

## Democracy's College

### Working Toward Equity for Underrepresented Individuals in Career and Technical Education and the CTE Workforce

**Sal Nudo:**

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:**

Thank you for joining us today. Democracy's College podcast has two special guests: Dr. Rita Ali, vice president of workforce and diversity at Illinois Central College, as well as Jennifer Foster, deputy executive director for the Illinois Community College Board. Thank you both for joining us.

Before we get going into some of our conversation, it would be really nice for you to share a little bit about yourselves and your background with our audience. Jennifer Foster has been with the Illinois Community College for a long time, and so I want you to tell folks what it is that you've been involved in and your background in terms of your pathway to being at the Illinois Community College Board and being an advocate for community colleges in the state of Illinois.

**Jennifer Foster:**

I've been with the ICCB since probably June of 2000, so a little bit more than 20 years that I've been at the Community College Board. And my path to the Community College Board range from a community college, so I was at Richland Community College in Decatur, Illinois, where I worked in adult education. And so I continued my career with the Community College Board right after that. I've been the coordinator of programs in Decatur, Illinois. I've also taught adult education at the community college level. So a wide variety of experience. I also was a part of the Title One back in the day of CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, as well as the Job Training Partnership Act. So I spent about 10 years in that particular position. So it has led me over the years to work in adult education and then into workforce. Now I oversee career technical education, as well as some of the academic pieces and adult education and workforce. So, a long time in terms of a career, and I am very proud to be at this point, working on workforce development and looking at equity.



**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:**

Dr. Ali, would you share your background with our audience?

**Rita Ali:**



Sure. Thank you, Dr. Zamani-Gallaher. I also have a background in JTPA programs. It's interesting to hear that Jennifer has that same background. Before JTPA was the CETA program and I was actually a participant in CETA programming where CETA paid for some of my education. For the most part, I grew up in Peoria, and once I graduated from high school, I became a single parent at 19 years old. But, you know, struggled financially, but I knew that education was going to be a key to my success.

So, it took me eight years to finish a bachelor's degree, but I finally got there and ended up getting in the field of employment and training and moved from JTPA, working there, running some absolutely great employment training programs to go into Bradley University and become their first director of multicultural student services.

Ultimately, I went to the private sector and ended up 16 years ago coming to work at Illinois Central College as their first director of diversity; now that's vice presidency of workforce and diversity. So, I've been in this field for quite some time. You know, it's a great field to be in because it's about changing people's lives and putting them on a pathway to success. So, I'm pleased to be here to share some of our experiences.

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:**

Thanks so much. You know, over the course of time, particularly as we think about the last 30 years, there's been a shift. We've had in the field where we talked about a vocationalism, vocationalization, if you will, that was happening in postsecondary ed. And the shift of moving from the framing of vocational education to referencing or a rebranding of career tech education has also been thought to be something that was a way of trying to reestablish, or at least decouple that stigma of voc ed, and that there had been perhaps some tracking, that there had been segmented opportunities or ways in which particularly first generation students of color may have been stratified. And so, I think over time, as we looked at the different iterations of the Carl D. Perkins Act, which had been block grants for vocational, ed and now with it being career technical education, what we've seen is still a case in which, over time, what's been consistent, irrespective of the shift and the terminology, is larger shares of White students that are completing career tech ed concentrations relative to their Black or Latinx peers.

And so, with some of those patterns, we have also had, as a state, an emphasis, and also one that's been very much encouraged by the Illinois Community College Board, of using state-specific data in disaggregating the data to identify equity gaps. Can you tell us a little bit more about your thoughts relative to these patterns as they continue to hold, irrespective of if it's vocational ed or career technical education. What is it that we can do to make sure that we bolster participation, broaden participation within career tech ed, and especially in areas that are high skill, high wage, high demand that are not readily having

as many Black and Brown folks enrolled? Jennifer, would you care to address that first, and then I'd like to hear Dr. Ali's thoughts as well?

