

## Democracy's College, Episode 72

### Leading with Purpose: Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey on Community Colleges as Engineers of Opportunity

With guest Sheila Quirk-Bailey 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 [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey, the recently retired president of Illinois Central College, talks with host H.M. Kuneyl about her career journey from corporate education into community college leadership, emphasizing how her Illinois-based communication and business training, paired with a practitioner-focused doctorate from Maryland, shaped her student success-driven philosophy. Among other topics, she and Kuneyl discuss the value of working across institutional silos, knowing one's 'why,' and pursuing leadership roles with purpose rather than prestige.

This conversation is part of OCCRL's Illinois Community College Leadership Institute special-edition podcast series.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome back to this episode of the Democracy's College podcast and the series of the Illinois Community College Leadership Institute. I am your host, Kuneyl, reminding you that the Illinois Community College Leadership Institute meets twice annually to help community college practitioners develop their skills to advance to higher leadership positions.

Today, I am joined with a special guest, Dr. Quirk-Bailey, as she reflects on her years in leadership and community college. Without further ado, Dr. Quirk-Bailey, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Well, thank you. I'm just absolutely delighted to be here. I am Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey. I am the retiring president of Illinois Central College. I will be here just under 10 years by the time I step down. And before that, I was 26 years at Harper College in seven different administrative positions over the years. So, the joke there was I couldn't keep a job, you know, even in the same college, right? They kept moving me around. And

then before that, I was actually on the corporate education side in Anderson Consulting's division for professional education.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** So, you have *multiple* areas of expertise, but I wanted to kind of ask you some questions kind of in chronological order. So, if you don't mind, looking over your CV, two of your three degrees from universities in the state of Illinois, and then you have one degree from Maryland. So, my question is, what is an insight that you have from those Illinois institutions and how did that shape your career? And then [an] extension of that, what's something you brought from Maryland?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** That's a great question. Illinois has been a tremendous impact on my academic background. And so I attended both Bradley University and then Northern Illinois University. And at both of those institutions, at Bradley, I was a communications major with a business minor. And then at Northern, I was an organizational communications major, which includes business and communication. So that was the theme, the road I was on, and it had a tremendous impact on my leadership because I think what I learned is what makes business run is the communication and the transparency. I'm a very big believer in the 'why.' So, leadership is not just about putting your vision forward. It's explaining it and repeating it and communicating it and adapting it as you talk to people and you're working through issues within your organization. So, I think in Illinois, really, that combination as both of those skillsets required to be successful in educational leadership. That worked out, I think, very well for me.

When it was time to do my doctoral work, I decided to go a different way. So I don't have my doctorate in communications. My doctorate is in management with a specialty in community college leadership and administration. I chose the University of Maryland because it was an online program. There were five days that you had to put in with each of those rotating courses in Maryland, but the rest was done online at a time when that was fairly new and I just wanted to have that experience.

The other thing with that Maryland program is it was a practitioner's program. So it was aligned with the community college leadership competencies from the Aspen Institute. And all of our faculty were either seated or recently retired community college presidents. So all of that academic background really grounded in people who had done the work. And so what I brought from between that experience and my experience at Harper College in Palatine was really that entire focus on student success and what that means in educational leadership, especially in community college leadership.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** As you're talking, I'm thinking about your career path. You've already kind of mentioned this, but for clarity, like, what roles have you held in your career and at what point along your trajectory did you realize that you were headed for the presidency?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** At Anderson, I was brought in as an associate and made it to manager. I had an experience at New Manager School, which was a worldwide event. So everyone who'd made manager in the practice would come to St. Charles, Illinois. We had a corporate university. And I'm looking out at all these people and I'm thinking to myself, I'm killing myself and that's me—I work a lot. But I'm killing myself to make these individuals more successful. And they all graduated in the top 10% of their class from the top 10% of the universities in their country. And we had about 48 countries represented. And I just thought, boy, if I'm working this hard, there's got to be people who need me more, right? Where you could make a bigger difference. So, I made a conscious choice then to get out of the corporate university education and go into community colleges because I think they *are* the great equalizers. I think they *are* the place where you go in this country if, for whatever reason, you have not gotten off on a strong footing academically and you need those opportunities. And I thought, well, if you're going to work this hard, you might as well be making a difference, so let's go someplace where I think there's a bigger difference to be made.

