

Democracy's College, Episode 64

The Power of Basic-Needs Support for Students through Benefits Navigators and HOUSE Liaisons

With guests Valerie Lynch and Deana Schenk and host Gianina Baker

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, OCCRL Associate Director Gianina Baker talks with Valerie Lynch and Deana Schenk about the critical roles of benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons, two positions that are designed to help students access basic needs such as food, housing, health care, and financial support. Lynch is the senior managing director at the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and Schenk serves as a senior director for student success at the Illinois Community College Board.

Gianina Baker: Welcome to this episode of Illinois Success, where we explore the people, policies, and practices shaping student success in Illinois higher education. In today's episode, we're diving into the critical roles of benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons, two positions designed to help students access basic needs, resources like food, housing, health care, and financial support. While every campus is required to have these roles, simply having them isn't enough. I'll talk with Valerie Lynch of the Illinois Board of Higher Education and Deana Schenk of the Illinois Community College Board about their experiences working with and supporting campus staff in these positions. We will also explore how campus leaders can better support these roles and how data, both quantitative and qualitative, can be used to build more effective equity-centered systems of support.

Welcome to you both. Thank you for joining us.

Deana Schenk: Thank you, Gianina. It's a pleasure to be here.

Valerie Lynch: Yes, thank you for having us.

Gianina Baker: Let's just jump right in. And I'm going to start with you, Deana. Can you describe the role as a benefits navigator and/or HOUSE liaison?

Deana Schenk: Absolutely, happy to. So, I'll talk about each of them separately, although there is some overlap in the work that they do. The benefits navigator is a designated staff member that's required from each public institution of higher education who ensures that all students, especially those who are facing financial or systemic barriers, are able to access essential resources. Their role is to help students determine their eligibility for benefits programs, including any federal, state, or local programs that would provide assistance or benefits to students related to basic needs. Benefits navigators also connect students to campus-wide and community resources and things such as food pantries and emergency funds, ensuring that help is not only available, but then also culturally responsive and linguistically accessible. So part of their role is to coordinate and provide resources tailored for non-English speakers and other historically underserved groups in an effort to close gaps that often leave these students without critical aid.

The HOUSE liaisons, on the other hand, are also a staff member, and these staff members are required at every institution of higher education in Illinois, and they assist and support students who are specifically experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity or students with experience in foster care. And by designating a trained staff member to identify, assist, and advocate for students with these lived experiences, HOUSE liaisons are addressing one of the most persistent barriers to college access and completion, which is stable housing. The HOUSE liaisons link students to critical support resources such as priority access to on-campus housing, local continuums of care, emergency housing, and other resources so that unstable housing does not derail their academic progress. They also complete required annual training and do some data collection. Working across student life, financial aid, student affairs, and community housing providers, HOUSE liaisons really build a coordinated campus response that integrates housing security into the broader student success strategy and helps ensure campuses are responsive to the unique challenges that these students face to help increase equitable access and persistence for some of our most vulnerable members of the campus community.

Gianina Baker: You gave a great overview, and I am sure if there are people listening out there that have never even heard of these roles, you've provided them with enough information to say, okay, you know, I get that this is what's happening on our campus, and maybe able to identify who those people are that are serving in those roles.

If I push on this a little bit, I might ask: What are some of the biggest challenges that they might face in some of these roles?

Valerie Lynch: I can kind of start on that one. I think it's fragmented services. So, the services might be there on campus, but before a benefits navigator was there to kind of

connect them all, they might have been in multiple different areas on campus and not obvious to the students that actually need it.

I sort of have a unique experience in that I served as a benefits navigator at my previous institution before coming to IBHE. And it was at the beginning of the legislation when we were still trying to figure out exactly how this fits and how we can make it work on our campus, which in my case was a community college campus. So, we found that we have a lot of supports in place for students. We just didn't necessarily have one repository or one go-to place for students to go to kind of get all the information they need on basic needs.

Another challenge that I saw when I was in the position, and I think it still rings true, is like limited resources, limited budgets, and limited authority. So as a benefits navigator, I might have seen a student who came to me with some really intense needs, and I might have ideas for how to help them. But some of the barriers that I would like to alleviate, I may not have had the authority to make those decisions on my own. And with it being in its infancy when I was starting, we didn't have the systems in place. Sometimes it was jumping through a lot of hoops, even at the institution to give students needed resources that they need, which only illustrates how difficult it could be for students if it's difficult for us. I do think that we came a long way in the few years that benefits navigators have been in place because there have been communities of practice, resources available, sharing ideas with different institutions to figure out how we can make it better. But I think that's one thing is to do it correctly, the benefits navigators do need to have at least some decision-making authority or connection to those that can make decisions to help students.

