

# Democracy's College, Episode 63

## Different Frameworks for Understanding Institutional Data and Using Data to Attain Student Success

With guest Nick Branson and host OiYan Poon

**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](http://occrl.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Dr. OiYan Poon—an author, speaker, and race and education scholar—talks with Dr. Nick Branson about the different frameworks for understanding institutional data, as well as creative ways that campuses can use a wealth of data to improve support systems that help all students succeed. Dr. Branson is the assistant vice president for strategic advancement at the College of Lake County.

**Dr. OiYan Poon:** Welcome to Illinois SUCCESS! I'm your host, OiYan Poon.

In this episode, we'll be discussing the different frameworks for understanding institutional data. We'll also explore powerful and creative ways campuses can use a diversity of data to improve support systems for all students to succeed.

Today, I'm really excited to introduce you to our guest. Dr. Nick Branson is the assistant vice president for strategic advancement at the College of Lake County in Grayslake, Illinois. He has extensive leadership and expertise in student success, institutional effectiveness, strategy planning, research, and assessment in higher education. He's also an expert at communicating data to inform decision-making and evaluating results for continuous improvement.

Welcome and thank you for joining me.

**Dr. Nick Branson:** Thanks so much, OiYan. I'm so glad to be here with you and excited to talk about this topic.

**Dr. Poon:** Yeah! So, I have to say that my inner geek is totally nerding out right now because Nick has *really* helped me see how data use and practices don't need to be hardcore complicated to be effective in improving institutional equity performance. But before we

really dig into that, I want to get us started by talking about this term, institutional equity performance. I've heard you use this term quite often in your work. And so let's start with that. What is institutional equity performance?

**Dr. Branson:** So, in the context of my work, which is really focused on student access and success in a community college setting, but I think this applies really to any public institution, “institutional equity performance” refers to the disparities in the experiences and outcomes of students that are really a result of the institutional systems *and* reflect the college's effectiveness to deliver on its mission or its performance. You know, a more common term that we often hear today is equity gaps and this is similar, but I'd say not quite the same. The language has evolved over time. We had achievement gaps at one point in time, and that was pretty common, but it really reflected students' *accomplishments* rather than a focus on what might be impacting their ability to achieve.

And then there was kind of a shift to opportunity gaps, which is helpful to highlight that differences in outcomes may be the result of different opportunities that students had historically or while they were at our higher ed institutions. I think equity gaps is a really common terminology that we hear today. But in the last few years in the field, there's been a lot of conversation about that label and how to label unequal experiences and outcomes as institutional performance gaps. And Estella Bensimon from the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California has used that term. And the idea there is it really puts the onus on the systemic issues within the *institution* that result in the disparity in the student outcomes. It really asks us to kind of hold a mirror up to ourselves and think about not just that the students are experiencing this, but what are we doing that's causing that experience for our students?

In other words, if year after year, we see, as an example, low-income students have a lower graduation rate than the overall student population, that really reflects an institutional system that's not serving low-income students well. It's a gap in the institution's performance, not the student. The data's really demonstrating to us that same pattern over and over, it's really hard to argue that among all those different students, something's happening for them to achieve the same outcomes if it's not really our institution that's *causing* that. And it's not that students don't have a role in this. Of course, you know, they have agency and responsibility. But the conditions they're facing are conditions that we are not addressing well as an institution if students within that same group, experiencing those same conditions of being from a low-income household, are not allowing them to complete their goal with our institution.

**Dr. Poon:** Absolutely, yeah. I *really* appreciate the refocus onto systemic issues, which I think is just something that institutional leaders have more control over. Yes, while

students have agency, of course, and we need to respect that, I think it's those systemic conditions that you mentioned that institutional leaders can really do something. And so, I like how you're reframing it as, like, whether an institution is ready for the students, right? So how can we kind of better focus on the *student* readiness of colleges and universities? So, you know, to really illustrate this point, can you offer more specifics about how the shift in framing to the problem has occurred at CLC?

