

Democracy's College, Episode 68

Improving Advising and Wraparound Services to More Effectively Support All Students in Their Postsecondary Education Journeys

With guest Lonetta Oliver 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 occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. OiYan Poon talks with Dr. Lonetta Oliver about how colleges can improve advising and wraparound services to more effectively support all students in their postsecondary educational journeys. This special-edition Illinois SUCCESS podcast, and several others in the series, explores 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.

OiYan Poon: Welcome to Illinois SUCCESS. I'm your host, OiYan Poon, and 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. That is *not* a short title. We will be placing [a link to that playbook](#) on our website for Democracy's College podcast.

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 technology to enhance student experiences and progress toward their academic goals.

Today, we'll be in conversation with Dr. Lonetta Oliver about how colleges can improve advising and wraparound services to more effectively support all students in their postsecondary educational journeys. Dr. Lonetta Oliver is a professor and dean of humanities at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, Illinois. She is a member of the Minority Student Retention Team at ICC and is a leader in developing supportive programs, communities, and structures for students to succeed.

Welcome and thank you for joining me, Dr. Oliver!

Lonetta Oliver: Thank you so very much for having me.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So, let's start our conversation off by learning a bit about Illinois Central College. Can you tell us about ICC and the college's strategic framework or model for offering holistic student advising and wraparound services?

Lonetta Oliver: Illinois Central College developed, as part of its latest five-year strategic plan, what is known as the Cultivating a Community of Care. And what we do is at all levels of the college's structure, we implement systems, processes, and best practices that will essentially lead to student success. And success for us is defined as students who not only persist semester to semester and year over year, but through to the completion of a degree or certificate. We expect our students to have all of the supports that they need to be able to do so, and we want them to be able to continue to pursue whatever academic or career goals beyond Illinois Central College. So transfer or moving into the job market, and also to let them know that we're always here for them so that if they have to come back and gain additional credentials or scale up in particular areas that we're here and our doors are always open for them.

With that cultivating culture of care, we have what some would consider to be an intrusive model of advising. And so, when a student walks through the door, we ask them a series of questions to ascertain what their goals are. Along with this, kind of completed a revision of our advising model so that students are advised now according to career or transfer clusters.

And so, what that means, ultimately, is we want to know what your goals are so we can place you appropriately. And our advisors have the information on transfer institutions and on employer research that suggests that we know how they can best succeed and best achieve those goals so that we are not putting students into classes that they don't need. We're not wasting their time, we're not wasting their money, and that we are moving them right along to get closer and closer to their goals with every semester.

OiYan Poon: You use the word 'intrusive' model of advising. And I've heard this a few times, and I think the first time I heard it, I was like, 'I don't want anyone intruding on me.' [Laughs]

I think it is the most accurate way to describe it. Can you share more about what that looks like and why do we need an *intrusive model* today for student advising?

Lonetta Oliver: The reality is that often when students walk through our doors, and this is not to assume their age or anything, but they have goals, but they don't always know how to achieve their goals or actually even what their goals mean.

And so, when you are using a more intrusive model, what you're doing is rather than *assuming* that you know what's best for the student, you are taking the steps to be advocating for them on the front end so that they don't have to fix things on the back end. So you're kind of walking ahead and heralding, 'Okay, this person is coming. They're going to need some things. Anybody who's got anything, you know, make sure that you are contributing appropriately.'

When we put together our college wraparound services, such as the food pantry, counseling services, follow-up advising, our academic alert systems, the academic support center for tutoring, *and* when we make relationships with community partners, such as Goodwill, we are making sure that we have things in place *in case* they need them. And so, it's not assuming that they will; it is preparing for the eventuality that *someone* will.

And so, to be intrusive, ultimately, is to try to have a little bit of a crystal ball and to try to be able to see a little ahead in the future, because we know, based on data, that the average community college student *is* only one life emergency away from having to drop out. One blown tire, one missed month of rent, one job loss that leads to a week's loss of salary could definitely have a devastating effect on our students.

So again, we try to prepare for those eventualities. It might not happen to every student, and certainly we're hoping none of those things happens to *any* of our students. But in case they do, we try to set things up so that we're prepared to support them out of that and so that those things that otherwise could have been catastrophic are not.

OiYan Poon: So, the data, you're saying, suggests that these students are essentially living on the *edge*. It sounds like there's a lot of precarity.

