Democracy's College, Episode 79

Community Colleges at 125 with Dr. Larry Ebbers

Hosted by OCCRL Director Lorenzo Baber

Lorenzo Baber: We've taken your model of CLIC and LINC here in Illinois. We have the Leadership Institute now, and I want to give a shout-out to the Illinois Community College Board for their support in helping us bring that idea to Illinois.

Larry Ebbers: They are still the people's college. Opportunity for advancement, for education. I still think it's one of the pathways to leadership in this country, and that the opportunity to engage with the learners and to move forward the various communities that they live in. They're still tied to the community. They're still tied to the broader picture.

Sal Nudo: You just heard community college-focused audio excerpts from 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 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 workforce preparation, transfer and baccalaureate attainment, lifelong learning, civic engagement, and economic mobility.

Yet the story of community colleges is not a simple 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 journeys that first drew these scholars to the study of community colleges, reflecting on their most important lessons learned from their scholarship, and ask them to consider the future of the field by sharing advice for the next generations of researchers.

Today, we welcome Larry Ebbers. Dr. Ebbers is one of the most influential figures in the study of development of community college leadership in the United States. Nationally recognized as a pioneer in community college research and leadership education, Dr. Ebbers' scholarship contributions include community college leadership, multiculturalism, learning communities, and higher education administration. His groundbreaking leadership initiatives include the Leadership Institute for a New Century, LINC, and the Community College Leadership Initiative Consortium, CLIC. These programs significantly expanded opportunities for women and people of color to pursue leadership positions in higher education and help strengthen Iowa's community college system.

A lifelong member of the Iowa State University community—Go Cyclones—Dr. Ebbers earned all his degrees from Iowa State University and devoted more than five decades of service to the university, holding numerous leadership roles, including department chair, assistant and associate dean, director of the Research Institute for Studies in Education, and, ultimately, university professor in the School of Education. He retired in 2016 after a distinguished career marked by scholarship, leadership, development, and mentorship. And it is our honor to welcome Dr. Ebbers, Larry, to this podcast. Larry, great to spend some time with you today.

Larry Ebbers: Thank you, Lorenzo. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in these podcasts. I think it's refreshing that you're doing this and look forward to hearing other leaders as well.

Lorenzo Baber: Thank you. So, we'll start by the question: looking back on your career—your illustrious career—what first drew you to the study of community colleges and why have they remained important to you as a scholar?

Larry Ebbers: Well, I think the actual reason I got involved with community colleges: I finished my doctorate. It was oriented toward community colleges. Became professor of the University of Michigan, came to Iowa State to start the program. And he was a student of Joseph F. Cosand, which goes *way*, way back. So, we had a number of people; they brought the program in to start a Ph.D. for people to work as presidents of community colleges.

But the actual thing that really *moved* me into community colleges: when I finished my doctorate, I had the opportunity to move to the College of Education. Virgil Lagomarcino, the dean, invited me to participate in [the] leadership there as an assistant to the dean, ultimately then become assistant dean. And that was the time that the community colleges were formed in Iowa in 1971. They started, actually, in '65. He said at that point they were going to be regents oversight committees to go out and see how they were doing in terms of academic performance. So, he called me and said, 'I'm gonna be a part of this team, but he said, I'm not doing those, *you* are.'

And so my first visit was to Indian Hills Community Colleges as a part of the accreditation team. So I got to know, obviously, a number of people. And then also I started teaching in the doctoral program and several community college folks were in the program. So that's how I really got involved with community colleges.

You said about the LINC program: Jim Ratcliff was the community college person we had. I was doing student affairs at that time. He said that he was in contact [with] a woman by the name of Virginia Loftus-Moskus. Came to DMACC from Illinois. I don't know exactly which college. But anyway, she started talking about, she was a friend of Jim's, and she said, 'You know, I look around this table and of all the presidents and all the administrative teams, and there are very few or no women.' And she said, 'I really think you guys need to start a program, if you'd be willing to do this, to evolve leadership development for women.' So that was LINC. And we started, got community college presidents to agree to it.

