

Democracy's College, Episode 65

Investing in and Encouraging Academic Leaders to Reduce DFW Rates to Improve Student Success

With guest Jay Gatrell 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, an author, speaker, and race and education scholar, talks with Dr. Jay Gatrell, the president of Eastern Illinois University, about how institutional leaders can organize campus efforts to reduce the rates of D and F grades, also known as DFW rates, as well as reduce the number of course withdrawals by engaging in actionable institutional research and data. Dr. Poon and Dr. Gatrell especially focus on gateway courses in their talk.

OiYan Poon: Welcome to Illinois SUCCESS. I'm your host, OiYan Poon. Really excited for this episode and conversation today. We'll be exploring how institutional leaders can organize campus efforts to reduce rates of Ds, F, grades, and course withdrawals, or shorthand, DFW rates is often used, and especially in gateway courses or intro courses, by engaging in actionable institutional research and data to inform leadership actions.

I am really excited to introduce our guest today, Dr. Jay Gatrell, president at Eastern Illinois University. Before this appointment, he served as EIU's provost from 2017 and held positions at Bellarmine University from 2014 to 2017, Indiana State University from 2000 to 2014, and Wright State University from 1999 to 2000. He has risen through the ranks of academic leadership throughout his career, and in his research, he is an economic geographer with expertise in spatial research methods whose applied work informs economic development.

And while I would love to geek out with Dr. Gatrell today about GIS and spatial methodologies, as a map geek myself, today we're going to focus our conversation on the strategic effort that President Gatrell and his team at Eastern have embarked upon to significantly reduce DFW rates.

When we look at overall institutional retention and completion rates, it's important to understand that one of the mechanisms leading to retention and completion outcomes is the rates at which students are successfully completing intro or gateway courses in their academic journeys. So then strategically working on reducing DFW rates is a very tangible way to improve overall retention and completion rates, and to improve institutional performance in effectively supporting students in their academic journeys and success. This work includes supporting instructors to design and deliver their courses to be pedagogically effective, offering well-tailored academic supports to students, and of course being data informed in the leadership of this work across campus, among many other things that we will talk to Dr. Gatrell about today. Welcome and thank you for joining me!

Jay Gatrell: Thank you for the invitation. I love talking about student success and our initiatives here at Eastern and the hard work that's gone into not only this project, but our commitment to ensuring an inclusive pedagogy that is relevant and makes a difference in the lives of our learners.

OiYan Poon: Awesome, super excited. So, let's start by learning more about Eastern Illinois University and the initiative that you've undertaken. Can you tell us more about how that journey started and where that initiative is at this point?

Jay Gatrell: Well, it started, actually this is the power of professional development. I was at an equity symposium hosted by Southern Illinois University in the fall of 2023. And the chancellor, James Minor, was speaking and talking about the knotty sort of complex issue around student success and gateway courses and how to get sort of faculty buy-in and create a framework where we can collaborate and focus on student success, not just focus on student success on a sort of year-to-year retention issue, but every course. How do we make sure students have the resources and the supports to be successful in individual courses? So, he shared some data and he talked about his campus discussions. And I thought, well, let me think about that and how we can operationalize something on our campus.

You know, anytime you have a new initiative, and we probably have too many initiatives in higher ed.

OiYan Poon: Maybe (laughs).

Jay Gatrell: But this one was something that was, for me, really resonated as sort of the first-generation college graduate myself, was how we make sure that the time and effort spent in the classroom results in earning credit, in the process tying the degree. So I came back to my campus. Actually, at the time, texted in the middle of the meeting, "I have an

idea” to my provost. Whenever I do that, that wasn't a good thing because he knows something's coming. So, we spent a couple of weeks figuring out: How can we identify what courses on our campus make sense to invest in and think about and have a dialogue around. We took three years of DWF data. We identified courses that are 1,000 and 2,000 level, you know, freshmen-, sophomore-level courses that are in the general education, that was critical. Had to be a gen ed course that were above the three-year mean for all DWFs across that population of courses. We identified 11 departments that had courses that were above that sort of average threshold. And these are courses that range from a DWF rate or DFW rate of 38% to 19.9%. So, the average was about, just really at 19%, 18.9%.