Where do you get those data from? Is it campus-based data from institutional research or is it statewide data?

Lonetta Oliver: So, we use the IPEDS data, but we also do, when students withdraw from classes, we collect a little information on the why. We've been collecting our own institutional data for quite some time to try to get to know our students and the types of things that inspire them to make particular decisions. We basically got that information from the students themselves.

And up until recently, we had campus housing. And so the students would tell us: / don't have this. If I can't get this, I won't be able to come back next semester. It's information like that that we've collected directly from the students, from that national data that lets us know, overall, what we need to do in order to be a community college that is prepared for students.

We definitely have always aspired to be a student-ready college. When you are prepared to accept the students that you're going to get, you have to recognize that you have to accept them however they walk through your door, whether they have the money or not. And of course, we're a community college. We're supposed to be cost-effective and we're supposed to offer high-quality education. And so, the students, their credits transfer to all of the state and private schools in the state. And so they're *not* getting a reduction in quality just because the price is reduced.

So, we again –

OiYan Poon: Big on that!

Lonetta Oliver: Yeah. Yeah. We want to make sure that they have everything that they need. We make sure that we are asking them directly, what *would* have kept you? What would make you stay? How can we reinforce what we're doing? And we've done a lot of things to those efforts. For example, it's also now part of our five-year strategic plan to move more of our courses into the open education resource realm. And so, we have written into our faculty contract that faculty who developed OER materials are compensated for doing so because it saves the students money.

Because a couple of years ago, during one of our back-to-school batches, we had a table and we asked students directly: What would you do with the money if you didn't have to pay for textbooks? And they told us directly: I would use this for gas. I would use this to pay for food. I would use this to reduce my child-care costs. They told us directly. And students who have to make decisions like that aren't the students who have a trust fund. They're not the students who already have a bunch of built-in supports that would be there if they have, you know, a small financial change in their lives. We are looking at students who every little bit helps. Again, we get that information from them directly. We try to shape our college initiatives around what the students are telling us that they need.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So the data *really* inform and shape this community of care that you're talking about. And I would imagine that a community of care might look differently for each individual student. What they *need* may differ, and so then having these data is really critical.

Lonetta Oliver: Yes, and to your point, it's highly individualized because, again, it's based on what the student needs, but it also allows us to make considerable adjustments when necessary because there have been times, for example, when we realized we wouldn't have campus housing. We realized we needed to develop more community partnerships to find housing for students. It's things like that that allow us with the culture of care that we're able to adjust to meet our students' needs.

OiYan Poon: So you're really connecting it to that institutional strategic plan. That equity work *is* central to the strategy work.

Lonetta Oliver: Absolutely.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. I'm wondering, you know, thinking about data, I love how you've been talking about different sources of data, like showing up at student events, campus fairs, and where you know students will show up.

This conversation is throwing me back to 20 years ago when I was an academic advisor. I used to hold *so many* stories from the students I would meet with. And I'm wondering if Illinois Central ever taps into kind of the collected knowledge of staff on campus from what they hear from students. I know it's kind of an indirect way of getting at student experiences, but I'm just curious about that.

Lonetta Oliver: Oh, absolutely. We invite and really encourage to hear voices from faculty and staff across the college when we are engaging in our strategic planning and in developing our annual goals, our institutional operating plan.

So, as part of that strategic plan, we have our IOP, the institutional operating plan, that we engage in. Those dictate our activities each year. And so, we hear from faculty and staff what the students have told them. It's there, *aside from* those instances when we can speak to students directly, like SGA and student events, and collecting that sort of data, the exit data that's directly from students. But we also hear from the faculty and staff *their* perception of how we can best meet students' needs.

And that's helpful because it allows for a lens through which we can filter based on what their relationship with students happens to be. And so your relationship with a student as an advisor, the students will tell you different things than they will me as a faculty member who has them in class. And so, you and I can have the *same* student, and we get a completely different picture of that student's needs, that student's challenges, that student's notions of their successes based on that relationship. And so the student could tell you, 'Oh my gosh, I'm having a really horrible semester because.' And you fill in the blank with whatever they told you. But when I ask them, how are your classes going? 'Great!' And that's because they've got all B's and A's.