So, I transitioned after eight years in corporate into community colleges. I started then corporate services at Harper College, which was the contracted business training arm of the college. And we built that up to almost \$5 million before the IT bubble burst. We were the first community college in the country to offer Microsoft certifications under the program. So from there, I had various jobs. I was an associate dean of CTE. I was a dean of CTE. I was an associate vice president of planning and research. I was an associate vice president of strategic partnerships. I then was a vice president of planning and external relations and ended up being the chief of staff. I got around.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** You certainly did. And I can see how each one of those fields, well, I shouldn't say fields, but each one of those roles, *you* have such a clear picture of how each one of those fits into the university mission. So, I'm thinking as someone who works *under* a president, how nice would it be to be like, oh, well, she was once in my role. She understands at a very nuanced level what I'm doing and how it works in the larger picture of things. So, I think that's *really* interesting.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** I think my team would see it as both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing that someone can relate to what I'm going through, what needs to happen, and it's a curse that, man, can't you just stay out of my lane? So, it can work both ways [laughs].

I think it has been very good for both my career and for the institution. I don't know if it *always* feels that way to my team, but when I would give that piece of advice, often in higher ed, we track just like health careers does. So you're an academic or you're in the students or you're in the budget or administrative behind-the-scenes side. And I think for most administrators, if you put that issue on the table and say you would like to broaden yourself out and you are willing to certify and continue to learn for an organization to take a chance on you, I think colleges benefit from people who have the experience in multiple silos. And so to raise that issue and put together a plan, I think would be far more likely be welcomed than people may feel like it would be to step across those silos.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** I agree. We have a joke here at the University of Illinois that just because we invented silos doesn't mean we have to stay in them.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** [laughs] Touché!

**H.M. Kuneyl:** [laughs] So, thinking about that, if you will, do you have any advice for folks who are thinking about the presidency in regards to how they should shape their path?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** In terms of shaping their path, I think that working across silos is very important. I think knowing your 'why' is very important. Why do you want to be a president? Why do you want to be at the vice-presidential level? It's very easy to fall into the trap. Well, I'm a dean, so I should be a vice president. Well, I'm a vice president, so I should be a president. I'm a successful person, so I want to keep showing career progression. But I think it takes more than that. To really be an academic leader, you have to understand what difference you are trying to make and then be true to that. And that *comes* in a multitude of roles.

Ever since my experience with Achieving the Dream and with the Aspen competencies at Maryland, I've been very, very committed to student success. But there are student success issues in accounting, and there are student success issues in admissions, and there are student success issues in academics and in continuing education, which we call professional credit, and in the registrar's office. So, understanding your motivation and the difference you are trying to make will give you a filter in terms of your career and where you find opportunities that won't, if you're just thinking from a traditional standpoint. I'm a faculty member, so I'm an associate dean. I'm a dean, and I'm moving up that pipe. Really figure out your motivation. And then once you put that lens on the opportunity and the way you could then start to craft that career pathing.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Just hearing you talk, I wrote down some quick notes I can reflect on later. I like that you said know your why and that career progression isn't a good enough reason. There are ways to meet your goal and your mission in every position, so really think about

how can you focus that and then use that to determine what your career goal should be. That sounds like solid advice for all graduating students, myself included [laughs].

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Well, I'm glad. I hope it helps.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** So, thinking about your leadership career, would you be able to share with our listeners a challenge that you faced and how you responded to that?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Those of us who've lived through COVID, *very, very* interesting at Illinois Central College. So, we would survey employees and we would survey students. And I swear those results came out more than once, 50-50. People who could not continue their education if you were going to let people back in without masks and separation, and there were people who were not going to continue if you made them follow those rules because we're taking away their personal freedoms.

So, it was a very good lesson learned to really reinforce, you know, these jobs are not about making people happy. This is not a popularity contest. And this is not about a democracy. It always helps to know where people stand, and you want to be sensitive to people's needs. But the conclusion I came to is sometimes you have to stand up. You have to do what's right. It may not be popular.

So, what we did is made everyone equally unhappy. All of this came out. It was very easy when the governor had a mandate, right?

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Right.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** I've got to follow the mandate. So when that went away, which was *very* abrupt to people because yesterday it wasn't safe if I didn't do this and now you're telling me I can do that. So we made accommodations. We said it's no longer required, but if you choose to, right, there were parts of classrooms that were set up with the distancing and we still made masks and that available. If someone was uncomfortable, they could make arrangements to switch to online. Faculty gave accommodations.

So, we tried to meet people where they were and still facilitate because there were a lot of, especially on the CTE side, there was a lot of interaction that would have to happen in different labs, in different settings, that distancing that other regulations were impacting the learning environment.