**Dr. Branson:** Yeah, and I think that's a great point that that mindset shift of moving away from an idea of college readiness—are students ready for college?—to saying, are we as an institution ready for the students? Because they're here, right? We need to meet them where they are. They are the public of Illinois, right? Those are our students, potentially. We want to meet them where they are and meet their needs.

So we've, actually, at College of Lake County, or CLC for short, we've embedded that concept of being student ready in our definition of student success, thinking about our role in that work, and also use some key terms around achieving educational attainment for every student at full scale, but doing that in a personalized, culturally relevant, equity-minded way. And we've had conversations about, you know, how do we describe gaps that we see? How do we think about the language we're using in terms of equity gaps? And that was a common terminology at our college. But over the last few years, we've had some intentional discussions through different governance groups, and we've landed on terminology that we use a little bit more frequently today, and that's institutional performance equity gaps. And each word is really important there. Institution, like I said before, it's about kind of placing the ownership on *us* as the institution; performance, because it ultimately is a reflection of our performance. Our mission is to serve our community well, and the public of Illinois well, and we're not doing that because certain groups are not experiencing equity in their time with us. Then that reflects on our performance. And then equity gaps, because ultimately that's what we're talking about. And that was a familiar term to people, and we didn't want to lose that element. Some institutions simply say institutional performance gaps, but for us, in our context, we felt like people were familiar with the concept of equity gaps, and we wanted that to continue to resonate with them.

And so, you know, I think what I'd like listeners to kind of take away from this is not necessarily that you might be using the *wrong* language, but just to reflect on your context. What is going to be meaningful for the audience you're trying to communicate to? And how the language we use gives meaning to the data that we're looking at. How might it evolve over time? And how are we making sense of that data? Because you might be asking, we're talking about these concepts, this terminology, but like, what does that have to do with the

data? But the data is just there, especially when we're talking quantitative data, it's numbers, but it's the language we use to describe that that makes *meaning* of it, right? And so, considering this language, it really helps us think differently about who's responsible for these data, and what can we do to change it?

**Dr. Poon:** Yeah, I often like to tell my students, data don't speak for themselves, right? We as humans actually make meaning of them. And so then making these concepts, these framings explicit will really help us be clear about how we're actually making meaning of these numbers that can't speak for themselves.

I really appreciate how we're underscoring in this conversation how important framing is, because how we frame any given problem sets up the possibilities for solutions in problem-solving, right? Framing matters. And so related to framing, and applying it to my past careers as a former student-affairs professional, a higher ed faculty member and researcher, I've often noticed what feels like an unnecessary separation of institutional or organizational performance and strategic planning, and so on and so forth, from concepts of equity. So rather than embedding concepts of equity throughout an institutional strategic plan, it feels *separate*, or it's a distinct *section* that's cordoned off within an overall strategic plan.

So I'm wondering if the assumption in the institutional performance equity gap concept is about that institutions that are performing well will really have fewer equity gaps. And I think you've kind of touched on it already, but is that about a disruption here?

**Dr. Branson:** Yeah, such a great question and point. And I totally agree. I think that it isn't uncommon to see institutions that separate the two, or it feels like equity work maybe is this isolated set of work that might be happening. You know, maybe for example, it's happening in student engagement. And that work is really important, but we might not think of it as a representation of the *entire* institution, right?

But when we think about this language and trying to make sense of the data in this way, it does cause us to really think about how are we representing equity throughout the experience? How are we *infusing* that and weaving it throughout the entire institution? And I do think, like you said, I would agree, institutions that are performing well would have few gaps or narrowing gaps at least. And the language really helps us to think about this is about our *entire* institution. Equity work doesn't live in just one space. It's in the work of everybody and really takes the entire institution to cause improvements.