I think also the stigma of basic-needs work. So, it takes a lot of courage for a student to ask for help on housing insecurity, food insecurity, transportation. In this economy, gas money, transportation; it might be something that they don't want to make known publicly. So that can also be a challenge. Then also like privacy concerns. So as the benefits navigator, there's a lot of information that I would have liked to collect on our students to be able to identify who really needs these resources. But sometimes there's privacy concerns with getting data about students. These are very personal needs, like the ability to have food and shelter and transportation. These are very personal topics. So, it's not always easy to get that data of who really is in need. And we'll probably get to this in a further question about what data *can we* look at that might be an indicator or an alert that a student might be in need. But I definitely see those as the biggest challenges.

Gianina Baker: I think you've hit on a couple of key points. I want to stay with this data points and ask Deana if you might talk a little bit about how benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons currently use data, whether it's quantitative or qualitative, to help guide their work.

Deana Schenk: To Valerie's point, tracking patterns and who's seeking the help, what services are in demand and how students kind of describe their experience. HOUSE liaisons and benefits navigators are really able to spot gaps and advocate for resources, adjust their outreach. And, you know, there are just a variety of ways they put quantitative and qualitative data to work in their daily practice.

I would start by talking a little bit about how they use intake and case tracking. A number of them, I would say the majority of them, use either simple spreadsheets or some type of case management tool to record referrals, to look for what benefits have been screened for, to track applications that have submitted, you know, outcomes such as approvals or denials. And the time it takes for a student to receive assistance, which can really then guide their work and their response. As they track the volume of students who are trying to access these resources and the common barriers they face, such as things like missing documents or delayed approvals, it reveals where our systems and other systems are breaking down and which groups are most affected, which really allows staff to remove those identified barriers so that students can receive those just-in-time supports.

They can also monitor those early-warning indicators. So by pulling lists of students requesting emergency aid or students who are carrying really high unpaid balances or withdrawing repeatedly or suddenly stopping out, they can hopefully reach out to students *before* a crisis forces that student to leave school. Acting on these signals, it really helps keep students connected to the campus and reduces the inequities in persistence.

I'll also say another way that they can and are using data is service utilization dashboards to take their analysis further. So by tracking pantry visits, SNAP application completions, housing placements, emergency fund distributions, by term, program or demographics, navigators and liaisons are able to see which populations are using the services and who might be missing out. And these patterns inform staffing decisions, campus-wide policy changes that can close equity gaps. And while there are certainly challenges to this, as some resources such as food pantries provide services in a much less formal manner, such as grab and grow food, where service utilization data can be gathered. It can help staff plan and implement services more effectively.

And then I really want to make sure that we highlight qualitative impact and qualitative case notes and student voices, which add context that numbers just really can't capture. Short interviews, surveys can really uncover why students don't apply for benefits, whether it's documentation hurdles, concerns about immigration status, or just the time it takes to maintain eligibility, which can be really frustrating for students. And these insights can shape those culturally responsive outreach efforts and help reduce stigma. It also just

provides insight to the whole human side of basic needs and security, which can make a compelling case for continued and increased support.

So, these data practices can really turn that day-to-day service work that Valerie was talking about in her experience as the benefits navigator into a feedback loop for equity. They show where barriers persist, highlight emerging needs, and give campus leaders the evidence to strengthen their policies and funding so that every student has a fair chance to succeed.

Gianina Baker: You know, you tied so many different pieces of data together that I hope, again, if you're listening to this and you aren't thinking about some of these data sources that potentially you do start to bring them in, if you are a benefits navigator or a HOUSE liaison on your own campus, to start helping make sense of what's happening with your students on your campus.

Valerie, you talked a little bit earlier, and I want to come back to this point of, you know, what kinds of data *would help* benefits navigators, HOUSE liaisons, in their role to be more effective in identifying and supporting students in need.

Valerie Lynch: Yes, I think Deana identified a lot of those. The ones that I would add are possible flags. Like it's hard to get at who qualifies for SNAP or Medicaid or TANF, but if there was a way to get students to give consent to give us that information that would be great. And sometimes campuses have to get creative.