**Jennifer Foster:**

I think that the key there is now there's this huge awareness of what is happening within our state, as well as within the nation, and so some attention is being brought to the fact that there aren't a lot of Black and Brown individuals that are participating in our programs and our services. And I think what I would say would be the key, especially when working with our community college system, is data is so important. I think a great beginning point is to look at the data; the data will tell you where those gaps exist. Also, look at the Census data; look at the data that you're using in terms of the numbers that you're serving, but also look at Census data because that Census data will give you good information about how many Hispanic or African American students are located within your area. And then look at those folks that you're serving.

I think that what we need to do is analyze those gaps, understand those gaps, and then do marketing that will be able to go after those segments of individuals, especially when you know where individuals reside. Those high-wage, high-demand occupations, they're there. Look at the workforce data; it will tell you. We know that the workforce, given COVID, has changed tremendously. So, what we need to do is to make certain that as we examine that data, that we're taking a look at those occupations that will yield our Black and Brown citizens that high wage. We have to make sure that folks understand: It does not require that you have a four-year degree in order to access all of those occupations. We need to make certain that we are really well versed in what those occupations are, so that we can make certain that we are steering people or counseling people in the right direction, because I think that's very important.

Sometimes students of color are sometimes put in pathways that won't yield those wages, and we need to be very specific about, you know, "Here's the wage, here's the occupation." Making certain that folks *can* go in those areas and are feeling comfortable with going in those areas. It may only take a basic certificate in order to get them to that high wage. It may take an advanced certificate or even a one-year in college, but that's the beauty of the community college system, that it's able to meet people where they are and take them further, so you can stop in, stop out, work, come back, and get back on track.

**Rita Ali:**

And I agree with everything that Jennifer said, and I appreciate the leadership of Jennifer in ICCB in terms of addressing equity in a really more aggressive, I would say, leadership manner. And, you know, I think that CTE going from vocational is the right way to go, but we have to begin to address root-cause issues. And that may mean treating people differently. You know, being fair often means treating people differently, and that's what equity may mean, because for one thing, we're not all starting, you know, on the same level. People of poverty, first-generation college students have *a lot* more barriers than, you know, other college students. So, you know, one thing that we've attempted to do is to take people that live in a high-poverty zip code area. We know that they may have

trouble with Internet connectivity. We know that they may have various barriers to even *getting* to college. They may have to take two or three buses to get there. They may not even understand the system.

You know, we have started, through the new Workforce Equity Initiative, we had an all-minority LPN program, a cohort, all African Americans and one Hispanic—first time that we've ever done this. Matter of fact, we've had people of color that have had challenges getting into these types of high-wage tech type of careers, but with that cohort of 16 individuals, we've had to do things differently in terms of ramp additional supports, in terms of tutoring and counseling, provide additional supports in terms of transportation and mentoring and counseling. I think that we have to learn how to connect with these populations, Black and Brown populations, in ways that we have not done so in the past. So, you know, again, it's about addressing root-cause issues in order to begin to chip away at these historical inequities.

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:** Thank you both so much for that. You know, as I'm reflecting on each of your comments, I began to think about a recent report. So, Hodge, Dougherty and Burris, earlier this year, out of University of Colorado Boulder's National Education Policy Center, released a report. They talked about that because there's popularity and a broadened definition of career tech education efforts in recent years, that also with that, what's emerged is a complication, if you will, that is complicating the efforts for folks to be able to evaluate the implications for equity and what is considered equality within CTE and within the workforce. And that that also included, they felt, issues of equity around work-based learning. And so I wanted to ask you, as you mentioned the root causes, you know, some of what's at root are issues of college readiness.

Jennifer, your work has *really* been in this space of thinking through how students are navigating, particularly adult learners, those that may have had little or no interaction and, or postsecondary experience. How does it work when we look at students beginning, say, at age 17, but again, they'd not had the traditional high school experience, and so they need a GED or the high school equivalency tests or their testing, you know, the test assessing secondary completion. So any one of these three tests, of course they've been authorized by the Illinois General Assembly, and it gives the ICCB the authority to select the test and also establish and guide what should be minimum passage standards. So, how do we look to create issues of equity when looking at students that may be doing workforce ed as adult learners and more of the non-credit side? You mentioned getting on- and off-ramp, so what's the on-ramp, and how do we more tightly couple so that we can close equity gaps between non-credit and credit programs within CTE?