And then Jim decided to take a position at Penn State University as director of the Center for Teaching and Learning. And we looked for somebody in community colleges, didn't really find anybody. And I said, I'll do that. So, I took over the LINC program, worked with Noreen Coyan out of NIACC (North Iowa Area Community Colleges). So we had that connection. We started the program and really worked at it very well. And so we brought a series of leaders. The next thing came along saying, well, we need a program for upper-level administrators and we need a Ph.D. program. And so we started the Ph.D. program, really focused on community colleges. Then we worked at that and got connected and working with graduate students all the way. Graduate students have been a very important part of

this piece of research for me, in the sense that we were able to do lots of things that related to that. We started that program and we started bringing in national leaders.

One of the things that Katherine Boswell, who was here, came in and she said, you know, Iowa is very centric in the sense that they don't hire many people outside of Iowa. And she said, you need, you might think about how you're going to expand that. And so we brought in national leaders. Kay McClenney was probably one of the most influential. I would put the calendar, I would say to her, 'When are you available for you to come to Iowa to work with us?' She was big on cultural evidence.

One of the things I'd observed in looking at the community colleges and doing our reviews around the state—and I also did part of this statewide accreditation program from the Iowa Department of Education—is there was very little research or assessment going on during that time. And she came in and talked about the culture of evidence, significantly, and that's how I got connected with CESCCE, Center for Study of Community College Engagement. And we worked with that until we got all the schools on board and to be a part of that process.

I was thinking about my journey in that respect, and we were not very research-oriented in terms of our community college leadership program. After Jim left, we kept the position open and sort of redesigned it to bring in a scholar. And we brought in Frankie Santos Laanan from UCLA, who's a real scholar, and he brought a dimension to us that we did not have. And so, I also learned a lot from Frankie in terms of doing that kind of stuff because he is a very good scholar. And so, we thought about all of that, and we just continued to work in the leadership. And that's how I got started in my study of leadership. That's been my primary focus, as you know.

I was also offered the opportunity to participate in the *original* group of identifying characteristics of outstanding presidents. We all came to D.C. for a two- or three-day session. I think we came out with these leadership qualities, and we reversed that. And then with a couple of graduate students, Chris Duree that you know, we did this national study of community college leadership, and that served us very, very well in that sense. So that's how I *really* got started in it. And I was on the board at CESCCE for a number of years, which helped me, again, work in that circle.

Lorenzo Baber: That's great. I think, well, first you dropped a lot of great names that you're connected with that you helped mentor. And so I definitely encourage our listeners to write down those names and look up that wonderful set of scholars from Dr. Ratcliff to Dr. Laanan.

But I also wanted to ask you, because in this time that you were developing your own interest as an emerging researcher and administrator and leader of these institutes, you know, community colleges weren't really *seen* as legitimately part of the postsecondary education system, right? There is still kind of some negative –

Larry Ebbers: Connotations.

Lorenzo Baber: ... connotations or stigma, right, around scholars.

Larry Ebbers: There's no question about that. But I think we've done a very good job here. My national consultants say, well, you've focused primarily on Iowa, which I have.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: But I have also really worked on preparing people who can do work in the community colleges. We have a number of our graduates, both at the master's and doctoral level, who have done research on their own campuses and [I feel] very good about the state of research on each of these campuses at this point, so.

Lorenzo Baber: What would you say in terms of that movement to legitimize community colleges, particularly as a core of postsecondary education in the United States from those days in which you and your colleagues helped move community colleges from kind of not being seen as part of the postsecondary education system to now, what we know today, as a core feature of the postsecondary education system in the United States. What were some of the challenges that you had to overcome in terms of helping, along with your colleagues, move community colleges to this conversation?

Larry Ebbers: I think part of it is I've also done a lot of board work. I've worked with boards in saying you need to have this culture of assessment or culture of evidence.