So, another piece of that sensitive information is whether a student is a parent or not. And that's another piece of data that institutions are being asked to collect. At my previous institution, we did get a little creative on how we could ask students those types of questions. And we did it through when they did textbook rental. Our campus had textbook rental. Most, if not all, students have to go through the textbook rental system in some way, shape, or form, even if it's to access electronic resources, they still have to fill out a form at the beginning of the semester. And so we would basically sneak in some of those questions (laughs). And it would be, of course, up to the student whether they disclose that, but just simple questions: Are you a student parent? Are you parenting while you're a student? I don't know that we asked the question about Medicaid and SNAP. I don't think we did, but that would be another thing that if we could find creative ways or common touch points where institutions can ask students this information with their consent, because a lot of this, you definitely have to have their consent for that.

Some other flags, and I think Dina touched on this some, there are some indicators if somebody is housing insecure, in most admissions offices they can track how many times a student changes their address. So that was something that we would look at. Like if a

student's changing their address two or three times a semester, then that might be a flag that maybe that's a student that needs targeted communication about what resources that we have. Maybe not, but it doesn't hurt to like put that information in front of them.

I think Deana mentioned past-due balances. That's another indicator that we looked at, especially if they had a less than \$500 balance, or you know, less than \$1,000 balance, then we would look at those students and try to figure out why. And if there were some of these basic-needs interventions that we could use to help, whether it's a short-term emergency grant or some type of grant like that we could give students, usually on a one-time basis. And sometimes through our foundation office. This is just in my experience, but some campuses might have something similar.

I think those are all data points. So if we can kind of break down, we may talk more about barriers to data later, but I think some of that is fears on FERPA and different privacy concerns.

Gianina Baker: Are there some barriers that exist with the collection or use of data on campuses?

Deana Schenk: I'll jump in and talk about this. And Valerie already kind of alluded to this. I think one of the challenges that really stands out are those privacy concerns and just FERPA confusion overall. So it *can* make staff hesitant to share student information across offices and across departments. Campus systems are not *always* set up for secure referrals, so that may block the creation of integrated dashboards that could track student needs in more real time.

I think the lack of a common data system can also be another hurdle. Campuses already collect required state and federal data, but this information is often stored in different systems, so there's not necessarily one common platform to integrate data from multiple sources or to track student outcomes holistically, specifically related to basic needs and securities.

I mentioned that colleges may use, you know, spreadsheets. So if they're relying on individualized spreadsheets rather than standardized referral or case management tools, it can make it difficult to really analyze trends or coordinate support in any way.

And then there's *always* in some places some barriers in terms of staff capacity for data collection and for data use. Benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons are typically more frontline service providers, not necessarily data folks. And without some type of dedicated institutional research support that information may either not be collected or may sit unused. And staff capacity issues are often compounded at community colleges where we

see IR shops that might be limited to a single individual who's taking care of data across the campus.

And then I think another barrier goes back to something Valerie mentioned was just the actual stigma. Students' reluctance to report really is going to reduce the accuracy of any self-reported data. And again, *lots* of reasons why students might not report immigration concerns: stigma, confidentiality. But when they face these barriers to disclosing their needs, it really leaves a *gap* in understanding who needs support and what supports they might need.

Gianina Baker: Valerie, I know you have at least a bit more of a personal experience with the benefits navigator role, and I'm going to ask if you'll maybe expand on, you know, what do you wish more campus leaders understood about this role?

Valerie Lynch: To make my situation even more unique, I did the role while I was in a leadership position at the college, simply because of vacancies and different reasons. And I had come from student life prior to being a vice president. So, I kind of understood and was used to trying to solve problems for students.

But what I *did* realize through that is that I think the benefits navigator, at the very least, needs to have a constant or dedicated interaction with the leadership team, if not beyond it, because that goes back to whether or not they have the authority or the information to actually make quick successes for students. In my experience, students who are in need that may already be apprehensive about disclosing that they're in need are going to probably lose focus if it seems like a million hoops have to be jumped through, even by the person trying to help them to get where they need. They may not want to feel like they're a burden. And this isn't always the case. It's just something that I've seen. They don't want to feel like other people are being put out or having to do all these extra things just to get them the assistance that they need. So, I really think one idea—and it may not work on every campus—but one idea could be to have them be connected to the leadership team, at least have an interface with them, you know, on some type of cadence to where they can also keep the leadership informed on what the needs are, and then that's going to further allocate resources for these types of needs.