So, we identified 11 sort of departments that had coursework that met those criteria. And in the spring of 23, I invited folks to engage in redesign. And we provided professional development resources for the department. And we asked that they write proposals, really brief, two-page proposal: How would they spend the professional development resources? And then I committed to also provide summer compensation for faculty. Not a huge amount, but really honoring the work that faculty do. We're all busy. And so I wanted to incentivize and provide a framework to say this is valuable and identify a champion *or two* in your department in multi-section courses, gen ed multi-section courses that meet these criteria and do a redesign. And they worked on it over the summer. And they piloted it in fall '24.

And that first semester, we had some pretty amazing results. Our Chemistry 1 course improved student success by 12%. That's 12% fewer students not earning credit. That is a *huge*, huge number. And so, I feel really good about that initial iteration. And when you look at the DFW framework from the fall '24 compared to the three-year average, we shake off 4%, 4.5%. That's a pretty good first effort.

And a lot of our classes, something like 70% of all the courses that were participating had a decline in the overall DWF rate. And a large number of them were above our target. And we set 7.5% as our target. It's truly arbitrary. There was no science in that. I'm like, I don't know what sounds like a good number. So 7.5% sounded realistic (laughs) and doable. And that first year we had several departments that first semester hit that threshold. And those departments that exceeded that got a \$7,500 incentive that went to the department, and they were able to spend that on whatever makes sense: additional materials for the classroom, professional development, travel. It really was an investment in the department. And that's really critical. Not only do we acknowledge this is important work, but how do we invest in units that see the value in it? This wasn't a mandate. It really was an incentive. And as part of a shared governance commitment, right, we had dialogue with our

faculty senate around this, our chairs council, and it's okay. We had 11 departments that were invited, eight participated. That's a win.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, that's absolutely a win. I mean, as a former faculty member, when you said, a little bit of summer salary, that's always a nice little sweetener, right?

Jay Gatrell: Emphasis on little.

OiYan Poon: It's still very appreciated, right? And I really appreciate, as you were talking about this reduction of whether you call it DFW rate or DWF rates, what you're really doing is improving student success. And so, we're looking at these numbers. You've offered all these numbers, like hard data around the change over one year. And so, it'll be really interesting to see how things go in the next couple of years. It's exciting to see that eight out of 11 departments said, "Yeah, we'll participate in this." It's showing the power of incentives and really showing commitment to investing in this work.

And I'm wondering, have you heard anything about the on-the-ground kind of like any qualitative data or like experiential information about how it's being received by faculty or students in these changes that are represented by numbers?

Jay Gatrell: Well, take the faculty perspective. Those eight departments, we had, I think, 10 champions for the eight courses that some people shared and collaborated because they had co-directors for specific gateway programs. We actually created a cohort for our Faculty Development Innovation Center, and they worked with our instructional designers. They met on a regular basis to discuss where's the challenge *here* around this. So they worked through pedagogies. They talked about relevance.

One of my favorite examples is sort of flipping the script, if you will, our music gateway course, which always began, you know, with Bach and Beethoven and ended with pop music. And for a lot of students, maybe that didn't resonate with them. So they decided to flip it and do pop music and then sort of work through the more traditional canon later on in the course. And sort of the line that's been used is it's now Beyoncé to Bach or Beethoven, and just making it a little more relevant and thinking about how we can use assignments and assessments as a learning tool, because that's really critical too. I mean, assessments have the potential and power to be a learning tool, not just a test. And how do you think about gateway courses? I mean, they're inherently high stake, right? Particularly if you need a course to move on and make progress in your degree pathway.

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Jay Gatrell: So how can you think of assessment as an invitation for students to learn? And what's the right number of assessments? What's the scale of those? How do you balance

those? How do you look at engagement, right, attendance and other things? Because the big picture is we need students to be engaged with the content.

OiYan Poon: Right.

