

# Democracy's College, Episode 51

## Strategies to Cultivate a Foster-Friendly Culture on Community College Campuses

**Host Sal Nudo:** Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in 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](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Chequita Brown of OCCRL talks with Kate Danielson of the organization Foster Progress, as well as with Anna Wandtke and Tricia Wagner of Rock Valley College in Rockford, Illinois. The group will discuss how to cultivate a foster-friendly culture at Illinois community colleges.

**Chequita Brown:** Hello and thank you for joining us. My name is Chequita Brown, your host for this episode of the Democracy's College podcast. Today we will talk about what it means to cultivate a foster-friendly culture on community college campuses. I am so excited to have with me three amazing women, Kate Danielson, Anna Wandtke, and Tricia Wagner. But before we get started with our discussion, let's take a moment to have the ladies introduce yourselves. Let's start with you, Kate.

**Kate Danielson:** Hi, thanks for having me. My name is Kate Danielson, and I'm the founder and executive director of Foster Progress, where our mission is to help youth from foster care to become successful adults, especially by helping them to achieve in higher education. So, kind of our banner program is the mentoring and scholarship program where we're matching youth who are in high school, who have experienced foster care with a one-on-one mentor who helps them to finish high school strong and navigate that path to college. And they earn scholarship money through their participation in the program. They earn \$100 every time they meet with their mentor. So that's Foster Progress. We have a couple of other great programs too, but that was the one that got us started.

**Anna Wandtke:** My name is Anna Wandtke, and I'm the Perkins coordinator at Rock Valley College. The Perkins grant is a federal grant for career and technical education, so we do a lot of things to ensure that we have equipment that is industry standard, that we're providing professional development for our CTE faculty. But the part that's near and dearest to my heart is that we have certain special populations that we are working to remove barriers so that they can access high-wage, high-demand jobs. And one of the



*From top left to right, Chequita Brown, Kate Danielson, Tricia Wagner, and Anna Wandtke*

special populations are students who have aged out of foster care, and to that end we have some amazing people who have been working in a work group in order to make these things happen. And Tricia is the leader of one of those groups.

**Tricia Wagner:** Hi, I'm Tricia Wagner. I am the director of adult education, so I oversee the English as a second language programs, adult basic education and GED preparation, adult secondary, and some transition programs. I think I've been on the Perkins group for the last eight years, and maybe about five years ago, four years ago, I took the lead of Annas's subcommittee, serving individuals with experience in foster care.

**Chequita Brown:** Great, thank you for those introductions. And I am so excited about this conversation with you all today because this is such an important topic, and I know that this content will be a great resource for our listeners. I want to jump back into something Kate mentioned. You talked about the work that you're doing with Foster Progress, and I know you have made some great strides in the Chicago area just with the work that you're doing. But what I want to know is why do you feel like the work with Foster Progress is overlapped with education and students going to college? Why is earning a college education so important for foster youth?

**Kate Danielson:** That's such a great question. The outcomes for youth as they age out of foster care are typically pretty poor. We're finding that much higher proportions of this population end up experiencing homelessness and unemployment and incarceration, among some other really difficult circumstances. So, a college education, I believe, is still the best way in our society for students to have that economic mobility and to become independent and successful adults. And yet, it's a really difficult journey and it's not one that we are meant to travel on our own. You know, finishing high school, getting into college, pursuing that postsecondary degree, it's not a solo activity. I have high school students now, my own children are in high school. And I'm doing *a lot* to help them navigate this in terms of going to college fairs and going on college visits and lots of conversations about what do you want to be? What do you want to pursue? What do you want to study? And so, for youth-in-care, they oftentimes don't have that person, like in a in a typical family, you know, caring, trusted adult who is having those conversations on a regular basis starting early and then seeing them through. There's just so much to do. There are so many forms to fill out, applications. And it's complicated.

Even as I was starting Foster Progress and learning all the ins and outs of dealing with the taxes and the IRS and financial aid and these institutions, it was a lot to learn for me as a woman with a master's degree who, you know, English is my primary language and I had a typical family growing up. So, it's a lot for me to learn myself. And to expect that foster youth with not much of a social network or a supportive family structure would be able to do it on their own. That's just asking too much of them. That's why Foster Progress is so important.

**Chequita Brown:** You brought up a great point. I remember just being a first gen struggling with trying to navigate college and understanding how to college and the benefit of having those resources in addition to family. And so, I completely understand that. I would imagine that, Tricia, you and Anna have encountered students who struggled with understanding how to navigate college life. And so, I would love for you all to talk about this connection between the work Kate is doing with Foster Progress and even students in the community at large. Where does Rock Valley come in with that? We have a nonprofit and we have a community college. Where does this connection come in at with what you're trying to accomplish for college students with youth-in-care experience?

