

# Democracy's College, Episode 66

## Effective Data Use for Holistic Advising

With guest James Minor 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](https://occrl.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Dr. OiYan Poon an author, speaker, and race and education scholar, talks with Dr. James Minor about how campuses can leverage data and institutional research to improve holistic advising and other programs to support students to and through college so that they can complete a credential or degree. Dr. Minor is the chancellor of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

**OiYan Poon:** Welcome to Illinois SUCCESS. I'm your host, OiYan Poon. In this episode, we'll be exploring how campuses can leverage data and institutional research to improve holistic advising and other programs to support students to and through college to complete a credential or degree.

In 2024, the U.S. Department of Education published a playbook on implementing holistic advising and wraparound services to equitably improve postsecondary student success. This playbook explains that effective advising, particularly holistic advising that is well-integrated with wraparound support services, can play a central role in helping students navigate the complicated systems and processes that are critical to success on their campuses, to increase retention and completion rates for students. The report offered *many* recommendations, but I want to highlight its call on campus leaders to use data and advising technologies to enhance student experiences and progress toward their academic goals.

Today, we have a really special guest. We'll be in conversation with Dr. James Minor about how colleges can improve advising and wraparound services to more effectively support all students in their postsecondary educational journeys. Dr. Minor is the chancellor of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. He previously served as assistant vice chancellor and senior strategist in the Office of the Chancellor at California State University, which recently posted the highest graduation rates in its history. He's

successfully advocated for hundreds of millions of dollars in support of graduation initiatives and served as principal investigator for a \$7.5 million in funded programs and research.

Prior to his post at Cal State, Minor served as deputy assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Education, where he administered more than \$7 billion, that's with a B, in federal higher ed programming. A recognized thought leader in the field of higher education, Minor has a noted resume of teaching and scholarship in educational policy, administration in higher education, academic governance, and more.

Welcome and thank you for joining me, Chancellor Minor.

**James Minor:** Thank you. I feel like we need music after that introduction. Thank you very much. It's very kind, very gracious.

**OiYan Poon:** We need some walk-up music for you.

**James Minor:** Yeah.

**OiYan Poon:** (Laughs) I'll save that question for another time. What is your walk-up song (laughs)? All right, so –

**James Minor:** Most people would be surprised, but we'll save it for another time.

**OiYan Poon:** Now I'm dying to know. You've got to tell us (both of them laugh).

Not to derail our conversation. All right. So, let's get started, actually, by learning a little bit about SIUE and how holistic advising and wraparound services works there.

**James Minor:** Well, thank you for the invitation. I'm excited to have the conversation.

Just a couple of maybe context clues for people who may be listening. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, or SIUE, is located in Edwardsville, Illinois. Some people in the Chicagoland area would refer to this part of the state as downstate. I have to remind people when I travel, I go, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, people think Chicago. I say, no, think St. Louis. The campus is about 20 minutes from downtown St. Louis. It's separated by the Mississippi River.

And the footprint for the institution, which enrolls about 13,000 students, there's a main campus in Edwardsville; there's a location in East St. Louis, where we have a charter high school, a nursing and dental clinic. We have a footprint in Belleville, Illinois, where we operate a number of community programs in addition to a master's in forensic science program. And then the School of Dental Medicine that is attached to SIUE is in Alton, Illinois. So that just gives people the footprint of the geography of the institution.

So, our students are mostly regional. Some come from as far away as Hawaii; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; California; but the overwhelming majority of them are from the region. Our approach to holistic advising and serving students starts before they arrive. And so maybe if you put two other scholars in the room, we'd start to argue about the definition of holistic advising. What is it? How would one define it?