Jay Gatrell: This isn't just a redesign of tests. It isn't just a redesign of the order in which content is delivered. It's how we engage with students. And so, I think *that's* the exciting part for me.

And then also, how do we build out resource supplements in sort of the online learning management system, because students really depend on those resources. How do we make it not just loading up PowerPoint, right? What are the sorts of interactions you want students to have in that environment that are meaningful, learning-centered, and so on?

So, from that perspective, it really was a reboot. But it's always linked to the learning outcomes. It can't be a pathway to changing outcomes or reducing rigor because it's critical that we maintain a framework of high expectations for every learner. And I reiterated that, and I know other folks have, because we want students to be prepared for that next course. They *have* to hit those marks as a learning outcomes. But the only way we can get learners to there is to have them engaged and be excited about learning.

OiYan Poon: Yes. So I'm hearing, there are these overarching numbers and metrics on outcomes, but beneath that, there are all these questions and different ways to understand whether students are engaged and different levers to make that happen. You know, I'm hearing you say, sure, it's the content delivery, so it's the pedagogical and curriculum design, but then also delivery. And so there's just all these different layers that I think are harder to measure with the numbers but can still be represented through different types of data.

Right before this, you and I were talking about how you are a spatial methods expert. And so, I like to think about research and data in very diverse and wide-ranging ways. So, I'm wondering if you can speak more directly to, okay, there's the numbers, the quantitative data, but what kind of other data are you using in understanding student engagement, for example?

Jay Gatrell: Well, first of all, we have to know who our students are. This year, Eastern is 52% first gen. That is our highest first gen number on record. And I'm excited about that because it sort of speaks to what regional comprehensives are, which are the engine of social mobility, access opportunity. But part of that's also a commitment, commitment to the community from which these students come from, their families, the folks in their lives, and an acknowledgement that context and geography matter. If you're in Springfield, you're talking about resource levels for school districts and those pieces. And we have to

acknowledge that students come to us with a diverse collection of lived experiences in the K-12 environment. We have to meet them where they are.

OiYan Poon: One size just doesn't fit all, right?

Jay Gatrell: Yeah, we *have* to change our pedagogy. If we're committed to the work of student success and inclusion in its broadest and most inclusive concept and are committed to the mission of a regional comprehensive or any public university, we have to retool ourselves and constantly focus on continuous improvement.

When I was a faculty member, I never understood the importance on assessment and accreditation. Because it just seemed like more boxes to check. But what I've learned in the last 10 to 15 years, as I've had a different vantage point, is the value of those processes to inform our practice and center the learner. If we center the learner and wrap our discipline or content around their experience, they're going to engage with it very differently. It doesn't mean we're doing anything less rigorous. It doesn't mean we're not meeting our learning outcomes. But if you're focused on a continuous improvement, it's not just about delivering the content more efficiently, right, with better PowerPoints. It really is about looking at the outcomes. Are our learners prepared when they go to the next class? And how do we make sure, particularly in multi-section courses. Every year I've been in higher ed since '99, how do we know students in this 1,000-level course are ready to go to the 2,000-? And we've tried to supplant minimum GPAs and all these weird sort of metrics, when really it's about learning (laughs).

So how do we create an experience that engages the student, excites them, and lets them know what the expectations are on that next course? And gateway courses *have* to be linked to that curricular sort of pathway. And we've increasingly in higher ed talked about pathways. And I think it's a very valuable concept. The first time I'd ever seen that was Howard Hughes Medical Institute had a wonderful paper on pathways and pipelines and why that metaphor is better. Pathways is that people go through their career in different ways in the higher ed and through life. And that pathway approach is pretty powerful if you think about the curriculum as a path and not just a series of content-delivery modules.

For me, reducing the total number of Ds, Fs, and withdrawals is how do we make sure students stay on that path? It's not just about fixing one course, right? We have to use that gateway course as an opportunity for the student to also learn our expectations in higher ed.

OiYan Poon: Right. And just to really understand for them to get the foundations for that overarching pathway and journey ahead of them is what I'm hearing.