They had a summer workshop for boards of trustee members and we would do a lot in that. We really worked through LINC and CLIC to have an emphasis on scholarship and what was going on in terms of the community colleges around the country. I was sending out lots of material from, like, you guys, and also from the center for Community College Research at Columbia, bringing in some of those people as well.

We had a statewide conference every year, and we focused on the current issues with community college. Iowa State sponsored them. That's how we worked with our provost and a couple of others to do that.

I was thinking about this: This perception still reared its ugly head a *little* bit this year, in the sense that community colleges tried to legislation for four-year degrees.

Lorenzo Baber: That's right.

Larry Ebbers: And the private colleges reared their head. You know, a lot of those folks, obviously, and was not surprised—they have one of the strongest lobbyists in the country. In fact, I got several calls from higher ed, four-year private institutions, say, can you help us? And I said, no. I said, because I said the leaders of the movement are our graduates.

Lorenzo Baber: That's right. That's right. Yeah. Well, it sounds like, you know, one of the things you emphasize is that data-driven decision-making around leadership and that became a core feature for community colleges, particularly in Iowa, as you elevate that and that even as we think about the community college baccalaureate and those things they're really driven by data, right? By data, not necessarily by envy or any other kind of thoughts about, like, mission creep is always a word that's really is, like, you know, this is the community colleges for certain majors and degrees based on the data would be the place to either extend a program to four years or develop four-year programs.

I always use respiratory therapy as my example for that; that, you know, in Illinois, we don't have a four-year degree in respiratory therapy and yet we know the industry is moving towards four-year degrees as a prerequisite for entry-level positions. So, who are the best institutions to kind of extend that? [It] would be those who already have two-year respiratory therapy programs, not necessarily institutions to create, from the start, a four-year program. And I think *that's* an example of, like, data-driven decision-making –

Larry Ebbers: That's right.

Lorenzo Baber: ...that you really inspired in your leaders, right, to think about not decision-making around data and evidence.

Larry Ebbers: It's around data.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: There's no question. Had a conversation with a community college president on Friday night, and it obviously came to this, and he said, we have the data. He said we'll produce the data.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: And we'll get there. I had the opportunity to lead the statewide strategic plan. They had two of them. We had the first one. It was organized by the state legislature—said you're gonna do this. And they couldn't find it. They didn't want an outside consultant, at least the president didn't because they said you never know what you're gonna get. So they said, would you do this? I said, okay, I'll do this. And so we led the statewide strategic planning process two times for 10 years. And the research became a very important

component of that. And so we were able to work that in as well. So it's through a multiplicity of arenas that we were able to improve the scholarship.

Lorenzo Baber: You know, you've talked a little bit about this, but [I'm] wondering if you could expand on what you see as the most important lessons from your career in developing leaders for community colleges and conducting research on leadership studies, specifically *with* community colleges. What do you see as the most important lessons? And you can take that from, like, presidential leadership. What are the things that you've really emphasized for senior-level administrators, but particularly chief academic officers and presidents?

Larry Ebbers: I've done a lot of work in this and tried to really focus on what the research and what the data shows. If I were to go back, I would do more on president interviews, doing some of that work that I've done, although I continue to do a little bit of that, but looking more deeply into the decision-making.

The dynamics are changing, as you well know. I think there's a lot of pressure on our presidents to respond to both national and local issues as well, and if I were to go back, I would probably put together research that would focus on how they respond to decision-making. And the other thing is putting teams together.

Lorenzo Baber: Okay.

Larry Ebbers: The days are gone when a president, top down, sort of led the institution. In our early formations, I mean, we had some great leaders who formed great institutions. But that's not the way it's gonna happen today. I think we need to focus on teambuilding and research around teambuilding. And there's some really good national data out there that we need to continue to work. I will say that sometimes some of our community college leaders are not as academic as they need to be.

Lorenzo Baber: What do you mean by that?

