

Democracy's College, Episode 67

On-Track Data System at UIC to Inform Work and Improve Student Success

With guest Lindsey Back 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.

In this special-edition Illinois SUCCESS episode, we will 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. Dr. OiYan Poon talks with Dr. Lindsey Back about the On-Track Data System at the University Illinois Chicago, and how this information informs her team's work to improve student success across campus.

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. This 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, I'm really excited to be in conversation with Dr. Lindsey Back about the On-Track Data System at the University of Illinois Chicago, and how these data inform their work to improve student success across campus. Dr. Lindsey Back is the interim associate vice

provost for strategic initiatives and director of the Office for Research on Student Success at the University of Illinois Chicago. It's *quite* the title, Lindsey, gotta say.

Lindsey Back: (Laughs) It's a mouthful.

OiYan Poon: (Laughs) Dr. Back completed her doctoral degree in community psychology at DePaul University. Her research interests include access to and empowerment through higher education for underrepresented groups, as well as the use of an ecological approach to understand student success. She has expertise in educational assessment, evaluation, and measure development. I also understand that Dr. Back is a key leader at UIC in the On-Track work, which I'm *super* excited to learn about because, as I was telling her before we started recording, I heard about On-Track through Chicago Public Schools and the freshmen On-Track, ninth grade On-Track work there. So, [I'm] excited to get underway. Welcome, Lindsey, and thank you for joining me.

Lindsey Back: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

OiYan Poon: Okay, so Lindsey, tell us a story. Tell us about how UIC started its journey in developing and using the On-Track data to support student success. When did it start? How did it start? Where are you now?

Lindsey Back: Yes, absolutely. I thought we could begin by talking just a little bit about the UIC context and how this metric came to be within that. UIC is Chicago's largest university. It's defined by our commitment to student success. Our chancellor has elevated student success to be UIC's top strategic priority. That includes advancing social mobility for all students while closing equity gaps, specifically increasing degree attainment, making sure that students achieve academic excellence, but also have meaningful college experiences and thrive in their personal and professional journeys, becoming responsible global citizens. So this commitment has always been central to UIC's mission to provide the broadest access to the highest levels of educational, research, and clinical excellence.

We enroll a really diverse student population. In fall '25, the current semester, which is when we hit record levels of enrollment, including more than 5,400 first year students, which is our biggest first-year cohort on record. More than 40% of our first-year cohort is Latinx, about 10% is Black, about 20% Asian, 17% white. We consistently have upwards of 50% of our first-year cohorts identifying as first-generation. And similarly, upwards of 50% of our first-year cohorts receiving Pell Grants.

So we're a minority-serving institution, a Hispanic-serving institution, an Asian American-, Native American-, Pacific Islander-serving institution. We're also the fourth largest producer of Hispanic and Black medical doctors in the US. So, we've done a lot of work over the last kind of decade plus to increase our retention and graduation rates. Most of our

students who come in as first-years—and I suppose transfers as well, but for the purposes of this conversation, first-year students—most of our students graduate in six years. And like I said, we've done quite a bit of work to get those rates up. We still have about 40% of our students who don't graduate, and we generally lose about 20%, although that number is decreasing, of our first-year students are not retained to the second year. So we lose about 20% of the cohort between the first and the second year.

Our Office for Research on Student Success, which is in our Academic Programs, Student Success and Effectiveness unit. So it *is* distinct from institutional research, which I think is an important consideration. That office was established as part of our student success initiative process in 2011, 2012. And so our goal is to utilize our institutional data to collect any additional quantitative or qualitative data to really inform action on campus related to student success. We want to get the findings into the hands of people who are working with students, who are making decisions, who are designing programs, establishing policies, things like that.

I should say too, I'm a community psychologist. So, prevention and intervention has kind of been key to what I do; also really relevant when we're thinking about On-Track. Because in the development of it, we wanted to think about prevention and early-intervention strategies that we can utilize to get to students as early as possible in the first term, in the first year to keep them on track, keep them retained, keep them moving toward graduation.