**Dr. Poon:** Right. And so oftentimes we think about, I feel like in higher ed conversations and equity conversations, we think about these very high-level outcomes, measures and data of, like, access and retention and graduation rates by demographic categories and

comparisons. But I often feel like, yes, that's *really* important to keep an eye on, of course, but then at the same time, those data don't really tell us what's actually causing and producing and reproducing those outcomes. And so, I think it's really important to think about, like, what's underneath the hood, if you will, of the machinery, right?

**Dr. Branson:** Absolutely. And a lot of times the institutional performance metrics are such *high* level and oftentimes lagging indicators, right? Like, we look at graduation rate, community colleges, it's three years' time for graduation rate, four-year institution, six years, right? By the time we're measuring that and then asking that question: Well, what's causing the differences we see? We're talking about a student experience that began three years ago or six years ago, right? It becomes very difficult. And so looking at what's leading up to that? What are the things contributing to that? Those leading indicators, contributing factors in the student experience, *those* are going to be more actionable and really important to look at.

**Dr. Poon:** Yeah, so shifting gears a *little* bit, if I can ask you to talk a little bit about more, how do you measure institutional performance equity gaps? The what's under the hood, right? Like beyond the big, high-level metrics?

**Dr. Branson:** I think there's really a range of options when thinking about measuring institutional performance equity gaps. And I'm going to kind of just talk about it in that range, from simple to more complex. And I think there's options for *any* institution, wherever you're at on the spectrum. And I think you could consider it as sort of an evolution in your data capacity.

I think a first pre-step, before we even talk about measuring, is really to understand the disaggregation of data that makes sense in your context. We're *diverse* across the state, and our institutions serve diverse populations that are *different* in our different contexts. And really taking a first step to just understand who are your students, disaggregating that data, yes, by demographics, but socioeconomic status, whether students are parenting, first-generation. There's all kinds of ways to really look at that data and understand who it is you're serving, and then go from there as you begin to do more.

So, once you do that, I think a great first step is just really simply start to chart and graph at least a few key outcome metrics. Maybe it's graduation rate, retention, just some of those key metrics your institution already looks at, and disaggregate that data. Understand what student populations you have and what outcomes they have.

Then I think a good next step is to trend that data, right? Because we want to see what's their current experience, but has this really been a persistent and ongoing trend? If something is a one-time outcome, you know, that might tell us a different story than if we

see cohort after cohort, year after year, a student population is experiencing a lower retention rate than the rest of the student population.

So those are kind of first places I'd start. And then I think if you want to go a step further, you really want to have a conversation at your institution about how you want to compare between groups. And there's some tools that are really helpful to do this. Center for Urban Education has a resource guide on equity, and they created what they call an equity index. It's a mathematical formula, not super complicated. You don't have to know advanced stats or anything. And it basically does what I described. It considers what's the outcome of one subpopulation that we're interested in on a certain outcome compared to the overall student population? And are we seeing parity that we would expect or not? And then what can we do about that?

And then from there, I think if you want to level up further, continuing this line of thinking, especially around standards, it's important to think about what are the targets your institution wants to set? Because in our equity work, and I'll speak for CLC especially, very quickly as we began looking at our disaggregated data and understanding those trends, we realized *every* student population has opportunity to improve. *We* aren't satisfied with the performance of *our* institution for *any* student population. So we set really ambitious targets for our graduation rate and for retention and all the leading indicators that would contribute to that. And those targets were set for every demographic group. So we said we're going to set a target, and it's not an overall target that might mask disparities, but no, we want every demographic group to achieve that target. And then that becomes a new standard that we're measuring against, another way to consider the data.

**Dr. Poon:** I wanted to ask you a question about leading indicators, right? So you've got these overall targets and goals for, say, graduation rates, but then you mentioned, like, what are some leading indicators? And it sounds like it's not just, like, how are people doing across time? Like, it's that kind of under-the-hood kind of process piece. Having seen some of your work, can you talk about, like, maybe an example of a leading indicator, or indicators, that you've all determined at your campus?