So, what's my why? My why is student success. My why is that experience in the classroom. To the extent that that was being impacted by those rules, we would still accommodate people who wanted to work that way and had statements about that can't be held against somebody and there'd be no intimidation between parties about that. So faculty may have had to make other arrangements to be able to have that student alone,

still distance around that piece of equipment, whatever that may have been. But try to value that student learning in such a way that everybody's sort of personal safety issues were also met.

Those are tough lessons to learn and there's really not a right answer. So, what's your why and why are you trying to do this and let that help guide you, let that help guide you through.

You know, another big decision we've made, our current theme is 'One ICC.' And what we mean by that is we really need to meet each individual where they are. And we talk about ICC as being a superhighway, and we've got to meet them where they are to get them on the on-ramp. And some people may have to come off and on, enter and exit four times before they get to that degree. And there may be spans of semesters or *years* between those exits and entrance. It can't just be about those individuals who are college ready.

There are community colleges in Texas that 50% of their enrollment are actually coming from people from the professional credit side, from GED, from workforce over, as opposed to just entering college ready. We have to serve, especially in this community, where we have higher than state averages levels of poverty. We know where people are. We know what they need. They may need to stabilize in a job after an eight-week program or a 12-week program or a one-year program. And then they would come back and take the second part of that degree. And then we would set them up so they could transfer on to finish that four-year degree. Always building forward and moving down the highway.

But when you really start putting budgets and attention and staffing behind all of that, that can feel very challenging to the traditional academic structure. But if your lens, again, is student success and removing barriers, this is what we have to do. And it's going to feel very differently. The way admissions works is different. The way we build transcripts is different. Our ERP system is different. You really start teasing this out.

You know, we were an equal opportunity offender as we move towards this way of doing business, which is the theme of the strategic plan. But we *knew* we couldn't get to the level of success we needed unless we went through this. So that's sort of how we dealt with that problem. We had 88,000 adults in our district with some college credit and no credential. Obviously solely offering that academic pathway was not meeting their needs. How do we get them re-engaged? How do we package it into something that they get value out of now that still builds towards that ultimate value, which is our academic credit degree.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** As you were talking, I thought about Robin G. Isserles' book, *The Costs of Completion*, and how there's this tension between state appropriations and completion rates, but neither one of those metrics are very useful when you're trying to support

students. I'll give Dr. Isserles a free plug. Check that book out if you have the opportunity, listeners.

And I also thought about developmental education reform and developmental education and students who come to community colleges from that on-ramp. You mentioned Texas. I'm a proud graduate of a Texas community college, so shout out to Lone Star and the Hurricanes at our North Harris campus.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Great college.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Thank you. I'm completely biased, but you know, it was really wonderful for me to be able to start my career in education at a local institution. It was open enrollment and didn't care that I didn't *know* I was a homeschooled student, and I didn't even know what the SAT was. So, I made my advisor, Layton Gill—I still remember you if you're out there listening to this—really work overtime in explaining things to me and help me get ready for the admissions test, which is now the TSI.

But you know, I'm just thinking about that. I think it's really important that we remember that community colleges have a different population of students, and so we have to think about that when we're leading and also interpreting policy. It's just different. We don't have that same population.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** You know, it is different. In our first strategic plan, we did quite a bit of work on developmental ed reform. So we have had a 66% drop –

**H.M. Kuneyl:** [whispers] I saw that.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** – in [inaudible] students placing into developmental with not *one* iota change in their success rates in the highest developmental course going into credit. And the reason for that is, you know, we were always using Accuplacer and we're using things that really didn't measure –

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Right.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** – what you could do. And we dug into our numbers and worked with our high schools and found that at a 2.7 GPA out of high school, that number was *more* predictive of student performance than the Accuplacer test. So, we worked with our high schools to redevelop senior-level math so that passing that course made them college ready. The 2.7 is another five, I think, different ways. Still Accuplacer and ACT are part of that, but multiple ways you can demonstrate to us that you are college ready. And once we took all of that out and simplified that, like I said, we didn't have any change in those success rates. So, we were the ones holding people back as opposed to their performance

holding them back, so that was a major student success step forward we made in that first strategic plan.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Yes, I remember reading about that. I'm glad you shared.

So, I was thinking about what are the highlights of your career? Certainly that would be one of them, but are there others you'd like to share?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** We did a lot of work on advising redesign. That has worked really well. What I'm probably most proud of is we have two major projects that I would define as workforce ecosystems.