So, in our development of the On-Track metric, we're building on previous studies conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which you mentioned, and they're freshmen on track, as well as some researchers at UIC, Sue Farruggia and her colleagues. CPS freshmen on track, right, identify students as on track if by the end of the freshmen year they have earned five or more credits, failed no more than one semester of a core course.

So, there was previous research at UIC to create a first-year On-Track index. And then to build on that, we wanted to explore if it was possible to do a first term On-Track index to get even further ahead of sort of what students would be experiencing and their outcomes. So we wanted to have a metric before the first year was over, at the end of the first term, and then into the second term to be able to understand kind of how the first and second terms work together in a student's experience.

In terms of how we created the metric itself, we wanted to understand what are the predictors of students who do graduate in six years? What happens for the students who might encounter challenges toward graduation? So we looked at institutional factors to understand which ones were the most salient. We specifically looked at the ones that

didn't happen until students were actually enrolled. So we didn't look at any pre-matriculation data. We wanted to make sure that we focused on what was happening once students got here, as opposed to what may have been potentially inequitable preparation prior to matriculation.

OiYan Poon: I like that phrase that you use, institutional factors, right? Because students are just going to come to us.

Lindsey Back: Yes.

OiYan Poon: Whoever they are, right? But then what you have control over is these institutional factors.

Lindsey Back: Absolutely. We very much do see it as our responsibility to make sure that the students that we've admitted are getting all of the resources and the support that they need to succeed and thinking about how we can remove those institutional barriers too.

In terms of six-year graduation, we tried a bunch of variables. We used a logistic regression to understand the relationship between academic factors and graduation, some financial factors and graduation. And we ended up with term GPA, earned credits in the first term, and a completion ratio. So basically, the pass over attempted hours, which is very similar to what gets calculated for a satisfactory academic progress metric and a completion ratio for that. And then also a financial factor of students having unresolved financial holds at the end of the first term. We know that students might encounter a range of financial challenges while they are in college. What we saw as sort of the most important predictor here was not that they just never *got* a financial hold and never experienced that, but that they were unable to resolve it by the end of the term. So it's okay if you get a financial hold and have a plan to address it. The issue is if you finish the first term with that financial hold still on your account. So use a logistic regression to identify key thresholds for each of those indicators as well. The unresolved financial hold is dichotomous, but we ended up identifying having a first-term GPA of at least a 2.4 and a completion ratio of at least 67%, which you'll notice is also consistent with a satisfactory academic progress ratio. And this model is accurate a little bit more than 70% of the time, which is slightly below, I think, what the freshmen On-Track metric found, but also there's sort of a lot additional going on at a college level, so we were really happy with that.

We also did that for the second term, because I had mentioned sort of wanting to understand what happens in the first term relative to the second term. And we made the decision to use those same variables and thresholds for each term. So you can be on track in the first term, on track in the second term, on track in one term, off track in the other, off track in both terms. All those things are related to six-year graduation.

We also did a similar process for four-year graduation. And for that one, decided to stick with predictors at the end of the first term specifically, knowing that the timeline for four-year graduation is just so tight. There's a little bit less wiggle room. So, in terms of students who are on track for four-year graduation, that's those who finish the first term with at least a 3.0 and attempted at least 15 or more credits.

OiYan Poon: My nerd brain is fired up right now (laughs).

Lindsey Back: (Laughs) That's what we like to hear!

OiYan Poon: Yes, logistic, regression, and finding that there were these four significant factors to really track. How does this then get into the stream of practice, right? If you're an academic advisor or a faculty member working with a student or whoever else on campus that has direct contact with students. Say after the first term, there's a subset of students that are not on track. What happens then, in practice?

Lindsey Back: That's a great question because it's one thing to kind of develop the models and have them sit in your SPSS output. It's another thing to make sure that they're actionable on campus, which was always the goal, right?