**Tricia Wagner:** Sure. So, I think that seeing the GED adult basic ed, ESL populations, you know, one of our jobs is to make sure that they don't just get those skills, but that they are prepared to transition to postsecondary if they would like and see some success in postsecondary. And so, we're in the situation often of working with students who don't have some of those built-in supports and structures that Kate was referring to that others may have. And so, the idea of someone struggling because of barriers or because of lack of preparedness or just because of life situations isn't new to us. Embracing the individuals who have experience in foster care is very natural as a way to try to help individuals in our community connect with postsecondary [education].

I remember when our vice president, Amanda Smith, originally was forming these subcommittees. This is years and years ago when she asked me to take the lead. I remember having a wonderful conversation about, wouldn't it be great if we could just cast the vision that individuals with experience in foster care, if it's recent, if it's been a while, they can find their way to our institution and they can go from care to college. They can go from a place where there are not a lot of safety nets, not a lot of options, and they can find themselves in training programs and transfer programs. Community college offers so much in terms of supportive programs that sort of shepherd students through the program and then help them with employment at the end. And I just remember getting this great vision. Of course, at the time I think I was thinking a lot about if there were youth in our GED program or in our ASL program as well, you know, that had experience in foster care. But just thinking about how marvelous it would be to go from the place where they are to a place where they can be self-sustaining or family-sustaining in a relatively short period of time, a semester to a year, you know. Just imagining that option being presented to them and our college being able to come around them while they make that journey and then finding themselves in a place where they do have the safety net, they do have the support.

**Chequita Brown:** That is great. And you also talked about how sometimes our students with foster care backgrounds could be right under our nose and we don't even know it. And so just being aware of some of those challenges that they would face, but also how our resources could best benefit them to really increase educational attainment in their pursuit for college and career success.

I want to jump into something that Anna mentioned when you gave your introduction. You said, as the Perkins coordinator, you work with "special populations" to help them access high-skill, high-demand, high-wage jobs. For our listeners who may not be familiar with that language, can you explain what is meant by a special population? And what is the benefit or the importance of those high-skill, high-demand, high-wage jobs, specifically for special populations like college students with foster care experience?

**Anna Wandtke:** Absolutely. So, under the Perkins V law, there are nine different special populations. And these are groups of people who traditionally have had barriers in their way to accessing high-wage, high-demand jobs. And that differs, Chequita, by area. So, part of what Perkins has to do is we have to do a comprehensive local-needs assessment. We need to determine what those high-wage, high-demand jobs are for our area. So, at different places in Illinois, they may have different high-wage, high-demand jobs. But in our area it's manufacturing, it's health care. There are a variety of them and these special populations, they range from students who were single parents to English language learners. Kind of one that maybe is less coming to the top of people's head are students who are nontraditional by gender. So, for example, females going into occupations where their gender is less than 25% of the folks who are in that field. So, it could be female welders, it could be male respiratory therapists. So, there are several of

them and one of the populations is the students aging out of foster care, and that's one of the ones that was added most recently. That's not one of the original populations. I believe that was added in 2019, so foster care and homeless, students experiencing both of those. Those were the recent additions.

And part of what we have to do is we have to gather data - we're mandated to gather data on the students that we have that fall into these populations. How many do we have? And we have certain performance indicators that we need to meet as far as success for these students, as far as completions, as far as the percentage of nontraditional students going into the different programs. So, yeah, it's a *great* part of the Perkins grant that they're so invested in equity. Not that our campus needed to be forced, but it really pushes the needle on making sure that students with these special needs *get* these special needs and get the funding to ensure that those barriers are removed for them.

**Chequita Brown:** Thank you for giving us that foundational information because I think that's important as we jump into the depth of what we want to talk about today, which is cultivating this foster friendly campus culture, and what does that really mean for not only the faculty, the staff, but the college students who have foster care experience that would be on our campus. And so, can you talk about what does it mean to have a foster-friendly campus culture and why is this necessary for students who have foster care backgrounds? Kate, do you want to jump in?

**Kate Danielson:** Yeah. So, recently, I think this was in 2021, Judy Havlicek, Amy Dworsky, and Elissa Gitlow published a [study](#), a research brief about how we can improve the postsecondary educational outcomes of students in foster care in community colleges. And one of the main findings that they published was about how college students really want their community college, their institutions to know about them and their particular needs. And to just be prepared to be able to support them better. And so Rock Valley and, specifically Tricia, reached out to Foster Progress for, I think initially you just had some questions maybe about like students that you knew of, and then I let her know that we offer these trainings and she took me up on it. So we just finished yesterday, the third of three trainings with Rock Valley folks. And I was just so impressed with them because they're clearly a group of people that's really dedicated to learning and equipping themselves to be as supportive as possible to all of these special populations and foster youth in particular. So we did three trainings and the hope is that this will give them some context for what foster youth have been through, and then some of the best practices that we recommend for how to best support them while they're in college and how to make sure that they not only can enter into the college setting, but that they can succeed and then, ultimately, graduate or earn some kind of a certificate or transfer on to a four-year institution.