I think to truly impact your students and your community and for community colleges, that's very important for us. We really need to work. We talk about silos within the college. We need to break down the silos in the community. So, one is the Workforce Empowerment Initiative, WEI. So that's an \$18 million annual program. It is currently run by 22 community colleges around the state. Illinois Central College is the lead college for that. And it is a program 100% dedicated to people of poverty. We are very prescriptive in their educational pathways. We only offer them pathways that can be completed within one year and that pay 30% above a regional living wage where we can document a workforce gap in our community. So you're going to make better than average money. There are jobs waiting for you. People of poverty have been disappointed time and time again. So we can make some guarantees about where we can get them, which for us is about 11 programs then, and they choose those programs and we get them through. The completion rate on that program is about 68% to 70% on any given year, which is more than double the completion rate for individuals of poverty in this country. And we place them into those good jobs. And on average, statewide, those individuals make \$32,000 a year more after they complete the program than they did when they started.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Wow.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So, we're really talking about lifting people out of poverty. But let's talk about what it took to do that. It takes partnerships between professional credit and CE. We do complete wraparound services, so we don't provide that. We partner with Goodwill and the Urban League and with METEC, organizations that have long histories in the communities we're trying to serve, and that's where their trust level are, and *they* can provide that. It takes bus passes and child care –

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Absolutely.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** – and if someone's going into a boot-camp-style program where they're in class eight hours a day, then they need some stipends because they can't afford

to quit all of their three part-time jobs in order to reskill. So it *really* does take a community and an ecosystem to make that happen. And so I think that's some of my proudest work because to pull all that together and see the success that results from that, we're very proud of that work.

The other example is our IT workforce accelerator. We were fortunate enough to get a \$20 million Good Jobs Challenge grant, one of the only two community colleges in the country who received that grant. And what we've done with that is we built an ecosystem around credentialing people in IT because it was a major workforce gap in the greater Peoria area. So we launched that with partners, again, those community-based organizations, our economic development councils, our K-12 partners, and over 230 business partners. So in two and a half years, we've credentialed 2,600 people with new IT credentials, and we've all but erased the workforce gap in the IT industry in the greater Peoria area.

But again, it took *all* of us working together to do that. Bradley University is a partner. Eureka College is a partner. So, if someone already has a four-year degree and it's in something that isn't giving them the career trajectory or the financial benefits that they were hoping for and they're changing, they may do some of that at Bradley or they may do that in Eureka.

There are programs we've started in high school and we're pulling people through. There are, in IT, just like in health care, well, you're a programmer in X, and we don't need X anymore, so this group of people gets laid off. And now we go to market to find people who can program in Y, right?

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Right.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So Python people now, right? And they don't exist in the market. And we had to go in and talk to companies and say, 'We take these people and we turn them into those people.' We don't just push out into, right? Think of the impact on the community when you're pushing dozens and dozens of people out who now aren't COBOL programmers. I can take your COBOL programmers and make them Python programmers, and it just pays off for everybody.

So that *really* was creating an ecosystem. Companies had to change. We had to change that fluidity between different higher educational institutions. Again, the wraparound services when the people of poverty entered that program. So, I think that's the future, especially of community colleges and putting those systems together. So I think that's some of my proudest moments because we didn't know when we started that that was all going to work, right? And figuring all of that out. And we were blessed to have resources to do that work. Really proud moments there.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Absolutely. And you've really gone into my next question perfectly, but I really appreciate that you mentioned all the community involvement that was a part of those big programs that you were able to develop because I think oftentimes we kind of start wanting to build something out and then look at limited financial resources from the institutional perspective and use that as kind of an artificial cage to prevent us from being able to do things. So, I love that you kind of started with, well, what would we need? And then who is already in the community that could help us provide that?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** I think sometimes, as higher educational institutions, so if I need coordinators and support people, I go out and hire those folks. Maybe it makes more sense to the individuals you are trying to help that they're somebody else's employees, and then my resources flow *there* because you have more success for students at the end.

It's not just all about growing *your* institution across this community. What are the pieces that exist that people trust, that they already have those connections? You don't go recruit for those programs. All those people who are in those communities, the referrals just flow in. And that's always been there, but we haven't tapped into that. We advertise wherever we advertise for them to come to us to talk to us about their issues as opposed to us *being* in those communities and flowing that through. So just a *different* way to think about things that I think really is the future of community colleges.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** What is something that you're excited about when you're thinking about officially retiring?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** I am sort of excited about where ICC is. I'm excited about a new leader coming in and taking that to the next level. I'm excited about that 15-month-old grandson in San Francisco who I'll be able to see far more often. And I'm excited I'm going to start a consulting company, do some of this workforce ecosystem work, and I'm excited about being able to focus on sort of that faction of the industry needs as opposed to [what] the 24-7 on-the-job presidency is.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** And the multifaceted e-mail chains that just never seem to end [laughs].