**OiYan Poon:** What's your conceptual framework?

**James Minor:** Yes, exactly, right. And I do think when people say holistic advising, the meanings can vary. So let me just offer, conceptually, how we're thinking about it here at SIUE. Most institutions have what would be referred to as a preview day, right? High school students who are shopping for a college or university. There's programming that allows them to come to campus, learn a little more about the institution, maybe their major, take a tour. Just a week or so ago, we had 800 students and families on a Saturday here for preview day. That is the beginning of our conversation with students and families about the environment here, the expectations, the level of care, and the expectation that students will succeed. We're talking about that during preview day. Yes, we're going to tell you how many books are in the library, and we're going to show you a residence hall if people want to see it. But we spend a lot of time focused on communicating to students and families what it means to be a student here and a part of this university community.

The second touch point is orientation for the groups of students who have decided to attend SIUE later in the summer, late May, June, July. They're here for some kind of orientation program before their first fall. There are *lots* of conversations about 15 to finish and office hours and advising and the expectations to be a part of this community.

Now, I want to say this very carefully. We're talking about holistic here. We're talking to students in one room, and we hold the parents back to speak with them in another room to make it abundantly clear to them that they are a part of our student success model here at SIUE. And there are some specific messages that we communicate to them about their responsibility in supporting their student once they're here.

I'll just give you one example, is about allowing them to be a *college* student. One of the messages I share with parents is that any student who wants to meet with me, I have a standing meeting at the Starbucks on campus at 7.30 a.m. The no-show rate is about 50%; the 7:30 hour hangs up a lot of students. But what I am saying to parents is when they come and sit down with me, they're not talking to me about differential equations. They're not talking to me about the chemistry lab. They're talking to me about what's happening at home. What I would call responsibilities that you typically wouldn't see carried by a first-year college student.

So some of the parents are not necessarily aware of that. And so, with all due respect and humility for anybody's family situation, what we're asking them is, to the extent possible, we need you to allow them to be here. And this is a part of when we're talking about holistic advising and student success. So there are very clear messages for parents, families, and loved ones.

And then I'm going to take you to one other point in time in our timeline, which is convocation. Think about the week prior to the beginning of the fall semester. That week before the academic term begins, Wednesday and Thursday, is move-in [day]. And then Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday is an entire series of programming to prepare students for the fall term. And one of them is convocation, where we *formally* celebrate the bold decision that these students have made to begin their college career here at SIUE. It is part ceremony, part celebration, right? We hire a band. There's a procession from the basketball arena to the front of our Cougar statue. The students are going to take a class photo, but their message is there about our expectation that they succeed. It's very intentional.

So that's convocation and part of the programming for Welcome Week are what we call academic sessions. Even prior to your first class, we put you in the department with current students and faculty members to allow them to orient themselves to their major or academic program. All of this, I am expanding the definition of advising here, right? It's not an appointment with a person about your course schedule next semester. We are now considering all of these things to be a part of what some may refer to as holistic advising. So that's convocation and courses start.

And then we start to have all of the regular fall meetings with the staff senate, with the faculty senate, with our constituency groups. We have designed very clear messaging there. We have begun to ask our faculty and staff to do three really easy and free things: One is to affirm students. It doesn't cost you anything to say, 'Hey, where are you from? Springfield, Illinois. You made a great choice to attend college here at SIUE. We expect you to succeed and I'm here to help if you need it.' The second thing we ask people to do is to intervene sooner rather than later. So we use starfish here, but not to wait until week 14 or 15 to raise a flag to do it in week two or week three. Again, easy and free. The third thing we ask people to do is *walk* students, not point them. So, if they're looking for a resource on campus, the Writing Center, Access Center, to *walk them* over and make the connection and not simply point them to a place. Again, we're talking holistic advising. Most people think about the whole student. I'm thinking about it as a whole institution.

And then we move into the fall term and they're in a series of check-ins. And then all of the more traditional actions that you'd expect to see as a part of our advising protocol play out

during the course of the academic year. And when we're talking about holistic, we're also talking about the touch points across the institution.