**Dr. Branson:** That's a great question. And you know, leading and lagging indicators is really always interesting language because it's all relative, right? It depends on what we're talking about. Something that's lagging in one case could be leading in another. But I think, you know, when we think about the *big* picture outcomes of completion, let's say graduation rate, that's really key to every institution. That's why we're here to get students credentials, right? Leading indicators of graduation: retention is a common one, right? If students are not continuing from their first term to the second year, then we wouldn't expect them

necessarily to graduate, right? They've dropped out. And so that can be a leading indicator to say are we on track to reaching a graduation target that we might have?

But I think there's even further indicators that are more actionable. So, credits accumulated, and that could be in the first term. Completion of key milestone courses like math and English in the first year. And then there's sort of student actions that are really important, too.

If you look at your data and you know some *drivers* of retention; for example, kind of taking that step back: Let's say you know meeting with an advisor is highly important to students' retention. And at CLC, we've looked at our data and we know students who meet with their onboarding person and their advisor are four times more likely to be retained from first year to second year. So, we can look at the data to see, well, how many students are doing that? How many are meeting with those key personnel? And if we're trending down, or we're trending up, then we know what we should expect in our retention rate, and then further down the road, the graduation rate.

**Dr. Poon:** Or if different groups are meeting with those advisors at differential rates, perhaps there's ways, whether it's maybe rural students, you know, whatever disaggregated group as you were discussing, then for *me* it brings up, like, okay, that is actionable, right? Like how do we then intervene and perhaps improve that rate of meeting with the advisor or completing that gateway course in the first year or first semester and passing that? And so if they do that, if you improve that, then it sounds like you can then anticipate the rates of credential completion would be more likely.

**Dr. Branson:** Yes, exactly. And it gives you, really, insight into the different supports or different strategies that might be needed for different populations, right? Because maybe you see, you know, one student population. Okay, wow, they *are* meeting with their advisor, but they're not doing something else that we know is key to their success. Maybe they're, you know, not as aware of other resources we might have at the institution. So, we need to focus our attention there for that student group.

**Dr. Poon:** I have another follow-up question, which is basically, how do you determine [best outcomes] for your specific campus? Like, oh, it's about meeting with your advisor that first year or first semester. How did you decide, like, that was a key contributing factor towards these larger-level outcomes?

**Dr. Branson:** I think something that's been really hugely important for us at CLC and really speaks to our evolution of our data capacity over time is that we've mapped out the student journey and identified kind of what's the ideal student experience from their very first initial connection at the college all the way through to their completion and also post-

completion, their transfer or employment outcomes. And we've mapped that out in a student success framework. It's using national research on the loss and momentum framework. We call it the Lancer Success Framework after our mascot, which is the Lancer. And, you know, that describes the student journey. It's not data itself, but it really informs the data behind that because within that framework, we identify, for example, like we were just talking about, meeting with an advisor in the first term, right? *That's* a key experience. And we know from the external research that that's a highly important experience for students. It puts them on a good path, helps them progress in that path. And we identified other key experiences like student success course or engagement at the college, their learning experiences with faculty, right? And then we mapped data points to each of those. Well, how are the students doing? What kind of volume of students are we seeing in each of those? And then how does that relate to their outcome? If they engage in that, what's the outcome that's associated? And disaggregating all that data along the way, like we've been talking about.

**Dr. Poon:** As you're talking, I'm thinking about how every campus has just mountains and mountains of data, right? But then it's a matter of, like, how do you actually come together and start organizing it in a way that is actually actionable, right? That is effective. You can access it very quickly, that it's a dynamic tool for leadership. What was the journey in that and were there any kind of barriers in the way or how did you overcome that?

I love how you talk about how College of Lake County has gone through a journey, right? There's been an evolution. Can you speak more to that?

**Dr. Branson:** You know, I think we definitely have grown in our data capacity here at CLC. And I think you asked, you know, what are kind of barriers? Time is always a barrier. And like you described, you know, most institutions, I would argue, are data rich, but insight poor.