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Exactly.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Before we wrap up today, I wanted to just pause for a moment. Did you have anything that you wanted to share with our audience?

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Well, first of all, thank you for what you're doing. It's always great to have these different perspec-, and I don't have all the answers, but the different perspectives out there and to ignite those conversations. I think that's very positive, so I appreciate you and the work you're doing.

You know, in terms of what's going on in Illinois, one of the things I've really been thinking about is, like, the future role of community colleges in terms of really being that community warrior, and really taking a look at our policy and what we do in the state. I think that professional credit and that workforce is just as important as the academic side because that's where quite a bit of our population is starting. And so if we don't embrace that and make that all just as easy and not build our systems around one population, and then the other one's always an add-on or an afterthought. We really need to think about that if we're going to have Illinois continue to be successful because we're getting to the point where 70-plus percent of all of the jobs require postsecondary credentials, right?

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Yeah.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So you can't leave those other 40 basis points behind, right? We need to figure out a way to do that. And I think that will be the work of the community college and that's going to take changes in how we're funded. That's going to take what qualifies as success. So, if people don't earn a degree, well, that's not success. Well, actually, they could be *tremendously* successful, right? We have credentials that are non-degree credit, like my truck-driving program. Well, talk about taking someone of poverty and they're making \$80,000 within six months after graduating. How could that possibly not be successful?

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Right.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So *really* rethinking the value we bring. And don't get me wrong: We are an amazing place for students right out of high school to start. You do a whole other podcast about the benefits. And you know that because you started in a community college.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Yeah.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** You know, higher ed, we tend to think of everything, again, in silos. Well, if we're focusing over here, then we're not focusing over here. Those are *all* needs for our students. Those are *all* needs from our community. And community colleges, we need to change some of those state rules, some of those policies, that lens, and really become community warriors and really advocate for *what it takes* in the communities we serve to make sure all of those adults and all of those potential students are served well. Because what we have learned at ICC is that when an individual earns a credential of value, it changes the trajectory of their life. It also changes the trajectory of their family. And so that's the work we need to be doing.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** You made me think of something, and I cannot think of the scholar's first name, but the last name is Mountjoy. And they write about how the difference in earning

potential based on whether you have a postsecondary credential, four-year degree, a two-year degree, or some college, no degree. And what Mountjoy's work has helped me as a researcher to understand is that even those small credentials make a big difference, especially at the associate's degree level.

You also made me think about, for our listeners who are coming back to the podcast and have been listening for the past year, we did a similar episode with President Terry Wilkerson when he retired from Rend Lake [College]. And one of the things that he saw for the future was micro-credentialing. And he really felt like *that* is the next step for the community college. And I thought about what you're saying here is really focusing on redefining what success is and thinking about those micro-credentials as being a way to help people along their highway, as you mentioned before.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So micro-credentialing is a very, very big part of our One ICC, making a difference. So, I'm a logistics specialist and I want to be promoted to manager. I don't know how to read financial statements. I don't need an associate's degree in accounting. I need to know how to read financial statements. And that could be a micro credential. And that skillset will be game-changing in terms of my career path. And so *that's* what we need to be able to deliver. So just *rethinking* all of that.

Another thing we rethought in terms of the future is, as of next August, we are moving to 80% of our courses will be offered in eight weeks. You can on-, you can off-ramp. If you need to take some time off, it's only a couple of months, you pick right back up. You're not out for five months and then your life has changed and you can't get back in the rhythm.

We find that this is a student success issue. Our students are far more successful when they take fewer courses at a time over a shorter period of time than five classes at a time over 16 weeks.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Interesting.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** So that's a student success issue for us. And so we're really excited that this will be a two-and-a-half-year conversion, and we launch next August.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** *Exciting.* We'll definitely have to come back and see how that's going, maybe in two years' time, give you all a little time to process.

Well, thank you so much. It is great to have met with you and to have taken this little moment to capture some of your advice and also reflections on your career. I think our listeners are in for a delightful episode. So once again, thank you for your time.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** And thank you and best of luck in finishing up the doctorate.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Oh, appreciate it. Thank you.

**Sheila Quirk-Bailey:** Bye-bye.

**H.M. Kuneyl:** Bye-bye.

**Sal Nudo:** Tune in to the next Democracy's College podcast when OCCRL Associate Director Gianina Baker talks with Dr. Terry Vaughan III, who is the associate executive director of research at Workcred. Among other topics, Drs. Baker and Vaughan will discuss the role of community colleges in micro-urban spaces and in workforce development, and how these efforts impact black students and communities.

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.