**Jennifer Foster:** I really think that it's important, and something that Dr. Ali said, which is wraparound services. Wraparound services are so important for all populations, but in particular Black and Brown populations. One of the things that we are trying to do at the ICCB in order to on-ramp more students to this notion of a career pathway is integrated education and training. It is a blend of adult basic

education that is aligned with those college and career readiness, knowledge, and skills to make certain that their basic skills while they're training to get their high school equivalency, those basic skills have all of those college and career readiness activities that will help an individual get to where they need to be. But integrated education and training takes those basic skills that are aligned with standards, or they have standards, with career and technical education; blending those in order for individuals as they're studying for their high school equivalency, they're contextualizing it in accordance with a career pathway or a program of study.

We already know that there are not going to be enough high school graduates in order to fill the jobs of the future. We already know that. So here's a population that we can work with career and technical education, it's a part of the Perkins V, is to work with adults. It's a part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that we work with adults in order to make certain that they're on a career pathway. So we have seen that this particular model is *really* helping us to move more students into the pathway. It's also helping us in, some of the colleges are using integrated education and training in order to move students without a high school diploma or low basic skills. They dropped out when they were 17 or they haven't been in school for 25 years and so they have low basic skills.

So this is an opportunity under workforce equity to meet individuals where they are, meeting them where they are, giving them that opportunity in a contextualized fashion, looking at not watering down the career and technical education instruction, but providing some additional supports that will be able to help them as they are moving along a pathway.

The results: We're reshifting our thinking. Our senior director for career and technical education, Whitney Thompson, is working with our senior director for adult education to make certain that we're blending these models so that folks can get credit, or they can come from a non-credit standpoint, but they're able to get the skills, get into employment, come back and have those credits already, so that they're not starting all over from the beginning. So, I think that when we look at these opportunities, and I think you called it opportunity gaps, here's an opportunity for us to look at a segment of the population that we work in with either if you're without a high school diploma, you're needing English-language services, and also you're coming in through the door of the workforce equity.

The key is to make sure that there are multiple doors that folks can enter and receive those services. And that the message is exactly the same. That here we are, it depends on where you are. You may come from this standpoint, but the end point or the middle point is your headed all in the same direction, so that's, I think, very important.

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:** Thank you for that. I want to pick up with that with you, Dr. Ali, because that was, in terms of the different models that we can find for on- an off-ramps, and

I'm curious in terms of with the work you've done in concert with the Illinois Community College Board, but also independent of it with Illinois Central College, if you might share some other models with us in terms of equitable structures for offering career tech ed, as well as workforce education and development. But also, in particular, if you could share with us some of the newer equity initiatives that you're steering at ICC that are aimed at helping underserved, underrepresented first-generation students to get a higher education credential. I know that, in the past, you've previously talked about publicly wanting to focus and recognize particularly African American under-participation and how to be very purposeful in engaging a segment of learners that have not had as much readily accessible on-ramps to high-skill and high-wage employment opportunities, so can you share with our audience more around that?

**Rita Ali:**

Sure. And I'm glad that Jennifer mentioned integration because that's really our ultimate goal is to get to that point of integration. But, you know, we have at ICC established equity as a strategic priority, but we realized that we have to provide some professional development and build our *foundation*, then the college and throughout the college, in order to get to the point of integration through academics and various areas of our college. We recognize the need that we have to scrub our policies, our procedures, and our practices to create more pro-equity policies, procedures, and practices. We have to remove barriers from these areas to make sure that we're treating everyone fairly and, you know, it has to be done through collaboration. So, we've recently hired an RJE coordinator, racial justice and equity coordinator. We have some money that's been committed by the college as well as from a grant provided by a local senator, state senator.

And we're going to invest in our people. We're going to provide them with RJE training and development. We are part of an initiative, and I also serve as an at-large city council person for the city of Peoria, and we have just passed an ordinance on October 23rd. It's a city-county commission on racial justice and equity, and it's new. It's going to consist of about 160 individuals throughout the city and the county participating. It's going to have a steering committee as well as eight different committees that focus on addressing issues of racial justice and equity in these areas where we know the disparities exist, such as the justice system, economic development and jobs, transportation and mobility, the health care system, environment and climate, youth and child development, and a couple of other areas. But we will engage the citizens of our county and our city and through community-based organizations, through education, through business, and coming together in a more comprehensive manner to address these issues.