This raises a question for me, and you kind of alluded to it a little bit, is in doing this initiative, have you come up against any barriers and challenges? And I'm thinking particularly about oftentimes, I think when we start talking about redesigning curriculum and coursework to really, as you said, you know, understand who our students are and meet them where they're at. Do you ever come up against this kind of critique of, "Oh, see, you're just watering down the rigor. You're watering down the standards." If you do hear these kind of critiques, how do you respond to them?

Jay Gatrell: We want to maintain rigor. It's part of our values in higher ed. We want to make sure students meet those learning outcomes. But rigor should be focused on the learning and not necessarily a grading event or a series of interactions that are not necessarily supportive. I mean, we can be rigorous and supportive. We can be rigorous and mindful of a pathway or the next course of the sequence. And I would never argue we shouldn't maintain those standards. We hear that a lot. It's easy to say rigor is being diminished. Whenever anybody sees a change in the DWF rate, DWF rate has *nothing* to do with rigor. It has to do with engagement.

OiYan Poon: That's a really important reframe in connection to it being about engagement and not rigor.

Jay Gatrell: And rigor, it shouldn't be rigor mortis, right? Because we can't just be so locked in to an ecosystem that doesn't exist today.

Jay Gatrell: Can you give an example of that?

Jay Gatrell: The ecosystem that I was trained in or my advisors were trained in, I mean, there have been generational shifts in learning styles in terms of technology, in terms of even how our disciplines have evolved so rapidly. We *have* to be open to lifelong learning. It's in most of our mission statements. And faculty wrote those mission statements. Part of that is we have to continue to evolve and invest in professional development and provide support for that evolution. That's why when we did our redesign initiative on the DFWs, we had to resource it. I mean, quite often we ask faculty to do stuff without additional resources. Sometimes those resources can be time, sometimes it can be compensation, but there has to be a recognition that the work they do is valuable. Historically, you know, when budgets crunch, we don't have a lot of budget resources here at Eastern. But this is so important that I said, we have to do this. And if we do it well, it will generate student success and also ROI.

OiYan Poon: The approach that you took, which was really incentivizing and offering little pots of money to support and you mentioned it was not a mandate. Was that a strategic approach, anticipating potential kind of like, hey, hey, shared faculty governance and this is

the territory of faculty and our courses and our class delivery is our territory here, president, Mr. President here, man (laughs). So was that kind of an anticipation of that potential challenge? I'm just curious about what made you decide, you know, this is not going to be a mandate, but it's an incentivized program.

Jay Gatrell: Well, I'm against mandates. I think –

OiYan Poon: And unfunded mandates at that.

Jay Gatrell: I mean, mandates don't work especially well. And I wanted people who were excited and committed to these concepts around student success, around more inclusive pedagogy to run with it if they had an idea and to be recognized and rewarded for that. And they did it at the departmental level and they had champions. And so mandating something, my experience in higher ed, it doesn't work. It's a dialogue. It's a dialogue. It's always a negotiation, right? It's human relations 101. You don't want to mandate something. You know, I've been in this situation where I've told we have to do this. And usually mandates don't work as success. I mean, yes, you can implement them. But the outcome's not going to be durable, meaningful, or intentional unless the folks doing the *work* see the value in it.

OiYan Poon: And I think the folks have to also have their expertise appreciated, feel appreciated for what they bring to the table. I mean, I'm clearly not someone who would teach chemistry, but if I was teaching chemistry, I would want my leaders to recognize my expertise in the discipline and, yeah, what are key learning outcomes.

Jay Gatrell: Yeah, I would never say you have to have this model or that model or you have to give points for attendance. No, that's academic freedom. What's in the course is curriculum, and that's the primary authority of faculty. And I think it's important to *honor* that and acknowledge that and not in any way infringe upon it, because academic freedom is really critical to me and primacy –

OiYan Poon: Thank you for acknowledging that in this day and age.