**Dr. Poon:** Brilliant.

**Dr. Branson:** We constantly collect data about our students, but it's just not organized necessarily in a meaningful way or not available to everybody. And we've been collecting data for years, right? We've had data since students arrived on our campus. We just haven't always looked at it or used it in a meaningful way. And institutional effectiveness teams and research teams, where I spent a good portion of my career in that space, they're great experts at pulling the data together. They're my best friends, my people. Shout out to all the IR/IE people. But their time is limited, right? They are busy doing compliance reporting. Oftentimes, they've got big roles in accreditation work on campus, and they're getting flooded with requests from a variety of people.

So part of the evolution we've had at CLC is thinking about, one, how to prioritize that time. One of the key strategic work that's happening as an institution in our equity and student access and success work that we need data support on, right? And we set a research agenda. We say for the year, you know, we're going to focus on analyses around this policy that the college is considering changing, or our onboarding first-year experience advising model, or student resources, right? Whatever the agenda is for that year. And then we want requests to follow in that theme. And if they don't, we have to say, you know, right now is not the priority for that.

The other strategy is to really empower other people to access their own data, to really open access to data to the extent possible, and provide tools that give them that data in a meaningful way. So we've done a lot of work in dashboards that you referenced. And we have a number of dashboards now that are open to any employee at CLC that describe our student population, show student outcomes in all of their courses, and also show outcomes across the student experience from, again, their initial connection all the way through to completion. And all that data is disaggregated, so people can be thinking with that equity lens as they review it.

**Dr. Poon:** So, I'm going to call this the transition into the real-real talk part of the conversation. You're talking about dashboards and I'm wondering, you know, what if someone's leading or is a leader at a campus where they're really early in their IE/IR journey or data dashboard journey?

Something that really impressed me about your dashboards was I was anticipating huge bells and whistles and complicated big-data computational systems, and I don't know, I'm just throwing in whatever words I can come up with right now (laughs). But then you opened up this very nicely designed Excel sheet, and I was like, I have Excel! Right? So I guess my question is really what kind of organizational capacity [do you need]? I mean, obviously, beyond just having an Excel package, right (laughs), do you need to really do this continuous assessment of institutional performance to motivate change?

**Dr. Branson:** This work really can be done in *any* size institution with any team. I mean, I've seen *amazing* work from one-person IR shops and the same great work from large teams.

You know, I do think in most institutions, you do have limited capacity in an IR/IE department. And you know, the size of the student body doesn't necessarily change the number of questions we have about those students, right? But oftentimes, smaller institutions have smaller support staff. You can make advances with simple things, right? You can *use* Excel, you can use Excel sheets and create graphs and charts there, right? I mean, that's a very simple way to do this work.

You also have other tools, right? At CLC, we've kind of evolved and we are using Power BI as a common tool now. But like you said, you know, our dashboards are not super complex, complicated tools. In fact, we have kind of a vision for our dashboards that they are very intuitively designed and accessible for people to really understand what is the data showing.

And dashboards don't need to answer every single question. There may be deeper questions that we need to do outside of a dashboard, but we can give the majority of people *enough* information to at least *begin* investigating a question that they might have or hopefully answering some questions that they might have about our students and their experience, and how that looks, again, from an equity lens.

So that empowerment of people to use that resource is hugely important because it's going to free up time from the IER and IEE staff. It's a good investment, you know, initial investment in their time to free up more of their time later down the road and have them become more consultants and do more of that deeper analysis that they're really experts in.

You know, I think too, it goes back to that setting the priority as well and leadership helping to shape where they want that time spent from their institutional effectiveness area.

**Dr. Poon:** So you are a numbers guy, and we have already established this. I am not. I'm a qualitative person (laughs). So I'm wondering, in your work around institutional effectiveness, have you engaged with qualitative data? Because I really do think that quantitative data and qualitative data answer different questions and can give you insights into what you can do to disrupt inequities in different ways. So, I'm wondering if this work can entail or does entail qualitative work.