So, you know, it's not just the college working in silos. We have to work in conjunction and collaboration with the community, because there's inequities, but when do they *begin*? When do the gaps start to appear? And we have to go back to third grade or fifth grade when we start to see these inequities and we can't work in a vacuum, so we have to start there, work in collaboration. I'm so

happy with some of the bridge programs that ICCB has developed. We're actually starting early working with the K-12 system. I'm proud of the TRIO programs that we have through Upward Bound and Talent Search and student support services that help to target the first-generation students, the low-income students, the students with disabilities and begin to wrap support around them and get them on a pathway.

And also not to exclude employers, because we have to engage employers in this whole process and educate them, and going back to do some things that we had gotten away from that we know work. Apprenticeship programs have been around for hundreds of years, right? They're very successful. Well, I'm glad to see that they're coming back to the forefront because these earn-and-learn programs can *really* benefit people of color, because many of them work two and three jobs and they feel like they can't quit not one of these jobs, because the bills are not going away. The bills are still there, so if we can find a way for them to earn and learn at the same time, perhaps they can give up one or two of these dead-end jobs. And that's the way it was with me. That's why it took me eight years to finish my bachelor's degree because I had to work and support a child at the same time, and it would have been almost impossible for me to quit my job. But now, through the ICCB's Workforce Equity Initiative, people are paid a stipend to attend class, to go to school, to earn a certificate as a CDL truck driver, coming out making \$50,000 and \$60,000 a year after just four to eight weeks of training.

You know, there's opportunity here, but again, we have to tap that population. We have to let them know about the opportunity and then we have to support them throughout the training to make sure that they're successful. But again, people have to buy in. They have to be educated on how to treat people fairly and how to help everybody to be successful because that's what equity is all about.

**Jennifer Foster:**

Just to piggyback on something that you said. That's why it's so important that, as a system of community colleges, that we do our research. Research is *so* important. That we research what's working and what the best practices are, because all of our colleges are doing something that is *really* spectacular. And how do we scale that? And I think that that is the key. How do we scale these programs that have good research behind them, good evaluation behind them, so that we can expand that throughout the state? We have another grant called the Innovative Bridge and Transition Grant. One of the things that we have learned from that grant is put those grant resources out there, let people test to make certain what can happen, because we don't know until we actually go through with it. And so, with the Workforce Equity Initiative, we're looking at creating and expanding those short-term certificates in high-need communities.

We're looking at Black and Brown communities. We're focused on those high sectors. We're focusing on improving equity overall. And I think the key is with the 15 colleges that we've worked with over the past year is that we don't come in with assumptions that everyone knows about equity. The project starts out

with, let's make certain that we're all on board and we're checking our awareness at the door, making certain that we know how to work with this population of students. So we make certain that we bring equity trainings to each of those colleges. And we ask, "How are you looking at your program through a racial equity lens?" Because we don't want to make any assumptions.

And if there needs to be more training, we bring more training in. And I think that that is one of the things that is the reason for this success—that we want to make certain cultural awareness is a part of what we do, but also making certain that we are sensitive to the population that we're serving. Sixty percent of the population has to be African American, and we're at 78%. And so that's great because that means that with those wraparound services, people are sticking to it because there's enough there. And I can't emphasize that enough is those wraparound support services are *so crucial* to the success of this particular model.

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:** Thank you both. We've had some really good conversation that's included looking at ways in which students can continue their education instead of entering the workforce and it not be counted against them or the institutions in terms of numbers. We've talked about ways in which we could, again, have a focus on how to grow student participation, namely for students of color that have been underserved and underrepresented in high-skill, high-demand, high-wage sectors to be involved more readily in the short-term instruction—that's less than a year with those on-ramps—and also the need for stackable credentials so that students can have a pathway that marries the non-credit or short-term certificates to the completion in terms of applied associate's or other associate's degrees.