So, what we ended up deciding to do, sort of beyond disseminating just, like, this is the model, these are the thresholds, pay attention to these things as much as you can. And we did do some additional work looking at who goes off track, right? So, what groups of students are more likely to go off track, things like early alerts and midterm grades.

OiYan Poon: The indicators, students get flagged mid their first term. So you don't even have to wait until the end of the first term to flag students for intervention. Is that right?

Lindsey Back: Yeah, some of those kind of precursors to being on- or off-track do get flagged. We use an early-alert system. We do use midterm grades for a large number of courses that first-year students would take. So we do have some of those sort of related metrics too.

But in terms of flagging students as on- or off-track after the first term, after the second term, what we decided to do next to make it even more tangible, I think, for people on campus to use it is to develop these recovery targets. If you are off track at the end of the first term, what needs to happen in your second term, right, to get back on track?

For four-year graduation, I had mentioned that was a sort of one term only metric. We ended up using those same metrics, so the 3.0 GPA and at least 15 attempted credits in the second term to identify students as kind of recovered back on track. And what we really loved about that is that the 15 attempted credits, like that's something that happens early, right? Like that's prior to the census date. It's very actionable for advisors. You can –

OiYan Poon: So do advisors meet with all students in their first term?

Lindsey Back: We do have mandatory first-year advising.

OiYan Poon: Okay. So that's where there's kind of an intervention point.

Lindsey Back: We do also have a range of success units that are part of our Office for Student Success on Belonging that do a lot of coaching around some of these things too. Our sort of broader advising community includes your academic advisors in the colleges, your success coaches, advisors in success units, things like that. It's a wide network.

And then we do also have second-year recovery targets for students who may have been off track either in one or both terms of the first year. And for those in your second year, you should be aiming to earn at least a 2.4 GPA in each term and then earning at least 44 credits, cumulatively, by the end of the second summer.

In establishing these recovery targets, we looked at, like, what happens if you are off track, but then get back on track? What happens if you are off track and you recover?

OiYan Poon: Oh, what happens (laughs)?

Lindsey Back: Yeah, the graduation rates for those students are almost as high as they were if you had just been on track from the beginning. From a strengths-based perspective and a growth mindset, we love that. We really, really aim to, I think, use these data in a way that allows students to make progress, to identify needs, to think strategically about what their trajectory will look like. And we wanted to make sure that it was not punitive, not deterministic, anything like that, where we're saying like, hey, you're off track –

OiYan Poon: Right.

Lindsey Back: And it's over.

OiYan Poon: And like, tisk, tisk, right?

Lindsey Back: Yes, exactly. That doesn't help. It's actually the opposite. It's like, hey, we've identified you potentially benefiting from some additional resources, additional supports. Let's see what we can do as an institution to get you back on track and hit these targets. It gives you something to aim for.

OiYan Poon: So then there's like a network of outreach professionals who then reach out to that student?

Lindsey Back: So yeah, I think that the recovery targets give advisors something to work on. And I can talk a little bit about how we've integrated the metric itself into existing practices. And then I can talk about some ways that we've piloted it as a new intervention.

One thing that we have really liked about the On-Track metric for six-year graduation and predicting six-year graduation, I had mentioned that completion ratio and making sure that students are completing at least six 67% of their attempted hours because it's consistent with SAP. We know that you are going to lose your federal financial aid if you're not making that satisfactory academic progress. So we have a SAP flag, a kind of SAP warning flag that goes into iAdvise, which is our iPass system, at the end of the first term. Students who are either below a 67%, or in some cases just kind of getting close to a 67%, are going to get this flag after grades roll in the fall. It's a really quick turnaround. It's still a little bit more manual than we would like, but we're flagging those students, I was like, hey, let's plan what's going to happen in your spring semester to make sure that you are registered for a balanced course load, that you're registered for enough hours that you mathematically, right, could get that ratio above 67%.

