data. We look at demographics data about those different populations, course success rates, retention rates, who's here from one semester to the next, from one year to the next. We do do surveys, of course, with our students, with our employees, our faculty and staff. We like to track what happens after graduation, whether our students transfer or head into the workforce, what do those outcomes look like? And then there's outside data we bring in to provide different contexts, so whether that's labor-market trends; if we have somebody or a department looking to add a new program, for example, we want to look at what's marketable, what's lucrative out there, information about our peer institutions, that sort of thing. But really, we want to know what question we're trying to answer, right? So depending on what the question is, who's asking, that will determine which data set we use and how we frame that. So if a faculty member has a question about core success rates, I might pull grades, I might pull retention rates, and then look at some of those

characteristics about that data, whether that's the teaching format, if the modality was in person or online, any student characteristics—those are some sorts of information I may pull for them. If our leadership is trying to do some long-term planning, I may combine our enrollment data with external demographic data to sort of give that full picture of what's happening in our district and in our state to be able to do some of that planning.

Our goal isn't just to analyze data but to select the right data for the right question and then frame it in a way that helps that individual make better decisions for our students and for our community.

H.M. Kuneyl: I completely agree and I see how even that you might be pulling enrollment data to talk about retention or enrollment data to talk about a graduation, you're probably framing that very differently depending on your audience. Can you talk about that a bit?

Sadya Khan: Yeah, so I think really the best place to start is with the question, as I mentioned. So, for people to ask themselves questions about what they're trying to understand better, what challenges may be in a certain situation, what opportunities there might be, and then sort of taking those next steps of figuring out which data to pull to match what question that is. And then really thinking about who that audience is and what they're looking for. I think having those conversations about which data makes the most sense and how to present it in a way that will be easily interpreted and something that's visually appealing as well, depending on who that is.

H.M. Kuneyl: Yes, exactly. I was thinking of, like, heat maps can be a way of presenting data. I don't want to get too much into the weeds. I recognize our listeners can't see the heat map when I explain it, but I think that's kind of like beginner-friendly way of presenting data, if your data happens to fall into that way of displaying it. And the bar graph is great, but if you've seen 30 of them today, they start to lose their [laughs] ...

Sadya Khan: Right. Right. Exactly, exactly. And I think these are conversations we have on our staff all the time about different data sets. Maybe we do a survey or maybe we have some data that we're pulling and how to best present that and what makes sense. Does it make sense as more of a static report? Does it make sense to pull it into a dashboard so it's more dynamic and we have filters for people to be able to pull what *they're* looking for? So, all of these questions are definitely things we consider when deciding how to eventually present that information.

H.M. Kuneyl: What are some of those beginner-friendly ways for folks to start incorporating more data into their current roles?

Sadya Khan: You know, I keep saying being curious and thinking about the questions that you have is really the best place to start. So instead of thinking about numbers on a

spreadsheet, really asking some of those questions of what you're curious about, what challenges you may have, what are you trying to understand better, and then accessing data that may already exist around you, not necessarily trying to hunt for brand-new information. But there's data everywhere, and so that may exist depending on your role in the form of student feedback. You may have attendance records. It may be budget information. You can start small with the information you have and try to see if you can discern any sort of patterns. If there's anything that jumps out at you, if there's anything that surprises you, that's some of that initial sort of analysis or observations that you may have when looking at that information.

And also, it's not something that you necessarily have to do alone. You may have colleagues who are more comfortable with doing that data analysis, or even just share what you notice and ask for their perspectives. I think having different viewpoints on the same data, it's always really interesting. And I'm sure you've noticed this in meetings where you have multiple people looking at the same report or the same data set, and everyone will have a different takeaway, something different that jumps out at them, or like a different insight to the same piece of data. Because we all have different roles. You know, all of our minds work differently.

I love to do that with my own folks sometimes, just kind of present some data without any context and see what they have to say about it. And everybody will have a different take or a different next step they might think about as to where to go with answering some additional questions. So I think, you know, that sort of partnering with people just to get their perspectives or even people that you know that may feel more comfortable with data and looking at data, that would be a great part of that process or that journey as well.

And I think also to remember that data doesn't necessarily *replace* your experiences or whatever instincts you may have. It's just serving to enhance whatever it is that you're coming into that place with. So really, when you're pairing your own experiences with whatever data you're able to pull and analyze, that's where you're gaining that confidence or gaining that credibility and influence. Whatever it is you're trying to do; if you're trying to convince somebody of a certain position or maybe you're trying to make a point to get more money or funding for a certain initiative. That's the power of being able to combine that data with your own experiences to try to make that happen.