Larry Ebbers: I think that, of course I'm a reader, and I know you are as well.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: We read all of this stuff, and I still get my Chronicle every day, and I'm still getting all my publications and so keep up with that. Pressures are such that they respond to what the immediate needs are, as opposed to taking time to sit back at reading and reflection and looking at the research. There are some very good presidents who do a lot of that, others do not do as much of it, although I'm pretty satisfied with our leadership teams in Iowa right now. It's a way for them to stay engaged, to go to different kinds of conferences. And I realize, you know, they're under great workforce pressures right now,

and that seems to be the order of the day, and it's a matter of setting aside some time on their part to look at the current research and what's going on.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, I think, you know, as my experience with LINC and CLIC that you established and I worked with for a few years is that you really emphasize that scholar-leader perspective.

Larry Ebbers: Yes, I did.

Lorenzo Baber: And I think that's really important to say that, yeah, there are some immediate needs and decision-making that needs to be done, but there's also a bigger picture, right?

Larry Ebbers: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: And thinking about the national trends that are out there and thinking through and also, I think what these leadership institutes also did is the collaboration between presidents and among presidents to say, okay, I've read this, let me pick up the phone –

Larry Ebbers: That's right.

Lorenzo Baber: ...and call my president down the street, my colleague, and maybe we could talk through this because we have this shared issue, as opposed to me making the decision, you know, on my own or feel like I'm the only one having this challenge. I think those two things kind of reflect the characteristics of a scholar-leader that I think, you know, as you mentioned, we kind of need to reemphasize, especially for the new group of leaders that are coming up in the leadership pipeline. Would you agree with that?

Larry Ebbers: Yes, I would agree with that.

It took us a longer time than I thought needed to get to guided pathways. That's some of the kinds of things that happened around that, going from there. But I still have a passion for that stuff, and I still talk with a lot of leaders about what they're doing and what they're, you know, encourage them to do their professional development as well.

Lorenzo Baber: No, that's a great example.

So, as you think about our next generation of community college scholars, especially those who are interested in studying leadership and studying leaders, what advice would you offer for those folks in terms of what they might want to focus on or kind of lingering issues that you see as kind of underexplored or under researched that might be valuable to crafting or adding to the community college scholarship?

Larry Ebbers: Well, how I really got involved in a lot of community college leadership scholarship was through CSCC, Council for Study at Community Colleges. The fact is the leaders in the movement were *there*, and they were presenting their research, what they were finding. And one of the things I liked about CSCC, and I still do, although I don't go, obviously, as you know anymore, but the fact is that people like yourself are willing to sit down with graduate students, young scholars, and talk about what the issues might be, what you see are the primary issues. I mean, I think ASHE is very important. It's a very different kind of conference where they look at leadership and a number of things that are going on with the profession. And obviously you and I have both known several of the leaders of ASHE. CSCC is just a *different* kind of experience.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: It's a unique one that, if I were a young scholar thinking about it, I would certainly look that one up and be a part of it.

Lorenzo Baber: I didn't even, you know, prompt you to say that, but I know that, as you know, I'm a past president of CSCC, huge fan, but I think you're absolutely right, that community in terms of balancing both critique for developmental, especially among emerging scholars with support for encouragement. You know, I think back to my first CSCC and meeting folks and really engaging with people that *you've read*, you know –

Larry Ebbers: That's right, that's right.

Lorenzo Baber: ...and then, you know, a lot of times the people that you read, their personality doesn't really match with (laughs), you know, how they write. But at CSCC, that was never an issue. I think of, like, Marilyn Amey, Barbara Townsend.

Larry Ebbers: That's right, all of them.

Lorenzo Baber: Of course Deb Bragg, you know, who introduced me to CSCC.

Larry Ebbers: Barbara Townsend!

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, Barbara Townsend was, yeah, and I met her once. But I, but one of those ones where, and again, I encourage listeners, if you haven't read Barbara Townsend, she's, like, the *way* she writes is unbelievable, but that's who she was, right?

Larry Ebbers: Yeah, exactly.

Lorenzo Baber: She wrote, she writes like she's on fire. And she was, like, *always* on fire, always passionate about community college. And I think that's the value of CSCC is that there's not that hierarchy.