Deana Schenk: And I will just add, I think one of the things that I would like for leaders to really know, and I want to start by acknowledging that leadership across the state, from my perspective, has shown a really clear commitment to supporting student basic needs. But I think if we could go a little bit deeper and really recognizing this as retention work. There is often talk about mission creep at the community college and that this type of support is going beyond kind of that core mission of educating and building a workforce. But really, in

reality, ensuring students' basic needs are met is fundamental to achieving that mission. Students can't learn or complete programs if they're struggling to survive. So really, *really* thinking about this as by helping students access food, housing, public benefits really directly reduces the barriers that cause students to stop out, to withdraw, to drop out, so that's one other part that I would add to this need for greater understanding.

Valerie Lynch: One other thing that I would add, too, is it's truly a completion strategy. If we're helping students feel like they belong, feel like their needs are met, then they're more likely, like she said, to retain and to actually complete. And that is a huge return on investment for institutions. So leaders should see that there is a return on investing into these programs for student basic needs.

Gianina Baker: You both definitely described the role in a way I think that others will be able to relate to and now have some new language, right, in describing what these roles can offer to students, to their campuses.

As you're talking and saying, you know, integrate them into your leadership teams, you know, how can institutions also think about moving beyond just having them, you know, that they're here, to truly really *empowering them*? What support is needed from across the campus or across the institution? Maybe Valerie, you can start.

Valerie Lynch: Yeah, I would say roles don't equal results. So, you can have a lot of roles, but it doesn't mean it's going to get you closer to the objective of what you're trying to accomplish. I agree that in my experience and from what I've seen, we have very dedicated leaders at our institutions. They understand that this is important. And I think we're moving closer towards finding results from these positions when they first came out. It's like any new piece of legislation. Everyone is scrambling to try to figure out what exactly does this mean and how do we do this on our campus?

Now I think we're at a point where through things like this and future communities of practice that we hope to have in this area and that have already happened, part of the legislation, our communities of practice, we're evolving it to actually trying to get results from the work. And I think that we're headed in a good direction with that.

Gianina Baker: Within this, you just sort of also talked about the legislation piece. Can you tell those that are listening, Deana, more about how policy or funding has assisted with this role and maybe some policy or funding changes that might help them scale their impact?

Deana Schenk: So, yes, as Valerie mentioned, this very much was policy-driven, but of course also very much need-driven as well. So state and institutional policy along with, I would say targeted grant funding has really been essential to sustaining and establishing and sustaining the work of both benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons.

The statutory mandates created the roles and required that training, those community of practices, and it's really there to ensure continuity of support statewide while allowing some flexibility to address local needs as well. Policy and funding together create a framework that allows benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons to remove barriers and stabilize students' lives.

However, the funding is *not* sufficient to support these holistically. I think some of the things that are needed is for campuses to look for ways to stabilize operating funds for navigators and liaison positions. Not only would it allow these positions to really focus their time in providing direct student support, but it would also allow campuses to then direct some of their grant funding to more immediate student supports like rental assistance or child-care assistance.

And I think some of the other policy considerations that we should be looking are really larger than just the higher-ed system. And that could revolve around SNAP benefits, which could have a significant impact on student success. We actually recently surveyed Illinois community college benefits navigators and asked them to identify the areas of highest need on their campuses, and nearly 50% of respondents listed food insecurity as the area of highest need. So, I think that really clearly illustrates the need for additional supports policy related to food. And SNAP and benefit rules or explicit campus waivers could help simplify eligibility and speed up student enrollment in those benefits or potentially funding a SNAP outreach specialist on campus that could help students access benefits more effectively, removing one of those largest structural barriers to basic-needs security.

Gianina Baker: What you are discussing really is starting to identify the piece, states-identified piece, right, that the benefits navigators, HOUSE liaisons are able to support our students in certain ways. But once you start digging into more root cause, you start to learn of *other* spaces that students need assistance.

With that, I want to stay with this for a moment and ask you both to dream a bit and help me answer, like, if you had an ideal system of basic needs support for our students, what would that look like on our campuses? Valerie, might you start?