**Dr. Branson:** I love this question. I mean, I could talk about this for days, probably, really (laughs). I, you know, yes, I definitely was a numbers guy and studied stats and complex modeling and my master's work and took a long break, went back for a doctorate in research methodology and focused on qualitative, actually, and evaluation research and mixed methods. And I really think the magic happens in the mixing. Both are just so important, and you really benefit from both. They really play off each other if done well.

And as we at CLC worked to create our first, what we call our Equity and Student Access and Success Plan, or our equity plan for short, back in 2018, 2019, we looked at a lot of quantitative data right off the bat. We mapped those student outcomes like we were describing earlier, disaggregated that data, trended it. Let's see what's happening here. But to create the strategy, we went out to the college community. We went to many different governance groups, and we showed them this data. And we said, this is describing what's

happening. Tell us what you think is behind this. *Why* is it happening? *How* is it happening? And they gave us really great insights, you know, said things like, oh, the first-year experience is, you know, an onboarding for students. You know, that's really messy. Students don't quite know what to do, particularly our students who have taken a break after high school, it's really difficult for them to navigate.

So then we went back to our quantitative data to validate that hunch, right? And we said, okay, let's look at that. And what we saw in that example was, yeah, actually our onboarding model, our orientation was a very traditional program designed for students who graduated high school within the last two years. We only required it of them. We allowed other students to come, but we had a limited set that was required, and that was because of our capacity at the time. We were only designed for a subset of students.

But what happened with that was it was creating inequities because we found that our Black African-American students tended to just take a break between high school and college at a higher rate than our students of other races and ethnicities. And so we were reinforcing this inequity by saying, well, they're not going to orientation. And then they were less likely to be retained because we knew orientation helped contribute to that. So we said, okay, we've got to blow up that model, right? And that's kind of the power of seeing that quantitative data, the qualitative input, and then the quantitative data again.

It's hugely important to talk to your employees, your faculty and staff, because they have great insights, just like in that example I gave. But students too, right? We looked at data around student resources, and we offer so many resources to our students, and we found they're not using the resources, and they're telling us they're withdrawing for things we know we could support them with. Why won't they go to our resource, right? And we talked to them and they said, well, yeah, I heard about that, but I didn't think I was eligible or thought I had to pay for it. And we said, oh, we never would have guessed that. It's *free* and it's available for everybody. It's definitely for you. There's no eligibility requirement. It's open to everybody. But *that's* the insight that we wouldn't have known without asking the students.

**Dr. Poon:** Thank you for illustrating the *magic* when you bring in that qualitative work as well (laughs). The numbers and the stories, they matter, right?

**Dr. Branson:** If I could just add too, you know, what I am most excited about is doing that and seeing that magic, but we've seen really dramatic improvements as a result of that.

**Dr. Poon:** Yes.

**Dr. Branson:** I want listeners to take away too, you know, it's not just about having good data and good insights, right? It drives important strategies. And we've seen, just as an

example, a five percentage point increase in our fall-to-fall retention and reduction in the equity gaps for our Black and Latinx students, as well as our first-generation students in that retention, and a 10 percentage point increase in our grad rate over the last six years here as we've watched these cohorts.

**Dr. Poon:** Yes.

**Dr. Branson:** And increases for every demographic group. So this is not just magic in the data itself. I love that part.

**Dr. Poon:** I love it.

**Dr. Branson:** But it's in the outcomes too.

**Dr. Poon:** Right, because, you know, if you don't do anything to intervene and you've mapped out, like, our hunches. I love how you used the word "hunch." Our hunch is based on engaging with and having conversations with people across the campus. We think this is what's happening. Let's give it a try. Let's give it a try! And create some interventions. And you're seeing these *outcomes* on the up and up, which is fantastic.

All right, so we are coming towards the end. I have one last kind of very real-real question for you. It feels like saying higher ed is facing unprecedented times is *both* an understatement and a cliché, complete cliché at this point. But you're still doing it, right? This is the work of colleges and universities, is to educate students wherever they come from. Do you think improving effective use of data for institutional performance is a way to navigate these times? Why or why not?