Jay Gatrell: It *is* challenging a little bit in this day and age, but we need to celebrate that independence in a way and elevate it. And incentives were one way to sort of acknowledge that independence. If you want to participate, you can; you don't have to. And if you didn't participate, doesn't mean you had any, I mean, we would never take resources away. A punitive model doesn't work either, so mandates and punitive models don't work. I just want to get people excited around the *positive* impact they can have.

OiYan Poon: What have you learned? What's been working in this initiative and what are some challenges that have emerged and how have you been addressing them, other than the ones that we've already kind of touched on?

Jay Gatrell: Well, I think we've learned that we need to have, as an institution, a more dynamic collection of interactions and engagement with students. And we need to know more about that. And this is the data person in me. I've been very intrigued about how do we connect with students? Everybody wants to sell you an app, right? And they want to sell you a piece of software to do this or an AI agent to do that. And it's sort of overwhelming. But what we began was an exploration of this is, is there a comprehensive piece of software out there? And this isn't a commercial, so I'm not going to say the vendor. But we identified a framework that allows us to communicate across all platforms, text and e-mail, personal e-mail, as well as app that would allow us to log interactions, and we had our own homegrown early-alert system. And this has that built in too. It has an attendance function for those who want to use it. I wanted to be able to know that once students got the interaction, because students do use e-mail, but they don't respond to it, which is interesting.

OiYan Poon: Maybe there's an overwhelm sometimes of too much e-mail?

Jay Gatrell: Probably, but they do read it. I mean, when I'm walking around campus, they'll say, hey, got your e-mail, and they'll actually know what it read. They don't respond, which is weird. So that's a cultural thing with this. I mean, I think –

OiYan Poon: This generation.

Jay Gatrell: Yeah, the normative behavior, my generation was to respond.

OiYan Poon: Even if to say thanks (laughs)!

Jay Gatrell: Yes. And so we're trying to think about ways to more intentionally engage and track that and get a sense of are we interacting with our students from the advisor's perspective, the faculty, the resident assistant, *all* the people who were in this community of care for our students, how do we know that community of care is resulting in the types and number and frequency and what is the right frequency and how do students really want to engage? And if we do all those platforms simultaneously, we're going to launch it, soft launch in January, roll it out to the whole campus next year. Because I'm convinced if we have a better early-alert system, our current one's in-house. We made it ourselves, which, as you can imagine, might have worked when it was created, but it doesn't have all those multiple channels. This initiative really forced me to think deeply about that investment.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, because I feel like a lot of institutions, there's just a lot of different sets of data, different sets of practices. And what I'm hearing from you is this deep reflection and question about how is everything tied together more seamlessly?

Jay Gatrell: And how do we move everybody on campus to see themselves as part of that community of care for our students and actually one another? Because there's a lot of work that faculty and staff and advisors do every day that's difficult work. It's emotional work. It's highly relational. And how do we communicate those interactions to each other on staff and faculty here? So we're going to try to identify what are those contacts? What do they look like? What are those engagement points look like? Where is it that we're *not* engaging as successfully that maybe we thought we were? It might be something as simple as maybe RAs aren't comfortable having a certain conversation with a student, or we've assumed they are. Or maybe an advisor, instead of saying, you know, you've got this, for whatever reason, they may prematurely or whatever have a different conversation. How can we collect all that data to inform our practice to become better advisors, become better faculty members, better staff in the residence halls?

Right now, we have amazing staff, amazing people who are committed to this work, but we're all going so fast, every day, that it's so easy to move from e-mail to e-mail or from crisis to crisis or whatever it is that you don't see the big picture, and you don't have that intentionality that you want to bring to your work every day. But my *hope* is these collection of data points will be able to make sense of that. And it also provides some opportunities for us to reinvest some of our web-development technology and staff into other priorities. So we're shifting resources from here, and so it's going to be a net-net win for our students, a net-net win for our IT staff. And I think it's going to make a *real* difference in our ability to communicate *across* divisions about student needs.

OiYan Poon: This has been such an enlightening conversation. I've learned so much about how you've been engaged in really a dynamic approach to leadership and use of data to empowering faculty and staff and *all* towards improving student engagement for improving student success.