And so, again, we're filtering it also through our role in that relationship that we have with the students. And so, if I were working in financial aid, I might consider, you know, the students great if everyone who walked in was successfully able to get aid or to have their appeals accepted. Whereas someone who's working in maintenance might say, the students aren't doing all that great because they decided to maybe fix something in a classroom and they had to move those students to a new room that didn't have all of the resources that the broken space didn't have. So again, you're going to get a different message based on that relationship with the students.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, so then it's leadership's responsibility and task to then synthesize all of this information. And I love how you're talking about the diversity of data and feedback and information to *inform* the strategic leadership work at the institution.

Now that we've learned a little bit about Illinois Central and the model of advising and wraparound services, can you share a little bit about what are some measurable *successes* that the campus has seen over the years through this model and strategic approach?

Lonetta Oliver: One of the things that we did that actually started at classroom level that then filtered up, if you will—I don't know that there's a hierarchy, but we tend to speak in terms in this culture of up and down rather than laterally—but one of the successes that filtered up *into* being manifested into the strategic plan was, at the classroom level, we had been working on developing culturally responsive teaching strategies for the classroom, particularly focused on students in developmental classrooms, so English and math at our institution. Some institutions have reading as well. We integrate critical reading into our writing classes.

As part of that, we tapped a few subject-matter experts and folks in our Teaching and Learning Excellence Center to work with us to develop modules to then be facilitated as professional development to faculty in the areas of English and math, again, particularly those faculty who teach developmental courses.

And what ended up happening was those strategies were so successful, particularly with students who are African American and Latinx, that we decided to scale that effort *up*. And so now it's available through the TLE, through the entire faculty group, and so any faculty who are interested in learning those strategies and implementing them into the classroom can utilize those.

There are some elements of culturally responsive teaching that are actually very successful *outside* of the classroom. So we adjusted our model from culturally responsive to culturally relevant content, and then started to include people who put on campus and college-wide events. That's where the work of the minority student retention team came in. We started to

reshape our campus events so that they had learning outcomes that connected with what faculty were doing inside the classrooms. So it's outside the classroom, learning outcomes that connects *inside* the classroom. And so those events became so popular, and we were at one point throwing like 48 events a year that now –

OiYan Poon: Oh, my gosh.

Lonetta Oliver: Yeah. It scales up to the point where it is now, again, college-focused. And so, the culturally relevant activities are now a part of the college's overall strategic plan.

And so what we found through the data is that it improved retention for African American students by double digits from fall to fall and for Latinx students for double digits from fall to fall. The reality is that it's *improving* the outcomes for *all* of our students, but because those two groups had been particularly indicated as a need, we need to close some gaps for those groups in particular.

We started to look at the data and realize that it was improving student success all around. Now, all of our students come to the events. We throw a wonderful Diwali event every fall, and we use local vendors to bring in fresh hot samosas and the students love it, and they share desserts and just do wonderful things. And we talk about, you know, what students should gain from that experience and *know* about their classmates and other people in the community. And again, it just kind of builds on that part of our strategic plan that it is focused on cultivating a community of care. The result is students are staying until they graduate.

OiYan Poon: Those double-digit gains, that's *huge*. And it sounds like it's an entirely holistic programming and offerings that are increasing student engagement. And we know from research that increased student engagement leads to higher retention rates, and this targeted strategic work is leading to overall outcome improvements. So when you improve institutional performance for targeted strategic populations, everyone wins, it sounds like.

Lonetta Oliver: Absolutely.

OiYan Poon: And so for these events, these community events where students are feeling more engaged and connected, do you think that then translates into students then having an easier time accessing information to *guide* their pathways of student success in terms of, you know, oh, which classes should I enroll in next semester and making sure I'm on track towards completing my certificate or transferring?

Lonetta Oliver: Oh, absolutely!

OiYan Poon: Is that kind of the connection?

Lonetta Oliver: Yes, that's a huge portion of the connection. Because the students, when they see each other at these events and not just in class, they talk. We know the one thing students will do is talk to each other.

OiYan Poon: They do.

Lonetta Oliver: Whose composition class should I take? When should I do *this*? They are their best supports, their best advocates for success. 'Oh, you will like this math class as opposed to this other one,' right? And so, when they have those conversations, it reinforces the work that we're doing because not only do they now have opportunities to have the conversations that are so critical to their success, but it develops that community that they need that goes beyond the college structures.

Ultimately, it may be a little bit of a challenge to get in to see your advisor for the next couple of weeks. But if I can just turn to the person who lives down the hall from me and go, 'Hey, did you like this? When I sign up for it, you know, what should I expect?' They're going to get an immediate answer that's authentic and based on another student's experience.