And finally, I'll just say, I have asked our university community to imagine what it would be like for a student to hear that message eight to 10 times in their first semester of college: You belong here. We expect you to succeed. I'm here to help if you need it. And then I ask people, OiYan, to imagine the students call home in week four and week five, and the parent or loved one is asking, 'Hey, Johnny, how's it going in college?' And Johnny responds, 'Mom, people are really nice. Everybody keeps stopping me to tell me that they're excited that I'm here and they expect me to succeed and that they're here to help.' I don't underestimate the power of that messaging to students, even the valedictorians who arrive here to begin their college career. It has meaning, and I think it has changed slightly the culture of student success and how we think about advising here at SIUE.

**OiYan Poon:** I hear you loud and clear that holistic student advising, Edwardsville, is really a *whole* campus culture. Stakeholders are all invited in to really push that message to students that you believe in them, that you're here for them, to support them. I really appreciate that.

And I picked up on something that you did mention, which is Starfish. Can you share with listeners what Starfish is and how that might connect to data on campus to do that early intervention with students and not wait until week 14 or whatever to be like, 'Hey, I'm worried about you,' because it's too late by then.

**James Minor:** Starfish is simply an application or digital platform that allows various members of our university community to share information about a student's well-being or academic health. So, a faculty member could use Starfish to make a note, 'Hey, Sarah's doing really great, is doing amazing, but needs a little more support writing.' They may say, 'Hey, Marshawn missed class on Tuesday and that seems really strange. He was doing so well.' And imagine an advisor or others across our university campus who may have the ability to receive or pick up that message, who may have a different touch point for the student and may be able to intervene. Part of our progress here is to have a greater number and percentage of members in our university community who are actually using Starfish in a way that allows us to intervene sooner rather than later.

**OiYan Poon:** How do you get everyone tapped into that resource? Because I'm thinking about two roles. In my career, I started as an academic advisor in an academic department 25 years ago. And then more recently, I was a faculty member. And as an advisor, I was always frustrated because I was like, faculty are not looking at my notes about this student, right? And I'm like, this is not connected. So it felt very decentralized and very

disconnected. And then as a faculty member, I felt like maybe I'm part of the problem because I'm like getting a million emails as a faculty member and forgetting like, what am I supposed to be doing? And what is this system?

How do you get everyone on the same *page* and be part of the same *team* to really reinforce that culture?

**James Minor:** So let me just state very clearly, there are some struggles here also. I do not pretend to suggest that it works perfectly here. It does not. And it works better in some areas of the university than it does in others. And you have underscored one of the challenges is faculty use and accessibility, ease of use, and a compelling reason for faculty to use it consistently in ways that have meaning. It is a challenge. I want to be very clear about that.

But I would also say that it is a conversation here that we are having; so, when I go over to faculty senate. We're talking about it when the provost goes over to faculty senate, we're talking about it. And my *guess* is that we will continue to talk about it until we have more structured, formal agreements about how we will use Starfish as a university.

One of the things that we've tried to do is be clear about the *promise* of using it. I'm still surprised by how many faculty members go, 'Why do I need to do that?' So that is still something that we're trying to communicate institutionally.

And then the other thing is to remove any technical reason that someone would have not to use it. So if I have pleaded consistently for a faculty member to use it, and when they do, it doesn't work properly or there are technical issues with the system, it is possible that you've lost that person. And there is nothing contractual or obligatory that requires them to come back to it today.

**OiYan Poon:** Right. And what it's making me think about is how do you make it *routine*? When we talk about organizational change, it's really thinking about those work routines and how do you *encourage* the work routines to shift up a little bit?

And I would also imagine that's actually a measurable change, right? Like if a goal is to see the promise and the potential of increasing routine usage, and then how do you measure that? One example of use of data for making, you know, the needle tick a little bit.

**James Minor:** It is a great question. There is an organizational reality that I think we have to contend with and strategize for. And that is they're probably, I would argue, 5% or less of individuals who work in a university community who have the opportunity to see the entire institution. The overwhelming majority of people who work in a university community see and experience a tiny slice of the university. It is not easy for people to connect that daily

practice to a larger institutional goal. If I am a faculty member and I have a course schedule, I worry a lot about teaching my courses really well and the content and covering it and how I'm going to structure the exam and, to some extent, my research and service. There is nothing organic that happens in the university community that allows me to connect, making notes in Starfish to the institution's student success goals. I don't want to underestimate that if I'm in Athletics that there's nothing that allows me to make that connection.