And if not, if that's not feasible in the next term, what is your plan? Do we need to think about summer courses and either shifting that ratio in that way? If it's a GPA issue, what does that look like for your major? What can we do in terms of your degree planning? What do you need to take in a given term? How can we be strategic about that?

So that's something that advisors and coaches see on all of the students that are affiliated with them. And so they'll do that outreach within the first couple weeks of January, realistically. Our census date for the spring ends up being usually like that last week of January.

OiYan Poon: Happy New Year. Get to work (laughs).

Lindsey Back: I know, I know. Whenever we're setting deadlines for that, we're like, okay, who's like not taking off during those couple weeks?

And then thinking about the credit piece of it, right?

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Lindsey Back: Knowing that there are attempted credit thresholds, there are earned credit goals for recovery. We do offer a lot of summer opportunities that help students either catch up, get ahead, keep moving toward graduation. Our Summer Edge is an academic recovery program for particular gateway courses that students may have earned a D, F or W in during the fall or the spring. So they're able to retake it in the summer with wraparound services. We tend to see the pass rates for students in those classes be two, three, in some cases four times higher than a control group. It's great.

We also offer some scholarships through our Accelerate Your Success program, which is for students who kind of meet a level of financial need and are enrolling in at least five

summer credits. And that's also been really, really popular, knowing that in the summer, students might have a little bit less going on. They might not be taking, you know, 15, 16, 18 credits. They have a little bit more time to focus on these kind of key courses and think about what they might need, maybe access some additional resources to make sure that they are in the specific circumstance, right? Like maybe addressing a SAP ratio issue, a SAP GPA issue, then also this On-Track piece too.

I mentioned that we have also piloted how we share these data. In an initial iteration, we shared them in Excel spreadsheets and color coded them by priority level. We shared these with the coaches in one of our success units on campus as part of this kind of initial pilot. We looked at the students who they served who were off track, and looked at actually what indicators were kind of identifying them as off track. So was it just a financial hold that was unresolved? Was it just a GPA issue? Was it just a completion ratio issue or some combination of both? And which ones are the most tied to not graduating in six years? Which ones are the least tied? And so we shared those for them to kind of do additional outreach and inform their work in that way.

The next evolution of that was that we piloted a flag in iAdvise. So again, in our past system, which is where we try to kind of focus all of the implementation pieces of this work because it allows advisors to communicate with students, with each other, with faculty, staff, things like that. We convened a pilot group of advisors from a few of our success units and a few of our colleges. So we have a mix of academic advisors and success unit advisors in there. We brought them together to test this flag for students who were on track for six-year graduation after the first term, but off track for four-year graduation. They weren't necessarily the group of students who were potentially dealing with SAP cancellation risks or academic dismissals or anything like that. But if they continued on that trajectory, it was going to take them a little bit longer to graduate than maybe we would like, they would like. It was going to cost them more money. So we wanted to see if we could kind of move the needle in nudging those students back to being on track for four-year graduation.

And we did this using a success-planning tool in iAdvise. It allowed the advisors to kind of lay out strategies for the students, talk with them about specifically what might be helpful for them in meeting those second-term recovery targets. The success plan itself, there's a, I'm sure a backend technical piece related to how it's built, but generally they facilitate a communication about things like working with an advisor to register for a balanced schedule, reviewing your holds, talking to financial aid if that's necessary. How do you develop your academic help-seeking skills? Do you need strategies for time management,

checking in with an advisor, seeking out tutoring? Here are the resources that we have available for tutoring, things like that.

In that pilot, we found that the students who had a success plan that was kind of successfully created for them by their advisor, by their coach, they got back on track for four-year graduation at higher rates than the students who didn't who were a part of the pilot. It was about a six percentage point difference. So that's something that we're still kind of thinking through in terms of how the kind of items on the success plans are addressed. Like, does that mean that students see them as a to-do list? Are they referrals? Do students need to kind of engage with the success plan to say like, okay, I did go to tutoring, things like that. So, it's an evolving process, but that pilot was really encouraging, I think, for how we use On-Track and also how we use success planning on campus just more generally.