Larry Ebbers: That's right.

Lorenzo Baber: It's really, really lowered so that you can have real conversations with people that have inspired you, but continue to inspire you and continue to support you.

You know, I always think about the story of Marilyn Amey, right, who recently just passed away. I met her once at a CSCC and I knew I was going to get [an] e-mail after that like once a semester just about an article I wrote or something that, you know, she heard about. It's just that kind of people that's really –

Larry Ebbers: Hard, hard loss.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah. Yeah, it was. It was.

Yeah, so, as you know, as we close out, we've taken your model of CLIC and LINC here in Illinois. We have the Leadership Institute now, and I want to give a shout-out to the Illinois Community College Board for their support in helping us bring that idea to Illinois.

But as you think about the enduring idea of community college and community college leadership, particularly, what's one thing you want to leave with for our listeners in terms of the thing that you want everybody to know about community college leadership based on both your research and your experience in working with leaders—multiple generations of leaders at community colleges.

Larry Ebbers: They are still the people's college; opportunity for advancement, for education. I still think it's one of the pathways to leadership in this country, and that the opportunity to engage with learners and to move forward the various communities that they live in and it's still tied to the community. They're still tied to the broader picture.

But as we said earlier, there's still some resistance out there with community colleges. I think it's really in a different place now, and that as we move forward that I'd encourage people to support their community college, but also to participate.

One of the things that's been unique for me is that I've been out in the field a lot, as well. We're not separate scholars from community colleges –

Lorenzo Baber: Right.

Larry Ebbers: ...but we are a real part of that movement and *really* maintain the American dream. Community colleges are certainly a pathway to that, and we need to support them in every way possible. And research, certainly, and data are one of the ways to do that.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah. Well, that's great. We really appreciate it. I know that for me, I learned a lot from you about, like, matching your research and your scholarship to the activism and energy at the community college, locally driven.

I know that for me, one of the highlights of my career was we had a year of overlap at Iowa.

Larry Ebbers: Yep, that's right. It was –

Lorenzo Baber: And I gotta tell the listeners, like, driving around Iowa with Larry Ebbers was just a phenom, I, the Pella. I remember the Dutch letters in Pella, Iowa.

Larry Ebbers: (laughs) There you go, man. There you go. A lot of graduate students do do that as well.

Lorenzo Baber: Yep. The Dutch letters and then the tenderloins, the pork tenderloins.

Larry Ebbers: And the tenderloins. Yep.

Lorenzo Baber: And more than food. We did more than food, Larry.

Larry Ebbers: That's right. We did. We had a lot of great, a lot of great discussions.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Larry Ebbers: And that's the other thing I would say is you can get crawling in the car, or be able to spend some time –

Lorenzo Baber: Right.

Larry Ebbers: ...whether it be at CSCC or ASHE or any of those, just ask for a little time. I've always found that you ask for a little time for, with leaders and they'll sit down with you.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah. Well, we appreciate your time. And I know for the listeners out there who have read your stuff, who are still inspired by your work and what you've done, and I know you're still active in terms of the presidential searches and things, we just want to thank you. Really, you helped us in terms of the legitimizing community colleges as a path for postsecondary education anytime, anywhere, anyone, and continuing to make sure that dream stays alive across, not only within Iowa, but across the country. So, thank you so much, Larry, and thank you for joining us today and being part of this special series.

For our listeners, please look out for future 'Community College at 125' conversations on our Democracy's College podcast. And we, of course, thank you for spending time with us today. And wherever you are, we hope that your being continues to be well.

Larry Ebbers: Keep up the great work, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo Baber: All right. Thank you so much, Larry. Appreciate you.

Larry Ebbers: All right. You bet. Bye.

Sal Nudo: Join us for the next podcast in the 'Community Colleges at 125' series when Dr. Lorenzo Baber talks to Dr. Audrey J. Jaeger, who is the W. Dallas Herring Professor of Community College Education at NC State's College of Education and the founding executive director of the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

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