Valerie Lynch: I think the model needs to be a one-stop shop. If we had the funding in place where benefits navigators could be someone's entire position. Because we have to remember that on so many campuses, it's in addition to someone's *other* core position, usually related to helping students. Sometimes they're in financial aid. I've seen it in financial aid. Deana can speak to this as well, and the different places where the benefits navigator and even the HOUSE liaison is placed. But I think that in order for it to lessen stigma, have more awareness on campus for students, be more visible, it really does need

to eventually be a one-stop shop where students can go get the help they need all in one place. And that benefits navigator being the connector to internal and external resources. Like that really is what I see as the model that would work best. It's also a model that we talk about in student services for every other part of student services and student needs. I think it's the same thing. It's part of it. It is a student service. So, I think that would be kind of how I would dream it to be.

Deana Schenk: And I would echo all of that. That's *exactly* where I would move forward with that ideal system. I would even go a little bit further and just kind of say that when we're thinking about removing or creating this ideal basic-needs support system, we're really talking about not just removing the barriers, but also adding in more services. So it's both, right? It's both *and*. So, it's really about creating that coordinated student-centered network where housing, food, health care, technology, child care, financial assistance are as easy to access as a library book on campus.

And I think another layer of providing these resources on campus will really be to build integrated partnerships beyond campus, because we can't do it alone. So creating formal agreements with those local continuums of care, with housing providers, with local hotels that could provide emergency housing, with food banks, public transportation providers, other public-benefits officers that could speed up applications or coordinate services and really streamline access to supports is part of *my* dream to have a system where students don't have to navigate a really confusing patchwork of agencies and resources.

Valerie Lynch: Something else that I would add, and this is my opinion, and for the listeners, I know they can't see my air quotes, but I'm using air quotes right now (laughs). Some of the “problems” that we see for students on campuses are basic-needs problems. Like, for example, attendance. Students aren't attending class. This might not be the first thing that an instructor points to. But when you really dig in, it's probably a logistical issue. Not always, but it very much could be. Maybe they didn't have transportation, their internet went out for whatever reason. They don't have a secure or safe place to do their coursework. They don't have child care. They're hungry. They don't have access to medical needs that they need—or all of the above or a combination of the above. But we might say they're failing because they don't attend, when really they might be failing for a myriad of other reasons. So, I think it's also educating faculty and staff that if you see some of these behaviors and attendance is just one of them, there's other indicators. But then if we had a dedicated benefits navigator in our ideal future, they would be able to reach out to that person and maybe dig in further about what some of these cautionary flags are. Is this truly a student who just is choosing not to attend for not good reasons, or do they have legitimate reasons that it's a huge barrier for them to overcome?

Gianina Baker: Thank you both for highlighting and acknowledging those other reasons, right? Some of which could include mental health.

Guests: Absolutely. Yes.

Gianina: And as you talked, Deana, about continuum of care, that's the very first thing that I thought about. And that's something that I know the state, both of your agencies are continuing to consider, think through, assist. The Governor's Office even, right, is thinking about how mental health for our K-12 students, there's so much that's involved with that. And so, I'm grateful that both the benefits navigator and HOUSE liaison roles are there and an extra support for what colleges are already providing for their students, but absolutely could be along that continuum itself

So, as we dream and we think, I know both of you have also some great examples, I think, of where this work has actually made a tangible difference for our students. So, I'm going to invite both of you, maybe we'll start with Valerie: Can you tell me about a success story that you've heard or seen or been a part of?

Valerie Lynch: Yeah, I think of a student at my previous institution. It was, I think, the week before finals or somewhere towards the end of the semester, and they came. They didn't have child care. They didn't have transportation. Actually, I think there was an issue with their car. The benefits navigator was able to connect them to our foundation office to get a one-time emergency grant, mini grant, whatever. It's called different things on different institutions. I think it was maybe \$500. And that was enough to get them whatever they needed to get their car going and to find alternate child care so they could actually do finals. Like they *literally* just needed to do finals. And so this is just like one anecdotal example that I did see actually work.

So, the model worked the way it's supposed to, even though we were a campus that had someone in the benefits navigator position that also had another job (laughs) as part of their day-to-day, but they were able to connect them to our foundation office, actually do like a soft handoff to them to get the application completed and *even* went out of their way to like help them find external temporary child care. You know, we were able to do that so they could finish finals. It literally was just one more week, and a very important week for them to be able to finish. And they did.