And so if you imagine that the majority of people working in the university community may be *unaware* of how one particular policy practice connects to so many other issues and the success of our students. So again, I think it is important to help close that gap for the people we're asking to do something, right, to participate in a particular way.

**OiYan Poon:** That's the role of leadership, right? I appreciate you saying, like, hey, there's like 5% of us, you know, any given campus that would have that large-scale overview. Couldn't be me, Chancellor Minor. Thank you for your leadership (laughs).

And I love how you're talking about acknowledging that there's always room to grow. There's always work to be done to improve. And around holistic student advising and wraparound services, what's working on your campus? Like what kind of successes can you share with our listeners at SIUE.

**James Minor:** Two things maybe that I think may be helpful to people who are listening. One is I share with my leadership team on a regular basis, if we are going to improve, we must be willing to do the things required to see improvement. Now that sounds very basic and straightforward.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, say more (laughs).

**James Minor:** But what that means is can you be clear about the policy levers, practices, resource investments that are likely to lead to dramatic, significant improvements? And if the answer is yes, then you must be willing to do those things.

One example: Very early in my tenure here as chancellor, we were in the beginning stages of establishing a first- to second-year retention goal and a four- to six-year graduation rate goal. And on first- to second-year retention, I'd asked to disaggregate the data by school and college and maybe even by department. And our institutional research team quickly came back and said, 'I'm sorry, Chancellor Minor, we can't do that. And I went, 'Well, what do you mean?' Sixty-five percent of our incoming students were allowed to be undeclared.

**OiYan Poon:** And say why that's important.

**James Minor:** As a matter of an institutional policy that you could be pre-nursing, pre-engineering, pre-something until a department or major decided to let you in. And we *knew* that a part of our challenges with respect to retention and degree completion is that early on in a student's academic career, they didn't have an academic home. So they didn't belong to anybody. So no one was responsible whether they persisted or whether they departed. They were just sort of in this general education land without an academic home.

**OiYan Poon:** And without an academic home, you have fewer touch points to kind of say like, hey, make sure that you're on the right path. Or can you explain why that matters?

**James Minor:** Yeah, so I think it matters for two reasons. One is that it said to students, maybe unintentionally, yes, you came to college for engineering or nursing, but go take these general education courses first. We'll see how you do. And then maybe we'll decide if you can be an engineering major.

**OiYan Poon:** So you still have to prove yourself.

**James Minor:** Yes. And I think it sent the wrong message to our students and our data suggested that, right? We saw students departing not after their first year, but we saw students departing after their *second* year because we had these artificial barriers about entry into majors.

The second reason it mattered is it was clear to us that students who were direct-admitted to a major had a different anchor point to the institution than students who didn't. And yes, they were advised differently. They received things that students who were undeclared perhaps didn't. So, the institutional response was to say by next fall. Any student who is regularly admitted, wants to declare a major, will have the opportunity to declare a major. Let's figure out what we need to do to make that possible. But the goal was clear. The timeframe was clear. And the less than 12 months, right, when the next cohort of students arrive, we had built a process by which they could declare a major. And it is difficult to deny *here* that has had a dramatic impact on students' connection to the institution *and* the upticks that we've experienced in first- to second-year retention.

**OiYan Poon:** By next fall, like, you just said, that's a very specific, SMART goal, right? It's measurable, it's time specific, all the things that SMART stands for (laughs).