And so we recognize that a lot of that stuff, you know, is filtered from student to student. And, you know, as a community college, it's built into the name. That is their community. Their community is built of other students who have had similar experiences to theirs.

OiYan Poon: Right. This is bringing up for me, I'm wondering if Illinois Central has kind of like a peer advising program at all.

Lonetta Oliver: We have peer advising and peer tutoring. The peer advising is more about counseling, though. And so, you know, when students are kind of having a moment and need somebody to talk to, it's more along those lines.

However, we're always working on developing systems so that the students can do more things immediately in the moment. Because if they don't, they'll put things aside or wait until it's no longer critical or even helpful. And so, we're working on that. You know, nothing is ever perfect.

As far as the peer work is concerned, most of our peer work with regarding to advising is actually connected to our counseling services. But again, when students have their little sub-communities that they've built, their little families on campus; they're involved in the college student clubs, they talk. And so, they help each other with lots of things. I'm a club advisor for a club called Black Legacy, and the students get together now every Monday, and they talk about the concerns that they have on campus and how to address them. And they help each other by working through. They do a whole lot of role play with, you know, advocating for themselves when they are having challenges in class and need to

communicate effectively. I'm also highly affiliated with the Dungeons and Dragons Club. That one's huge.

OiYan Poon: Interesting.

Lonetta Oliver: And so the students get together (laughs). Yeah, they get together every week. That club is so huge, they actually have to have two meetings. But they get together and they play and they are just really a collective community of students that *you found your people*. And so, they bring their challenges to each other and they work them out with each other.

And, you know, I think that on a lot of levels that's good because it helps the students develop leadership skills, right? Because everyone is not going to be able to join SGA or honors or, you know, we're not even talking about, you know, the high-achieving students who very rarely have challenges. We're talking about just your average community college student who comes to us in need of a degree or credential or some retooling, and we want them to have that same community experience as well.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, and your role as an advisor to these two different organizations, these student spaces, for me also presents a different form of advising that I don't think showed up in the playbook, right? Is that you got to meet students where they're *at*. And I like how you're talking about *evolving* as a campus in serving the changing needs and interests of students through the various touchpoints for advising and student support.

So, I like how earlier you mentioned being student-ready and constantly improving and learning from the students that come to your campus to keep evolving and keep it fresh. I've always been fascinated by this terminology because oftentimes I think in higher ed or college pathways, we talk about whether a *student* is college ready. But I think it's more empowering for institutional leaders like yourself and others to think about how can we as institutions be student ready and continually improve in that aspect of *being* ready for the students as they're constantly changing.

I mean, you've shared about learning from the student experiences. What are some examples of the ways that Illinois Central has changed in its model of holistic advising and wraparound services over the years to be more student-ready?

Lonetta Oliver: If you look at the history of universities in the United States, and I mean in Europe as well, but particularly in the United States, for the majority of our history, it was for the rich. And when they weren't university ready, they could afford to hire tutors to help prepare them to get there.

Well, our students don't have that. And we are open-enrollment, so we are not a selective institution, and we should *not* be. We instead, in that regard, have modeled ourselves after many HBCUs, in truth, in that when the student arrives on our campus, we don't know what their skills are. And so we have adjusted our academic support services and our tutoring services to be able to support students with whatever skills that they have in order to get them to be college ready.

And so, what that means is the moment that they step into the door, we focus on what they have and what they are going to *need*. We have adopted the state's focus on multiple measures. So, the students could come to us, maybe they haven't been in high school in a long time, but if they had a high school GPA of at least 2.7, they're considered college-ready. And so we take them in, but we make sure that they know that, hey, it's been a while since you've been in school. If you need to brush up in some areas, our academic support services are here for you. And we have both peer and professional tutors that can support you.

We have students who have come to us and they have to test in the testing center, and they may test into developmental coursework, but we also let them know, again, that we have tutoring services to support them. And embedded in a lot of our courses, we have what's known as supplemental instruction or the embedded tutors, who are actually taking the class *with* the students in the class so that there's another touchpoint of support within the class that's not the instructor. So, students can go, 'I'm going to have a meeting with Kathy, our SI, and we're going to go back over this lesson because I didn't quite get it when Professor Jones said.' Right? 'So I'm going to have Kathy explain to me in *student language*.' Right?

OiYan Poon: Right.