Gianina Baker: Deana.

Deana Schenk: Yes. So, I do have an amazing story from one of our community colleges. It relates to a student who identified as having experienced unexpected recent homelessness. And they did this at a time during inclement weather. Local shelters were full. So it really just left the student with no place, no immediate place for, you know, safety

and security. And so, this particular college had constructed some temporary housing partnerships with a local hotel. And they were able to get the student into the hotel for a few days while they really worked through some of their other partnerships to come up with a more stable solution. And after a few days in the hotel, having some safety, having some security, the student was able to transition into an apartment that was arranged through a partnership with an Airbnb that the college had. And the college was able to help the student secure some longer-term housing. And the student was able to move into it. They remained in that housing for the rest of the academic year. And so it really provided some safety and some peace of mind for the student that allowed them to focus on their studies. And they were planning to transfer to a four-year institution. So they were able to stay in this housing while they made that transition to a four-year school.

So, it was just really a great story of how the right training, the right access to emergency aid, the strong community partnerships are able to remove some of those material barriers that affect students' success and just really give them the foundation that they need to succeed academically and pursue their long-term goals.

Gianina Baker: Those are *great* examples. And as we end on this last question, I think you both have provided not only great thinking around what these roles are and could be, but also, right, as we think about this Illinois SUCCESS project, this is all designed to help close equity gaps in higher education. And you have both helped us think through how these roles can assist with that.

And so, in this ending, I might ask Deana if there's anything else you might say, like how can these roles help contribute to the state's, the institution's goal in closing equity gaps within their colleges?

Deana Schenk: Let me just say benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons are really essential drivers of equity and student success by helping to remove the very real material barriers, again, food insecurity, housing instability, gaps in public benefits that all too often prevent students from staying in school and achieving their goals, *particularly* students who may have traditionally been underserved by higher education, low-income students, first-generation students, students of color. The roles are moving the equity gap forward or closing the equity gap. When these roles are well supported with training, with funding, with data, with community partnerships, it's a profound impact. Students are able to gain stability, confidence, the ability to focus on learning. And campuses can see measurable improvements in retention and completion. And it really just reminds us that higher education isn't just about admissions. It's not getting students here, but it's also ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, regardless of their circumstances, can persist and thrive once they arrive.

So, investing in navigators and liaisons *is* an investment in a more equitable, more just system, one where every student has the resources and support to succeed. And really, it's ultimately about leveling the playing field so that opportunity meets preparation and every student has a clear path forward.

Gianina Baker: What was it? Success is opportunity plus preparation equals success. That's a great reminder.

Dr. Lynch, any final thoughts on how these roles contribute to closing equity gaps in higher education?

Valerie Lynch: To use a cliché, it evens the playing field. It really does. Like, if you can come to the institution with your basic needs met, you can focus on what you're there to do. And that does break down equity gaps. And I think eventually we are going to get to a place in our discussion with data where we can disaggregate some of this information we're collecting once we find good ways to collect it.

What I see would be great in a future state. We talked about it a little is one shared system, an electronic system of some manner where all this data can be collected at each institution and, you know, get student consent to collect it, but that we can actually use it to disaggregate and see which particular student groups need what type of interventions. And I think that that's going to be different on every single campus.

We're very fortunate in our state to have a wide variety of different types of campuses: public, private, rural, urban, community college, four-year. And I think that we have just as many varieties of needs. So that data is really going to help us and, in turn, close some equity gaps when we can really get targeted in our interventions.

Gianina Baker: Great points. We are considered a leader often in many of these spaces, so if we can figure it out and get our students what they need, you're absolutely right: We will again be leading the conversation around student basic needs, if we aren't already. So thank you. Thank you for that.

For all those that are listening, *please* join me in thanking both Valerie and Deana for this *important* conversation on benefits navigators and HOUSE liaisons in Illinois. As you've heard today, these roles are essential, but they need the right support, systems, and data to *truly* make an impact. Every campus should have a benefits navigator and HOUSE liaison, but their presence alone doesn't *close* equity gaps. Effective, data-informed practices are *key* to connecting students to basic-needs resources, and success in these roles depends on how well campus leaders understand and support them. If you're a campus leader, policymaker, or advocate, we hope this episode sparks ideas for how you can strengthen basic-needs support for your students on your campus.

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

Background music for this podcast is provided by Pixabay. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.