**James Minor:** Yeah, for sure. And let me be clear: It *defied* the conventions of higher education. The pace, the scale of the change and such a short timeframe *really* caused people to wrestle with, A, can we do this? The convention says that we need to have a committee. We need to have a task force. It takes at least two years to think about how we want to go about this, and then another year for implementation. We didn't have that kind of time. And the students who were arriving didn't have that kind of time. And so it was

really important to drive that kind of change on behalf of students. And I want to give, even on this podcast, a lot of credit to our provost, Dr. Denise Cobb, and the team of individuals who worked to deliver that for our students, and it has made a big difference.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. And the differences that you're seeing, are you seeing, you know, what we've talked about as institutional performance equity gaps? Have those numbers been closing or improving, I should say?

**James Minor:** There's no question that we have seen gains in overall first- to second-year retention. I think we're going to see the benefits on four- to six-year graduation rates in the next year or two as we start to move out in time. But we have also seen the closing of some equity gaps, particularly with African American students and Latinx students. This fall, the number of African American students returning for their second year *skyrocketed* from 65% to 80%. That is just unprecedented and unheard of both across the state and I think nationally for that population of students, especially when the first- to second-year retention rate for white students is only at 81%.

Right now, we have an institutional goal of 90% first- to second-year retention, which would put us in a very rare class of institutions nationally. But we believe that we can do it and we're going to pursue that goal.

So yes, we've seen the closing of some equity gaps. We took a look nationally this fall to ask how many other institutions in the state of Illinois, public institutions, have a first- to second-year retention rate of 80% for African Americans. Not easy to find once you get past U of I. We started to look at what it is nationally, and it's only about 72%, 73% nationally for *all* four-year public institutions. So that is pretty remarkable, and I think evidence that it can be done.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. And then if your institution-wide goal is to get to 90%, you need to make sure that you are providing the support needed, you're meeting the needs of students to really perform and shine and to thrive academically. And that's *all* the different students. So unless you're looking at these data in disaggregated ways, it's hard to know how to invest your efforts, I would imagine.

**James Minor:** We've been very clear. In order for us to get to 90%, we are focused on two things. One is the population of students who need to *outperform* 90% in order for our average to be 90%. So student athletes, honor students, those kinds of populations, you'd expect they're going to be retained at above 90%. And so we're very clear about that.

The other is to be exceptionally clear about the number of additional students we need to retain in order to hit 90%. If I said to people, listen, it's fewer than 300 students, right? And then I say, well, how many is that for the College of Arts and Sciences? And how many is it

for the School of Business, for the School of Engineering, School of Pharmacy? And then our goal is to go departmentally. And so, I want to show up in departments and say, 'I need you to retain 17 more students.' That is very attainable and it's *local*.

**OiYan Poon:** Super specific, actionable.

**James Minor:** Yes. Yes. absolutely. It is interesting. People respond to that differently. Now remember, these students now have a major, so they're your students. I need you to retain 17 more of your students, and I have been pleasantly surprised by how some faculty have responded to that, how some departments have responded to that, and how some deans have responded to it in the interest of retaining a greater number of percentage of students.

The good thing for us is that if you're in a university community, the likelihood that you're an educator is pretty high, right? So most people, I think, inherently want to see students succeed. And I think it's up to us to give them information, data, resources in order for them to support our institutional goals.

**OiYan Poon:** I like that you're talking about disaggregated data. It's not just by race or class or demographics per se, but it's also by academic area of study and student athletes, for instance, honors college students, et cetera. So really getting more specific around the data analysis on campus to guide the actions and strategic work.

So, in the back of my mind these days, I'm *constantly* thinking about the rapidly changing and evolving political environment. Last month, the federal government put on freeze or hold or canceled minority-serving institution grants. I [a] long time ago was part of the establishment of ANAPISI's AAPI serving institutions as a federal designation and grants. And of course, there's Hispanic-serving institutions, PBIs, et cetera. HBCUs, which is a different class, but we won't get into that. That's another episode. But you know, there's also these other federal grants that support student success, whether it's SSS or TRIO or CCAMPIS supporting student parents. So, the political environment *does* involve that. And you're talking about a regional university that really serves as a core and a heart of a regional geography, a place that is often under resourced, could always use more appropriations, public funding. When this kind of attack is happening, when this kind of challenges, and some might even say unprecedented times, how do you lead and how do you keep things going and moving forward in this upward trajectory that that you were just talking about to really effectively support students from wherever they're coming from.