H.M. Kuneyl: Yeah, I love the idea of bringing other folks in and kind of workshopping the data or even your research interest—what kind of questions do you have? It reminds me that whether it's an assessment project looking at a specific program or course, or it's a larger research project, data collection and evaluation is iterative. Like, I think that sometimes we can get it in our head that we have to know every step the moment we start,

and that's just not really how it works. We do the best we can with the information we have. And once we have more, we go back and revisit and reevaluate. So, I love that you started from that.

Sadya Khan: Yeah. You're kind of starting at the end with what you're wanting to know and then going through that process. Exactly.

H.M. Kuneyl: If you don't mind me hopping around a little bit in our questions –

Sadya Khan: No.

H.M. Kuneyl: I think the flow that we're on right now really leads into the question about how would you describe cultivating data-informed decision-making within a leadership role?

Sadya Khan: So, I think if you're stepping into a leadership role or maybe whatever position you're in, you're wanting to take on more of that leadership role in terms of cultivating the use of data, I'd say the first thing I would recommend is just to take a temperature of the culture of where you're at, you know, whether it's you're going into a new institution or maybe the institution where you're at. How do you think people are feeling about data? Is it something that they *trust*? Is it something they feel comfortable using? What experiences have they had? Maybe with people or with systems, both positive and negative, that have sort of shaped whatever it is that they're *feeling* about the use of data. I think that's really important to kind of do. It's like you're assessing the assessment or you're assessing sort of the culture of where people are with data.

And in my case, when I came into this role, I was fortunate because my predecessor had built a pretty solid foundation. People at the college generally trusted the information coming out of my office and they held the office in pretty high regard. So, when I arrived, I had the opportunity to kind of build off of that and take that to the next level rather than starting from scratch. Because I have worked places where that's not the case. And people, you know, you really need to work with people to help them get to a point where they feel like this is reliable, the information that I'm getting is trustworthy and, you know, I trust the *people* who are giving me that information that they have, you know, our collective best interest at heart and you're doing things with the right intentions and everything like that.

So I think that's definitely important. I think we want to model that curiosity I was talking about earlier and create opportunities for people to use data in ways beyond just compliance. So I think a lot of times when people think about data, there's this, you know, idea of data being used for compliance and accountability and those sorts of measures, which is important. We need to do that. And so that's definitely there. But we want to also

make data something that is relatable and something that's meaningful for people within their roles, whether they're faculty or staff or students, whoever they are.

So, for example, at my college, we built some academies, some faculty and staff academies where teams explore data projects related to issues in areas of retention and equity and assessment. So some of the teams, they came up with some really cool projects looking at online success rates. They examined equity and academic integrity cases and even bias in our library cataloging. So we had faculty and staff from around the college in different departments start to explore some of these ideas and use data to continue that exploration. And at the end of the year, we celebrated the work that they did through showcases. And people, you know, they had a lot of ownership, felt a lot of pride about the work that they did and how they were able to use data to sort of get to a point where they were feeling like they had some meaningful results that they could share with their colleagues and implement within their classrooms and within their departments.

So I think that's important. I think, you know, we need to have reliable systems. So, part of that trust is making sure that the data that we're providing, we're doing a good job with strengthening what's happening on the back end. So, I know at my institution, at other institutions, there's a lot of like third-party systems coming in to do all sorts of things from recruitment and enrollment and assessment and evaluation. So there is definitely a need to make sure that all of those systems, you know, they're talking to each other and the data is all coming out what we expected to be doing. So it may not sound like the most glamorous or exciting part of the job, but it's so important because that trust, again, going back to that, if the data is not accurate and reliable, people aren't going to trust it and they won't use it. And so, even with all the reports and the mapping and the dashboards, we can have all of those in place, but that backend is equally as important to make sure that everything is functioning as it should.

So all of those things, making sure there's trust and encouraging the curiosity, making sure people have sort of the tools and the skills that they need, and then ensuring that we're also leading people to show how they can use the data to connect those dots. So, it's not enough to just give the information, right?

H.M. Kuneyl: Yeah.

Sadya Khan: We have reports, we have dashboards, here you go. And some people may have some ideas of what to do with that information, but oftentimes we have to provide some guideposts and some training or information on how they could potentially use that to either further their own exploration or to create some change that they'll be able to see.

H.M. Kuneyl: And it sounds like, just from hearing you talk about this, it sounds like a good way to address mistrust in data is to invite folks to use it, to be a part of that collaborative curiosity. The more information you have about how to *use* information, the more empowered you might be to entrust it.

Sadya Khan: Exactly, exactly. It's kind of like just getting in there and seeing and being comfortable with going in there. And I think we as a provider also have to be comfortable with knowing they're going to go in and they might find things that are unexpected or that are surprising, but that's all a part of that process, for sure.