And so this has been great. As we wrap up our conversation, I'd love for you to each share some pearls of wisdom and, or a call for action as you think about ways in which both leadership as well as faculty and staff need to be involved in the conversation around what can be done to make sure that we provide those wraparound support services, that we increase what has traditionally been disproportionately impacted communities' participation within short-term workforce development and education programs, as well as those on-ramps to *credentials* beyond a short-term certificate to degrees. Anything you care to share with our audience as some takeaways for what they can do to bolster participation and degree completion *and* that pathway to gainful employment?

**Rita Ali:** I would just end by saying, you know, I think understanding this concept of equity is very important, and making equity a strategic priority can go a *long* way, understanding that we're not all starting at the same point and that we're only as strong as our weakest link. By helping those who are underrepresented within our workforce, who are living in poverty only helps us to be stronger as a community. And there's research that says that a strong economy requires that 60% of the workforce have a co-secondary credential beyond high school.



In our area, Peoria area, we're at 40%. So we've got a ways to go to get to 60%. And it's going to take collaboration. It's going to take everybody: employers, schools, colleges, everybody working toward getting that other 20% to build our community and to build our economic base. And ultimately, it's going to help everybody; it's going to help our community to be more successful. So that's what my advice would be is to get on board with this equity agenda and begin to seriously address the needs of your community.

**Jennifer Foster:**

I think equity so important, and as a system, a community college system, we need all of the individuals to come to our community colleges to get an education, our Black and Brown communities. Equity is *so* important when we have discussions. If we don't have well-rounded representation at the table, then equity is left behind. And so, I would agree with Dr. Ali that we need to make certain that we're talking about inclusion, we're talking about diversity, we're talking about equity issues, we're talking about cultural awareness. We're making certain that all individuals *can* access education. I think that that is so important. Just talking with a few young people over the course of the weekend: "I didn't know I could do that. I didn't know I can do that." And so, we have to go back and ask ourselves the question: *Why* didn't they know that they could do this? And I think that it's so important that we have to try.

We don't want anyone to be left behind, especially those that are minority, people of color. We need to make certain that we are mapping out the different pathways that they can be successful. And with this Workforce Equity Initiative, looking at those full-time jobs that pay that 30% above the regional living wage, it's going to be a hurdle, but if we can get people on that pathway, I think that is so important. And making certain to look at acceleration strategies. Dr. Zamani-Gallaher, you talked about stackable credentials; stackable credentials are *so* important, and we need to make certain that people can get in, they can get to a job, and then they can come back and they can continue on with their education. So, I think equity overall, we have to examine the research. We have to examine the data to make certain that we are serving people of color within our institutions.

**Eboni Zamani-Gallaher:**

Now that's really good news, because as someone who is very much focused on centering equity, we are very honored to have you as our guests. And we really appreciate you sharing your insights and the good news that we are at least moving in the direction of broadening participation, of providing additional on-ramps to degrees, as well as gainful employment for diverse sectors of Illinois' populace. And so, I want to thank you again for sharing your thoughts, your wisdom, and giving us, again, insights on issues related to workforce equity initiatives. Thank you so much. You guys are doing impressive work and we are so honored to have you as our featured guests, and we want to thank you again for being with us today to share your insights on issues related to workforce equity initiatives.

If you want to learn more about equity-minded approaches, as well as the initiatives of what we talked about today, please feel free to take a look and visit

the Illinois Community College Board site, in particular the Illinois Workforce Equity Initiative.org site, as well as Illinois Central College's site to learn more about their new equity initiatives as well. Again, Dr. Ali and Jennifer Foster have been our guest today, and we really appreciate your time and your efforts.

**Jennifer Foster:** Thank you.

**Rita Ali:** Thank you.

**Sal Nudo:** Tune in next time for the Democracy's College podcast, when Nolan L. Cabrera joins Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher to talk about various topics such as critically examining whiteness and explaining and addressing racism; attempts to dismantle race-conscious forms of affirmative action; the politics of identity and pedagogy; and the coalescing that's taking place by students of color, in response to current challenges. Dr. Cabrera is an associate professor of educational policy studies and practice at the University of Arizona.

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