OiYan Poon: You know, what I love about this conversation is you've used the term "pilot" a couple of times now, and that you've said, like, hey, we first started out trying one thing and then we went on to the flag in the system, and this has been trial and error, and I'm sure there's been bumps along the way that you're growing from, right?

What's been some of these bumps, and how have you overcome them? Like, how have you been working through these challenges of using the data and implementing it, informing the practice?

Lindsey Back: What pops into my head first is that it can be a little cumbersome to sort of communicate the data side of this. We've done a range of presentations on the analytics. I think that can be super interesting for some people, much more overwhelming for other people, right? I think data literacy perspective, that's something that as a research office, we are still learning, right? Like how can we communicate these things to the broader campus community in a way that makes sense to them?

I don't think this is unique to UIC, but we understand, right, that our advising community, faculty and staff, *everybody* is constantly being asked to do more with fewer resources. I think adding one more thing or treating it like we're adding one more thing on top of the work that everybody else is already doing isn't really feasible or very nice.

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Lindsey Back: This was sort of always the intention, right? If you can take a prevention framework or a prevention approach to some of this, ideally you are able to keep some of those kind of negative outcomes from happening. You don't sort of get that far with them.

OiYan Poon: It's like a public-health approach. I like this framework of like, what's the health of the community as a whole?

Lindsey Back: It is. Yes. Yes, absolutely. I think that's the perfect way to put it.

And one of the ways that we tried to frame this is we want to make advisors' efforts and outreach more efficient, more strategic. We're trying to help you use data to make your work—easier is probably not fair, right?—but you get the idea.

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Lindsey Back: It's potentially not possible for our advisors to talk to every single student in their caseload every week.

OiYan Poon: Or academic advisors.

Lindsey Back: Yes, you get it (laughs)!

OiYan Poon: That's not possible (laughs).

Lindsey Back: If it's not possible, our goal is then for metrics like On-Track for some of these flags that allow you to prioritize your students. Our goal is for it to make it easier for you to understand who is going to benefit the most from that outreach and support, knowing that you can't get a hold of everybody.

OiYan Poon: For the prioritization, I imagine the flag in these data systems are really, if I was an academic advisor like I was 25 years ago, like, being able to say, okay, who should I reach out to first and foremost? *That* would have been such an amazing help.

Lindsey Back: That's what we're hoping. Our traditional methods maybe of determining academic health and progress toward degree, probation, academic notice, class standing, things like that, may not be appropriate for all students, but also we could probably be doing a little bit better, right? Like, we're, I think, lucky to have a data infrastructure that allows us to understand what these indicators are. And we're going to keep working on it, right?

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Lindsey Back: We're going to keep trying to better embed it into the work that we're already doing and continue to optimize how that looks.

OiYan Poon: And keep learning from the community and how to –

Lindsey Back: Absolutely. Yeah, we get a lot of feedback from our advising community, which I think is *extremely* helpful. It's really invaluable for us to hear from.

OiYan Poon: So 14, 15 years into the journey at UIC now around the On-Track metric, what would you say to campuses that are *just* getting started on figuring out what are the metrics on my campus? What kind of advice would you give them if folks are just starting, you know, really like maybe in year one or two or even five of figuring out the metrics for their context?

Lindsey Back: You have to start by seeing what is already out there. What is sort of the current status? Take an inventory, right? What data are being collected? What systems are being used? What data points are proactive? Which ones are reactive? And what kinds of early indicators is your campus already using?

OiYan Poon: What's an example of a reactive or a proactive indicator?

Lindsey Back: Yeah, so I think if we, for example, wait until a student is academically dismissed, there is very little we can do for that.

OiYan Poon: So that's a reactive?