**James Minor:** It's an interesting *and* complicated question, and I don't believe that there are easy answers to such a question. However, I think it is important for leaders to zero in on the key objectives for their institution. I tend to think that if it wasn't this, it would be something else that we'd have to contend with. I don't know a university leader, pick 100 to

my left, 100 to my right, who would ever say that there was a year that we didn't have anything to contend with and I could solely focus on my top three, top five institutional objectives. If you're sitting in the seat of a university leader, there will *always* be things to contend with, nationally, locally, environmentally, et cetera.

It has been difficult to watch. There's no question about it. You read it in the bio to open this episode that a part of my professional experience was at the U.S. Department of Education managing a \$7 billion portfolio of higher education programs. So, all of the programs that you just named, I administered from Washington, D.C., and to now call and talk to colleagues who are there. It's just a very different place, very different time. And yes, it has been difficult to watch the volatility of change come from the federal government. And if you're an institution, you've had to figure out how to do two things: one, manage, and two, communicate about it across a university campus.

In the early days, we struggled to get a message out. No sooner than we could draft a campus message, we were revising it because there was some new development in the morning news until, finally, we just said, we're not going to issue a message on this. But I think the point I want to make here is that institutional leaders will *always* have to contend with challenges.

I don't know that there's ever been a season in higher education absent of challenges. Yes, this season is unique, but I still believe that the power of higher education institutions has value and meaning for the students and young people who show up to campuses. I tell the story of convocation. And during the procession from the Vadalabene Center here, which is our basketball arena, to the Cougar statue, there was a woman along the route. And I'm not sure that she recognized that I was the chancellor. Maybe she just thought I worked here, which is fine. And she said to me, 'I'm so glad that you all are doing this.' And then she said, 'You see him right there? That's my son.' It was a parent who had sort of hung back, maybe recently moved her son into the residence hall. But she was *watching* him be celebrated by university community as he's beginning college. And then she turned to me and said, 'I'm so glad that he's here.' And to me, that is really what is at stake when we come to work each morning as a university community.

Now sure, there'll be lots of things swirling in the environment, but if we lose focus on that student and on that family, then it is a disservice to any university community. So my message to people would be to continue to focus on the things that matter most, and you just have to manage the rest.

**OiYan Poon:** I think there's no better way to end this episode. Thank you so much, Chancellor Minor. This was wonderful.

Do you have any last points of wisdom or resources that you might suggest to listeners today?

**James Minor:** Let me just say thank you. I think my only message to people who are listening: Being a university leader at any level is inherently challenging. And I just want to encourage people, remind people to seek joy in the role and to constantly be *reminded* about why the work that we do each day matters for real students, real families who arrive with an expectation that the institution is going to convert their ambition into something that has meaning for their life. We can't lose focus of that. So, find joy and find a way to remind yourself on a regular basis of why your work matters.

**OiYan Poon:** Thank you all. Thank you, Chancellor Minor, reminding us to find joy. Thank you for your leadership. It's just really admirable. And thank you all for listening. Go find joy.

**James Minor:** Thank you.

**Sal Nudo:** In 2022, Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a law that required public community colleges and universities in Illinois to submit equity plans to the state starting in 2024. As a result, these Illinois SUCCESS podcast episodes are intended to encourage and support higher education leaders to keep the momentum going. This includes planning, implementation, and learning, with the goal of closing equity gaps on campuses. The Acronym SUCCESS stands for Supporting Universities and Colleges in Creating Equitable Student Success. This series is part of a collaboration among OCCRL, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and the Illinois Community College Board. In each episode, we converse with leaders from Illinois colleges and universities to hear their wisdom and experiences on effectively using data to advance institutional equity improvement strategies.

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.