Democracy's College, Episode 78

Community Colleges at 125 with Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher

Hosted by OCCRL Director Lorenzo Baber

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Sal Nudo: That was a preview of today's Democracy's College podcast, brought to you by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Through research, partnerships, and dissemination, OCCRL examines programs, policies, and practices that span P-20 education and strengthen pathways to postsecondary education and careers.

This episode is hosted by OCCRL Director Lorenzo Baber, who will introduce our esteemed guest to lead off the "Community Colleges at 125" Democracy's College podcast series.

Thank you for joining us. We're glad you're here.

Lorenzo Baber: Welcome to Democracy's College podcast. I'm your host for today, Lorenzo Baber, and I'm delighted to welcome you to a special series, "Community Colleges at 125," celebrating the 125th anniversary of the founding of the nation's first public community college in Joliet, Illinois.

In 1901, Joliet Junior College opened its doors and launched an educational movement that would transform access to higher education in the United States. What began as an innovative local experiment here in Illinois grew into one of the most influential sectors in American education. Today, community colleges serve millions of students each year, providing pathways to transfer and baccalaureate degree attainment, workforce preparation, lifelong learning, civic engagement and economic mobility.

Yet the story of community colleges is not simply a story of institutions. It is also a story of ideas, scholarships, and leadership. Over the past several decades, a community of researchers have helped us understand who community colleges serve, how students

navigate their educational journeys, and how institutions can become more equitable, effective, and responsive to changing social and economic conditions.

In this special series, we sit down with many of the leading scholars whose work has shaped the field of community college research and practice. Through these conversations, we will explore the personal experiences and intellectual journeys that first drew these scholars to the study of community colleges, reflect on the most important lessons they have learned from their scholarship, and ask them to consider the future of the field by sharing advice for the next generation of researchers and scholars.

Today, we are welcoming our good friend and colleague, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, who is the Renée and Richard Goldman Dean of the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. An accomplished scholar, her work focuses on equitable participation in higher education, transfer access and retention policies, minoritized student populations in marginalized institutional context, and racial equity in campus climate in postsecondary education pathways.

In addition to her work at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Zamani-Gallaher is a leading scholar and a leader in a variety of professional organizations. She's the executive director of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, a national organization for university-based researchers and community college practitioners who further scholarship for community colleges.

As a researcher, Zamani-Gallaher has amassed over $12 million in external funding on projects aimed at improving the field of higher education. Among her numerous awards and recognitions, Dr. Zamani-Gallaher was selected as an AERA fellow and was named as a 2023 American College Personnel Association Senior Scholar Diplomat.

Prior to joining the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Zamani-Gallaher was a professor here at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, in the College of Education, where she spent seven years as my predecessor as the director of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. And among those accomplishments was the start of this podcast. So, we are welcoming *back* Dr. Zamani-Gallaher to this podcast that she started a number of years ago.

Eboni, welcome.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you for having me. It's nice to return home.

Lorenzo Baber: Yes, we miss you, but we're so happy to see all the great things that you're doing at Pitt. And of course, your consistent leadership with CSCC has been amazing as well. So, looking forward to having a conversation with you this morning.

Looking back on your career, what first drew you to the study of community colleges and why have they remained important to you as a scholar?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Initially, I had come to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for graduate study. And I had, during my first term, a course on community colleges that was taught by Deborah Bragg. And I just was blown away; also because I had the good fortune of it being the single time that she and James Palmer, an emeritus faculty at Illinois State University and just one of our vanguards in terms of senior scholar and just walking almanac (laughs). And so to be a student and to be introduced to community colleges as a subject matter was something that hadn't been on my radar, but I'm *so* happy that it serendipitously did occur because I was curious about higher education, wanted to be a higher ed scholar practitioner, but I also was one of those folks that didn't have a *full* understanding of all of the things that lie within that sector.

You know, I would hear deficit-laden things about community colleges. And I think on occasion, I too, myself, probably perpetuated some of that noise of negativity. But I also realize that through that course and seeing the literature—I saw myself in the literature, family members—I understood that community colleges are game changers. They're able to have changed practice in the sense that, intergenerationally, folks can have greater mobility, educationally as well as economically, through the door seals of community colleges. And so, from that class, that changed everything in terms of what my trajectory would become.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, I think that's a great example of kind of how we've shifted. So now community college and courses in graduate school are more normative. But I know for me, same thing, where I didn't have a class in community colleges, and so the first exposure was kind of to seminal scholars like Dr. Bragg, Dr. Palmer, and others, who kind of had to help us *unlearn* some of the things that we were ingrained in, but understanding that we were interested in equity and access and that, you know, bridging that connection between what *they* knew we would be interested in based on those interests and connecting that to our own knowledge, I think has been an important part of this development of scholarship around community colleges. So, thank you for sharing.