Lindsey Back: Yes. When we think about SAP, we would think about that as reactive. When we think about satisfactory academic progress, one of the reasons why we implemented that SAP warning flag is because we *know* that a good chunk of the students who end up getting a satisfactory academic progress cancellation don't even come back for the second semester. So if we're waiting, right, as an institution to do that intervention in the spring term, it's going to be too late for a lot of those students.

In contrast, if we're thinking about our early-alert system, for example, will flag if a student hasn't shown up to class in the first couple of weeks if there's an attendance concern in one of those key gateway courses. If that student gets some kind of quick intervention from somebody on campus as a result of that early alert, that's a little bit more proactive. And I think our advisors would probably tell you that we will not ever be able to be like entirely proactive.

OiYan Poon: Because I was just thinking, in that example, attendance. In a previous life, not too long ago, I was a faculty member and, you know, are you building into it routines for faculty to be like, hey, this student hasn't been here for two, three classes in a row? At least for me, it was not a routine, like, *habit* for me to be like, let me put this in some system.

Lindsey Back: Yeah. We're trying to back out even further. So we do have a little over a year into another initiative really to identifying priority students prior to matriculation. And thinking about what that outreach can look like during orientation, during new student advising before the fall term starts to try to continue to get ahead of some of these challenges that we know it's very common for students to experience.

All of this best-case scenario, right, is very collaborative. We function separately from our institutional research office, but we work very closely with them. We have great partners in our IR office. I think a lot of IR offices are already putting out a lot of data that can be utilized in a lot of this work, a lot of dashboards, a lot of reports, a lot of memos.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So it's already there. Let's not reinvent the wheel.

Lindsey Back: Yes. Exactly.

I think that the implementation piece too, right? We work really closely with our Office of Advising Development, with our partners in the colleges and the success units, because we don't work with students directly, but we want to make sure that the people who can use this in their day-to-day work are getting it.

Some of these metrics, we're generally not like collecting new data for the purposes of this On-Track metric. These are pretty simple, high-impact predictors. They're realistically probably not surprising, right, to anybody who's listening. It's a little bit more of how can we be strategic about the process? How can we figure out what is a reasonable model that integrates several of these indicators but is also still actionable. We've refined the model, gradually expanding it, its use. But, you know, things like a completion ratio, GPA, attempted credits, finances, I think are probably pretty familiar too.

We're trying to continue to socialize the idea that these data are meant to support students, right? We really do try to take a strengths-based approach to this and use the data to connect students with resources. We're not trying to penalize students. We're trying to catch them early and make sure that we, as an institution, are doing everything that we can to provide them with the support that they need, but also that is available, right? We have a lot of resources on campus that students may or may not be connected to on their own. So we want to make sure that we're using the data, I think, to facilitate that as much as we can.

OiYan Poon: That's amazing. I've really loved learning about this story. There's *so much* that you all are doing in this, what is this, the 14th, 15th year of this work and continually growing. And I'm sure there's hiccups and problems that you continue to solve. So a *huge* thank you to you, Dr. Back, for sharing your insights and leadership on this episode of the podcast.

Lindsey, if listeners would like to learn more about On-Track Data possibilities and how to support their own campus's journey, what are some resources you'd recommend?

Lindsey Back: I would definitely recommend the Consortium on Chicago School of Research, Freshman On-Track reports. Those have really been foundational to this work.

We're also happy to share the UIC reports that we've put together and some presentation slide decks, things like that, if that's helpful for anyone.

OiYan Poon: I feel like I've seen some of your videos on YouTube. I feel like Dr. Varelas has presented and your team has presented little YouTube videos if anyone wants to Google that.

Lindsey Back: I'm going to look those up as soon as we wrap up here (laughs).

OiYan Poon: (Laughs) Awesome. Well, thank you again so much. Learned so much from you and excited to continue the work across Illinois.

Lindsey Back: Thank you so much for having me.

OiYan Poon: Thank you for listening.

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.

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