H.M. Kuneyl: And I also think that we can remember that using data and data-informed decisions doesn't have to *be* a *massive* survey of every student in your discipline or every student in your network, but it can also be smaller things like doing a poll in your classroom about which ways do students like to interact with the instructor. Do they prefer to be able to utilize their cell phones in class? Do they prefer to meet in person? Do they prefer to do some sort of, like, poll anywhere activity. It's kind of a small way that you can start getting student feedback. And then a larger way could be like doing, I don't know, end-of-the-semester exit interviews for more qualitative data about how your class went or considering being a part of your campus team to reevaluate teacher evaluations and the methodologies that you use there.

I have a student affairs background and now as a Ph.D. student, I'm more in that academic teacher space. But I think about the ways that we collect data. A lot of times it is opinion surveys. So, as you're thinking about that, I kind of want to put you into a scenario.

Sadya Khan: Okay.

H.M. Kuneyl: So, imagine that you're a new director working in academic advising at Neighborhood Community College, and there's a trend of students dropping the same government class from semester to semester. And as you think about this, you want to know, like, *what's* going on? Why are so many students dropping this one class? What type of data could you use? Like, what might be already collected at your institution? And how would you go about exploring this topic to improve student success on your campus?

Sadya Khan: That's a great question. You know, and there's scenarios like this all the time on college campuses. We notice different trends. And so how do we go about addressing what it is that we might see come up in a report?

So, I would say, actually, my first step would have nothing to do with data per se, but more focused on creating or building that relationship with those faculty members. So in this particular scenario, if this is occurring in a government class or classes, I think it's just really critical to collaborate with the faculty member, or members, teaching those classes.

Because whether it's a class or whether it's a department, wherever you're noticing some of these trends, we know that people take a lot of pride in the work that they do. This is their domain. This is their livelihood. They come in. This is their space where they're doing their work. And so, you know, there's very few people that would want someone from the outside coming into their space and telling them, these are the problems I'm seeing and this is what I think you should be doing, right? I don't think any of us like that. So I think it's really important to have that up front, that idea of not operating sort of in our silos and approaching it from more of a collaborative perspective with those faculty members. So definitely creating a relationship if that relationship's not already there.

And then once that's in place, like, hey, you know, I noticed this, I think we can look at this together. You may have some insights into it already. And more often than not, they *will* have some insights as to what they may be noticing. You know, digging into the numbers, looking at those withdrawal rates. So the students that are dropping by semester, if we're seeing any trends by sections or by instructors, are we seeing any of those spikes in certain modalities, again, like hybrid or online or face-to-face? Are we seeing first-year students struggling more than returning students? Is there any sort of gaps we can see by major, by any demographics? You know, those are some of the, I think, quantitative information that we can start to collect and start to look at that over time. You know, we don't want to just look at it at one point in time. We want to see if we can notice any sort of patterns over the fall semesters, over the spring. Maybe there's a difference there. There's so many different ways, as you know, that you can look at that information.

But then, you know, we don't want to, obviously, just look at numbers. We want to get at more of why that could be happening. So those faculty members may have some of those insights as to what they've observed or noticed with some of those classes. They may see where students have hit some of those roadblocks within their own classes through their experiences. Talking to students directly, seeing what they have to say about those classes, what may be challenging to them. If there are formal sort of class evaluations that are done, taking a look at those, any sort of exit surveys or conversations, again, with students who may have dropped the class, students that are in the class.

So, I think you get sort of that fuller picture and then you're able to potentially shape some solutions based on what you're seeing with both of those sort of qualitative, quantitative data, whether that's maybe supplemental instruction, embedded tutors, any advising practices that may need to be adjusted or any curriculum adjustments. I think, again, approaching it from a collaborative sort of way and then looking at these different types of data will hopefully help shape what can alleviate that issue.

H.M. Kuneyl: I like that you started with relationships because I think it feeds into some of the misconceptions that data is punitive or that it *can* be used in a punitive sense. Have you encountered that? And if you have, again, just more thoughts about how to make people comfortable with data.

Sadya Khan: Yeah, I mean, I think those relationships are really critical. It definitely comes from being in those positions or those experiences where you don't necessarily approach it from that way, you know, and then you kind of learn and you're like, oh, that's not the best way to go about this.

And then going back to the culture piece too, I think it's important to assess every college is different, every institution as far as even with communication: Is it formal? Is it informal? Is it more hierarchical? You know, so I think taking the time to assess that to see *how* some of those relationships can be formed to then have those conversations. And then when people feel comfortable, when they feel like this is a person or a department I can trust, this is information that I trust, then they're more willing to trust the process and not feel like this information is going to be used in a way that will harm them or that's, you know, looking to punish them in some way.