And I love how, you know, you're talking about this community of care and how it all starts with understanding the diversity of students' backgrounds and where they're coming from to really situate how do you design these communities of care and interactions in ways that are really effective for individual students? And for me, that brings up this question of, in a lot of ways, what you're doing, this community care is *deep* equity work. And I know in this moment, in our politics and public discourse, these conversations, this kind of work around acknowledging and affirming diversity and really engaging in institutional improvements for equity, it feels kind of dangerous to engage in this work, or at minimum,

at least raising a little bit of the anxiety level. Can you talk to us about how you've been navigating these times and how you feel that this initiative around DWF reduction work *can* be a way forward, even in these really challenging times?

Jay Gatrell: If we move the needle on student success, it creates a framework for *all* of our students to be successful. If we create these opportunities for a community of care that is informed by a student's sort of, you know, did you go to a high school and have these pre-reqs? We have conversations and we understand where the student's coming from. We're going to have those impacts. We're going to have those positive impacts to make sure that any inequities, in terms of observed inequities, in terms of performance or achievement—we're addressing those as an entire campus community.

I think it is challenging to be honest. We have to be honest about structural dynamics that impact student performance and how they co-vary based on race, gender, and other identities. We *have* to acknowledge that. I don't know if that's dangerous or radical, but we have to acknowledge it. And I think the dialogue today or the ecosystem shifted a bit in terms of how we talk about that. But for every learner who comes to our campus, they're making an investment in themselves. And I have a moral obligation to make sure they get some ROI on that, and that they meet their goals. And dreams don't have to be big. They can just be small dreams, right? Maybe it's just a semester dream, right? Or a one-year dream or a four-year degree or a master's or PhD. I want to make sure every learner has the opportunity *I had*. You know, I grew up in rural, *rural* northern Michigan. Charleston would have been the big city for me. When I say that, I go, wow, right?

OiYan Poon: Wow!

Jay Garette: So I didn't have a clue what college was like. I went to a college campus a few times for like band competitions. I never did a college tour.

OiYan Poon: Right.

Jay Gatrell: I sent in applications and that's the way it worked. So, I know it's how these students are betting on themselves.

OiYan Poon: And their families and communities oftentimes.

Jay Gatrell: And I want to make sure our institution provides every student with the opportunity and resources they have to meet their goals and live their dreams.

I never thought I'd be here, that's for certain, in this *amazing* role and [I'm] truly privileged and honored to have this role, but it also comes in responsibility to the state, to my neighbors. There is nothing worse than a student leaving a university with no credential and

just debt. And to me, it doesn't matter where you come from, It doesn't matter what your background is. We need to make sure that doesn't happen for *any* of our students.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, it's about that ethos of a community of care, as you're talking about.

And this has been so inspiring. Thank you *so much*, President Gatrell, for sharing your insights and leadership wisdom on this episode of Illinois SUCCESS.

Jay, if listeners would like to learn more about the initiative that is underway at Eastern or what's some resources that you would recommend, could you share them now? Or maybe if folks want to reach out to you, how might they do that?

Jay Gatrell: Well, you can certainly just e-mail me. It's pretty easy. Just president@eiu.edu.

But this was really a full team effort. I mean, instructional designers, our dean of student success, our FDIC director. I mean, this is an all team effort. And I'm just grateful to everyone who made it happen, the instructors who raised their hand. And one of them, I remember telling me, they said, "It was really a lot of work." And I said, "Yeah, I know!"

OiYan Poon: Yeah (laughs)!

Jay Gatrell: But she was so energized by the process. And so, I'd be happy to connect folks. And we're really proud of the work we've done. It's not perfect. It's a process. And we're always becoming sort of that next iteration of instructor and Eastern as a university. So, it's been a pleasure to talk about. And I'm certainly grateful to *you* and the entire team that makes this broader initiative around student success in the state of Illinois a reality.

OiYan Poon: That's a great way to send us off. Teams make dreams. We don't have to go this alone. So, thank you so much.

Jay Gatrell: 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.