So, thinking about your own body of research, what do you see as the most important lessons you have learned about community colleges, from that graduate class to now?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I think some of the most important lessons for me have been with respect to, you know, this is a central route, the community colleges into higher education, for so many students. There are students that, if not for community colleges, they wouldn't have a postsecondary opportunity. And so, I think over the course of my career, I've tried to

champion community colleges to make sure that whether it's policymakers or, you know, a lay person in the public to emphasize that nearly half of all our undergraduates are *going* through community colleges. They aren't at places like Illinois or Pitt, so the main pathway, and especially you and I both being very committed to educational equity, equitable experiences for students and broadening participation in terms of access to completion, I think that what I've always marveled at and appreciated about community colleges is how they do the work with the least support. You know, and I think that's a larger conversation at higher ed is these are institutions that have, again, been the central pathway for historically underrepresented, minoritized, marginalized students that have always endeavored and tried to do the most with the *least* for those that have been at the margins of society. And so, like those they serve, community colleges have often been *at* the margins within the larger discourse around higher ed, but they meet students where they are.

Our work, we get to see how they're more nimble, how they restructure based on the student needs, and they center people as mattering in a lot of ways. And I'm saying all of that, you know, like an ode to community colleges as a fangirl, as an advocate, but I would like to think in these last over 25 years of being a community college scholar that I've also been a critical friend (laughs). So I am both cheerleader, and I also understand that there are ways in which our community college sector is organized in such a way where, structurally, there's some things that we can do better in terms of equity gaps that need structural and cultural answers. And that whether it's a two-year institution or four-year institution, oftentimes there's rhetoric that doesn't always align with the realities. And so our institutions largely are well-meaning, but there's still more to do.

Lorenzo Baber: Yes.

There's a lot of misconceptions about community colleges, as you know. What are some of the misconceptions that scholarship has helped reduce and eliminate? And what are some things, in your mind, that we still need to tackle as, again, as that critical friend, not only to community colleges, but also to the communities they serve in terms of matching the support that these institutions need that are locally bound to the realities of, you know, resources available to these institutions and the practitioners that lead them?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Misconceptions Again, that deficit-laden language that's often sometimes attached to community colleges, like, 'Oh, that's not real college or it's extension high school.' There have been times over the course of my career where I have felt that they should be the Cinderellas of the ball, but like Cinderella have often, by the public or, you know, lawmakers or what have you, policy folk, to have been treated in a second-class or stepchild manner. And so, I think sometimes there's an ebb and flow with which they have a heightened visibility or they are cloaked in invisibility. It just depends on

the ebb and flow of interest convergence at what particular point they're thought to be made useful and have utility.

But we know that the value of the colleges is a public good, but I think there's also a value for community colleges in terms of a narrative that isn't as well touted about the private *economic* return, the *ROI* that you get, that these are credentials of *value*, and that the misconception that somehow students that are attending community colleges are doing so, you know, again, coming from some deficit-laden group or that they have academic ill-preparedness, as they're sometimes portrayed, is not, you know, just a given. That's not the case. So, I do wish that in terms of some of those misconceptions that are out there, especially for the policy community, is to recognize that community colleges really sit at an intersection, I think, of educational change, and what *could be* if we really are not shying away from DEI, socially just education.

You know, I think they're judged in a way that sometimes is unkind, and that there is a way also, within the research community sometimes, that people treat community colleges as *it's extractive*, you know, four-year institutions, some research sometimes doesn't have a bidirectional partnership or relationship. And I think that there's so much more that they can offer to everyone if the approach is one that is very authentic and bidirectional.

And I think, most of all, in terms of misconceptions, higher ed still runs on a kind of production-assembly kind of a model. And if you're really centering people as mattering and everyone being seen as someone that is human and to be served, and that you want to help self-actualize, you know, in their fullest of what their possibilities can be, then I think, you know, I would recommend that folks think of community colleges in that fashion because I think they endeavor to do that.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, I totally agree. I think, you know, that nexus that you mentioned and that intersection of it's 'a' and not an 'or' for community colleges, economic mobility and social justice, right? Those tend to be competing with each other in many institutions or in many conversations or ideologies, but at the community college, they hold both: that economic impact and that impact on communities through both individuals and as partnerships. So I think that's important, especially as we move forward in the next decade, thinking about, especially, funding; funding for community colleges as well as the scholarship around, again, elevating to that promise of the democratic institution that we hold to be true. So, thank you.