**Dr. Branson:** I do. I think it is. I think data is hugely important, but I don't think it's enough. I think it's important that we remember the data are a reflection of people. They've existed since we opened our doors. It's representing our students' experience. And we think about these concepts and the context that we live in today as public institutions. The data represents the public. It is who we serve. And disaggregating the data and talking about equity and trying to improve the experience, we are just doing our mission. We are serving the public. We are trying to improve for every member of the public because that is our mission as public institutions.

I think the data, it is hugely important, but it's really about the action that we've been talking about, right? *Motivating* people to act on that data. It goes back to our earlier point about the language and understanding it's the institution and *our* responsibility to make changes that will improve the outcomes in the data that we see.

We're talking about data, and I know people feel overwhelmed by data, right? There's data *everywhere* in our lives. In our society, we're constantly bombarded. Social media, there's likes on social media, there's surveys at every receipt that you get at the store, right?

**Dr. Poon:** Oh, gosh.

**Dr. Branson:** It's just data everywhere, right? And it's hard. It's hard to pay attention to that and make sense of it and *then* to think about, well, how am I going to act on it?

You know, one of the things I studied in my doctoral research was how to communicate data effectively and different modes of communicating data that would help inspire understanding and *use* of that information in an educational context. And I think that's really important in this current context, in this moment in time, to just really pay attention to the data and for us to think about how do we communicate it well in our institutions? Because we've got the high school cliff. We've got public doubts about higher education. Half of people in Illinois, or just under half, have a college degree. But we know that the job outlook is going to require many, many more people in our state to have a college credential.

Meanwhile, our students are struggling to find their way through a system that was originally designed in a way that really doesn't fit for the modern learner who's juggling, working, caring for others, finances. So, at the end of the day, our students cannot afford for us to just guess at how to change this system, and neither can we. So, we need the data, but we also need the action.

**Dr. Poon:** I couldn't agree more. Before we go, I want to see if you have any final thoughts that you really want to share with our listeners today.

**Dr. Branson:** A couple quick takeaways. I think your context is really important. Different institutions are going to do this work differently, and that's good to keep in mind. Think about your institutional role and responsibility and making meaning of that data. Really think about the entire system, the entire student experience from start to stop. And don't isolate equity work in one area of the college.

And then I would just say, really think about prioritizing *use* of your data. A lot of times we get caught up in the methodology and all the details there. And I'm a methodologist, but I will tell you, you can come to the table with the philosophy that we want to *use* this data to improve our institution. That'll take you that much further in changing the data into strategic actions.

**Dr. Poon:** A *huge* thank you to Dr. Nick Branson from College of Lake County for sharing your insights and leadership wisdom on this episode of Illinois Success.

Nick, if listeners would like to learn more about today, what are some resources you would recommend and how might listeners reach you?

**Dr. Branson:** So I've mentioned a couple of resources along the way. Center for Urban Education is a great resource. There's some organizations that I think are really helpful in this equity and student access and success work. A couple of national groups, Achieving the Dream, focused especially in community college space, and Excellencia in Education for Latinx learners.

And then more locally in Illinois, Partnership for College Completion is another great organization and resource. And if you're interested in just understanding socioeconomic mobility and what that looks like for different demographic groups, I think a really interesting resource is the Opportunity Insights. It's from the work of Raj Chetty at Harvard University.

And if you want to connect with me, you can find me on LinkedIn, just search my name or feel free to reach out to me at CLC.

**Dr. Poon:** Thank you all for listening. And this [is the] very first episode of this limited series of Democracy's College. Thank you, everyone.

**Dr. Branson:** Thank you.

**Sal Nudo:** Tune in to the next several episodes of Democracy's College to hear from college and university leaders who will discuss a wide range of information about data as part of OCCRL's collaboration with the Office of the Governor on a project called the Illinois SUCCESS Program, formerly known as the Higher Education Futures Roundtable. The Success Program supports universities and colleges in creating equitable student success.

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.