You know, there's always going to be situations where people have those concerns, you know, so it's not a perfect solution by any means, but I think trying to do that off the bat or making sure that those relationships so that trust is in place is really important.

H.M. Kuneyl: Thinking about institutional research and just for any of our listeners who might be curious about how to get into your position or thinking about applying for jobs in your position: Any tips just generally for those who *really* want to make data more a part of what they do?

Sadya Khan: Yeah, I mean, I guess I would say if you're interested in doing this work specifically, I mean, now I know there's a lot more, you know, even credentials you can get, you know, IR certificates and things like that, you know, if that's something maybe you want to explore and see what the field is really about. I would also check out the Association for Institutional Research, the AIR website. They have so many different resources, you know, presentations and classes and things like that. If that's something that, again, you want to explore before, you know, if you have to make some big decision about going into this field or not. That information's there, talking to people who are in the field, just getting a sense of what their day-to-day is like and the types of work that they do.

My team, as I mentioned, we're a team of six, which I know can seem pretty large to a lot of institutions that just have a team of one, you know, they're the one person doing this work. So, I think that will kind of also dictate the variety of work that you get if you're like a one

person versus a six- or seven-person office. If you're interested in one aspect of that, for example, you may be able to *choose* that if you're going into working at a bigger office versus a smaller office where you're kind of the jack of all trades and have to know how to do everything. But yeah, if you are interested in exploring information, data analysis, statistics, this may be something that you want to see if you have a career in this.

H.M. Kuneyl: Absolutely. I want to remind our listeners that data can be fun and making it more a part of your day is a great way to explore how.

Let's jump into our last question, which is, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about? Earlier in your introduction, you told us about so many of the different things that you were doing right now. So, I just want to give you some airspace. This could be a shameless plug or a shout-out.

Sadya Khan: I did want to say, I think, an example of some of what I talked about earlier with some of the, you know, systems for measurement and things like that. I think our college has done a great job putting together a process. We call it the PIE process. Sometimes we have pie, too. Data can be fun, right? But it stands for plan, improve, evaluate. It's essentially a way that we ask departments to identify any opportunities or challenges in their area and put together a plan where they are, you know, sort of delineating their steps on improvement, their measurement steps. Then 18 months later, they're able to share what they were able to do. And so we've seen some, I mean, really cool projects. You know, you think about something like this and you think, you know, within the classroom, like some of those examples you gave with enrollment trends and things like that. But we've seen some really cool improvements happen with data in our mailroom, in our campus operations. The coolest projects we've seen have been ways that people have thought to improve processes in areas in those departments. And it's something you may not even think about, like how you can use data to make those improvements.

Like we mentioned earlier, data is everywhere. And it's really about finding the pieces that are relevant to the work that you do and how you can harness that to make improvements and then, hopefully, just operate more efficiently.

H.M. Kuneyl: Absolutely. I mean, you mentioned the mailroom and our printer is also in our mailroom. And I thought there's someone tracking how much paper and how much ink –

Sadya Khan: Right.

H.M. Kuneyl: ... and when high volumes are going and when not –

Sadya Khan: Right.

H.M. Kuneyl: ... so they know to order. And I don't think about any of this. But what I do think about is how wonderful it is when there's paper in the printer, and I can get to my reading immediately (laughs).

Sadya Khan: Right, right! Yeah.

H.M. Kuneyl: So, you know, yeah, data everywhere. Data everywhere. And it's part of our lives, so let's make it a tool for our success.

Sadya Khan: Yeah, absolutely.

H.M. Kuneyl: Awesome. Also, love the pie pun. I don't think you can see her, but off camera is my beloved calico cat, whose name is Pie (laughs). She was born on March 14.

Sadya Khan: Okay. Okay.

H.M. Kuneyl: And once a nerd, always a nerd.

Sadya Khan: Yeah, well, I was gonna say, we try to align. You know, I mentioned sometimes we do these end-of-year celebrations, and so we try to align our PIE celebration on March 14. You know, whenever we can do these sorts of things, you know, once a nerd, always a nerd, right?

H.M. Kuneyl: Yep. Keep it fun. Keep it exciting. I love it. Well, I want to thank you once again for joining me on the podcast. I really appreciate it. It's always great to connect with fellow alum. We'll be seeing you hopefully soon at the virtual meeting next month.

For those of you listening out there, have safe travels, have fun with data, and I'll be seeing you soon.

Sadya Khan: Awesome. Thanks so much.

H.M. Kuneyl: Thank you.

Sal Nudo: Tune in to a future Democracy's College podcast for an interview conducted by OCCRL Associate Director Gianina Baker, who will discuss culturally responsive curriculum with Drs. Ginny Boss, Lauren R. Contreras, Tiffany J. Davis, and Rick Rantz.

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.