You mentioned Dr. Palmer, Dr. Bragg. I mean, we could go on Dr. Eddie, the late Marilyn Amey and others, Bev Bower, who have kind of gave us the baton and we've kind of held true to that over the last few years. But as you reflect on your career, and thinking about

starting to pass that baton as you have with your students, what advice would you offer the next generation of community college scholars?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I would say, you know, just be *open*. Be open. I entered, you know, the study of higher ed not fully conversant with, or having an appreciation for, the entirety of the landscape. And so, I think there's so many folks that are going through professional prep programs right now. And again, it's as if it's this sleeper hit or this well-kept secret—community colleges—and that there's so many ways with which there are questions that you have and there's nothing but space, room, and opportunity to explore them. And so I would encourage folks to pay attention to the sector to understand that for as much time and attention that has been paid to, say, issues of dev ed or transfer or dual credit, that there's still so many *unanswered* questions and so many areas with which people can explore. And so, I would just say they can manifest what is some really good work that can do a lot of good. And if you really want to make a difference, there's no *better* place than the community college in terms of boots on the ground. If you're a practitioner, scholar, if you are on a four-year campus and you want to be an engine of mobility, the transfer function as a means and catalyst for that. There's so many different ways via enrollment management, advising, financial aid, auxiliaries—there's so many different things with which to explore and to move the needle on with community colleges. So, I would just say to that next generation: we're on the track. It's the fourth leg. I got my arm extended, my hand out. Come on, catch this baton. Pick up this baton. Let's keep this running. You know, let's keep this going.

Lorenzo Baber: Great. And I know we're not done yet, right? So, as we pass that baton, we're still running as hard as we can as well, so thank you so much for the opportunity to spend time with you. I know for me, you know, we've been partners for a number of years around this area. I can't imagine my career without you, and I think I speak for a lot of us who say that you have been, you know, one of the leaders of our generation around this research. And we just really appreciate all the things that you've done for us through your work, through your leadership with CSCC.

As we close out, what's the one idea for community colleges, leaving our listeners or taping this in fall 2026. So what one enduring idea about the community college would you like to leave listeners with to ponder, to consider, to reflect on as we close out this conversation?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I think the one idea, and it's hard to really kind of come up with just one, but I guess for me what's pressing is universal transfer. Like I would love to see that in terms of across state boundaries, even if there was a comprehensive kind of national kind of mandate for transfer. Because we're still at a place where students are having credit loss. So you're losing money, losing credits, losing time. And, you know, it's

done better in some states than others, but it's kind of mind boggling to me, and unnerving, that we're [in] 2026 and we're still trying to, dare I say, perfect transfer (laughs). And so, the idea that we could come up with something that's more favorable, less restrictive. We talk about pathways: well, on the path, we got a lot of lanes, and we've got to figure out better ways of converging these lanes and cleaner on- and off-ramps.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, I think, you know, here in Illinois, we've been talking about that vertical transfer and that idea of 125, no matter where you start, right? Like, so getting to a bachelor's degree and 125 credits, I think is, again, that economic piece and that equity piece is important, so great thought there to leave us with, and so we appreciate it.

So thank you so much. Thank you for joining us today and being a part of this special series and especially kicking us off in this special series on the podcast that *you* started a number of years ago. And we invite our listeners to look up some of your work, your research, along with others that we have mentioned today. Also look out for future Community Colleges at 125 conversations on the Democracy's College podcast.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I appreciate the invitation and let me say that I'm so excited and proud of the work that continues at OCCRL under your helm. So, thank you for everything that you're doing and adding to, you know, this next volume in what has been a *wonderful* over 35 years of OCCRL at Illinois.

Sal Nudo: Join us for the next podcast in the Community Colleges at 125 series when Dr. Lorenzo Baber talks to one of his mentors, Dr. Larry Ebbers, who was the face of Iowa State University's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies for decades, and played an instrumental role in developing and promoting the community college system in Iowa.

Thank you for listening to Democracy's College and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all learners.