Lonetta Oliver: And so, we utilize several elements within our academic support services to meet students wherever they are academically. But, with that advising, it's not just about academics. Because again, we recognize that our students have lives outside of the classroom. So, no matter how well the student is doing *in* the classroom, it's only one indicator of success. We also want to make sure that they are well supported and that they are *safe* in their private lives, which is why we have the food pantry, which is why we have a robust counseling department, again, with *peer* counselors as well as professional counselors, which is why we have our career-cluster advisors at every level.

Again, we attempt to meet the students where they are because you can have an academically savvy student who is unhoused, and that's not support.

OiYan Poon: That's not student success.

Lonetta Oliver: Yes.

OiYan Poon: A big takeaway that I'm hearing from this conversation is if we as institutional leaders want to see the needle move on these big metrics of: Are students being retained? Are they advancing? Are they completing? We can't just drill down into *one* specific thing. What I'm hearing from you is it's a whole campus team effort of recognizing the complexities of and *humanizing* each individual student. Like you said, it's not just about the academics. The academics are influenced by *all these other* factors and what's going on.

Are there other takeaways that you would like to offer for your fellow institutional leaders out there?

Lonetta Oliver: Well, what I will say is this. In these times of educational uncertainty, financial, fiscal uncertainty, I would definitely say try to be creative, try to be innovative. We've been able to do a lot, especially in my department, with our internal partnership with our TLE for professional development of faculty because I see grants. And so being able to be somewhat externally funded has provided a lot of resources for us to be able to do some of the things that we've been able to do that have then led to them becoming a part of our institutional culture and our strategic plan.

You have to be a little creative, be willing to think outside the box as the cliché goes, and to really maintain that focus that whatever it is that you're doing and seeking, it should be to the benefit of our students. If you can always link it back to: This will support our students by, fill in the blank, then you know that you're doing the right thing.

OiYan Poon: I'm glad you mentioned this. It's everywhere, right? The threatening political climate. I'm hearing your very clear call to continue being creative. And I feel like in an atmosphere of fear, it's that creativity that gets squashed immediately. And so, how have you maintained for yourself and for your team at Illinois Central, like, hey, let's just keep working to be creative in the work that we do to serve students?

Lonetta Oliver: I just try my best to filter out the noise. Until something is certain, I operate as though it's just a rumor. I try not to make any changes unless I've been told, you must do this or you can't do that anymore. Until they say I can't help students, I'm going to keep helping students.

And so (laughs), we do our best and we try a lot of things. Some things work, some things don't, some things need to be tweaked. I know that I filter things back a lot to the microcosm of the classroom, but just like in the classroom, I tell the student, *try it* and see what happens.

You know, we are supposed to be about the business of discovery in education, especially in higher education. And so if we don't adopt and maintain that attitude of discovery and hope, then it's very difficult for us to try to convince our students to do so without letting, you know, what's happening on a national or international scale, you know, drive us into fearing things, again until, you know, they say we have to do something or can't do something else, we just keep operating accordingly, and keep working on serving our students.

OiYan Poon: Stay mission focused.

Huge thank you to you, Dean Oliver, for sharing all these wonderful insights and encouragements and leadership wisdom on this episode.

Dean Oliver, if listeners would like to learn more, what are some resources that you would recommend, and how might they reach out to you to stay connected?

Lonetta Oliver: They can reach me by email. It's my name, Lonetta: l-o-n-e-t-t-a, dot Oliver, o-l-i-v-e-r, at [icc.edu](mailto:lonetta@icc.edu). I would also recommend visiting icc.edu, our website. You can get all sorts of information.

Again, we have a lot of resources for students who are interested in coming back to school, even if you just want to take one class. We're here for you, and we're happy to answer any questions that you have.

I would certainly encourage even community members to take some of our corporate and community education courses because they are inexpensive and oftentimes offered for free, and they can provide you some insight as to what it's like to be a student again. *I'm* certainly a fan of being a lifelong learner. And so, if you want to engage in that type of stimulating activities, such as being in a class, it's the way to go. Community colleges are, again, inexpensive, and we are located definitely in your community. And so we support *you*. I would definitely say reach out to us and we'll support you.

OiYan Poon: Connect with the community college as a resource. You know, you've just inspired me to think about, oh, I should look up [Wilbur Wright](#)'s course catalog right now for next semester.

Thank you so much, Dean Oliver, and thank you all for listening to this episode.

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.