**Tricia Wagner:** Yeah and just adding on to that, I remember when I first reached out to Kate, I had heard about the mentorship program that they offer. And so, I was just curious about, like, 'Oh, you know, if we run across someone, what are the guidelines?' Just that kind of thing. You know, she kind of educated me about her services, the scholarships, the advocacy, their work, and then staff development. I have an e-mail from Kate that says we have these three trainings helping serve foster youth with trauma-informed care. This promoting the success of foster youth in postsecondary and then financial aid for individuals with experience in foster care. And I just about fell out of my chair because I just thought this is *exactly* what we need. Those topics are going to hit all of the high notes for what we're trying to do to wrap our heads around how we can make our community college a welcoming and supportive environment for this specific special population.

**Chequita Brown:** So if, let's say, a college or a community college was looking to implement strategies to create this culture that's friendly for students with foster care experience, what should or could they do to cultivate that type of environment on campus? Based off of what you all are doing over at Rock Valley, what are some tips?

**Tricia Wagner:** Well, you know, it's really wonderful to have the Perkins because it gives us a structure and some funding backing and just the ability to have a focus on these special populations. I think it's easy, without that focus, it's easy to say, 'Oh, we know some students are underprepared. What are we going to do as an institution?' And then you have really general strategies but maybe not something that really hits a particular population. So, the fact that we can focus in on specific populations is really wonderful.

I think the education piece is really important because of our foster youth group, there's actually a number of us that have some sort of connection with foster care. My father was adopted and in foster care. We have a staff member who fostered children. She's fostered many, many children as she's raised her family. So we have some individuals with some experience. But whenever it comes down to, okay, let's see how we can help these students succeed in postsecondary, we really needed some teaching. So, we need teaching on these topics that Kate presented.

We needed to connect with our local foster care, foster youth serving agencies, which was huge. They're kind of our lighthouses now to say, 'Okay, this is where you need to head. This is what our needs are. This is how we can partner.' And those agencies, just to kind of name them: We have the National Youth Advocate Program in Rockford. Of course, DCFS is a player. Lutheran Social Services and Children's Home & Aid, and thankfully, we have them. We have an agency through, I believe it's through NIU, the RACM, the Rockford Area Case Management Initiative. It's a wonderful group that provides training and professional development on particular topics about how to improve, align, make more efficient case-management services throughout many, many social service organizations in Rockford. And I approached the leader of that organization to say, 'Hey, is there any chance you guys could ever do something on foster youth? We just really need to learn and they were wonderful. They took us up on that and provided a community of practice panel focusing on foster care. So, they invited these agencies and we had a wonderful discussion. Not only did we learn from them, but we also are now connected with them. So, I think that that education connection to your local service providers is really important.

And then when it comes down to actually implementing the strategies, we found, and this is true probably for many populations in Perkins, but having active communication with faculty and staff about the initiatives that are taking place, about responses. Data tracking is super important because we need to identify individuals. And then having the services identified, you know, your college may offer lots and lots and lots and lots of services, but having them actually identified for, okay, these are the services that we think could really help someone who is aging out of foster care, has experience in foster care. And so, when we do come across that student there's a plan. We don't just generally refer them to the general services, but we can say, 'Hey, this is what know you may benefit from the most,' and we can sort of provide more informed, intelligent navigation for them.

**Chequita Brown:** That was *really* good. And you said so much in that conversation piece in response to that question. And one of the things I appreciate the most about your approach is the individualized. Really targeting youth-in-care to provide services that would meet them.

One of the things that, you know, having worked in higher ed, it's very easy to kind of lump all first-gen, low-income together. And if we're not careful, we will try to meet them based off of what traditional first-gen ... you know what I mean? And we know that those needs are *completely* different. And so many things can get missed if we only use those larger, broader labels to support our youth-in-care on campus. And so I'm curious: With the work that you all are doing, you talked about communicating with staff and faculty. How receptive have they been, or are they, to this idea of we want Rock Valley to be known as the place where we encourage and strengthen and support current and former youth-in-care, their college and aspirations. We want to be that place. Was that well received?

**Tricia Wagner:** I mean, they are enthusiastic. They are supportive, they are participatory, they have great ideas. One interesting outcome that I didn't plan on from the presentations that Kate did is it just gave us the opportunity to put in our Rock Valley Daily News e-mail multiple times, hey, we've got this Foster Progress organization that's going to come and provide teaching, and just announcing that that was going on created a flood of emails from our faculty to me saying this is so cool, I'm so glad you're doing this. Have you seen this article? And it sort of created a buzz or a conversation. We had one faculty member join our committee because she was excited. She had, at kind of the same time, come across the need and was very interested as well. But it kind of created an inroad for that.

Having an active, I guess active activities going on on campus gives a forum for the conversations to happen. So that was really, really cool. So, I think some of what we can do is just kind of keep the conversation going. We've got a few fun plans up our sleeve for what we're going to be doing over the next year or so. We've planned out about that far, but it's been really wonderful. And, of course, the staff, and, of course, the administration are also extremely supportive of Perkins and supportive of these initiatives. They love the equity angle, of course, that this brings. So, we're very excited to see the response that we've gotten. The college as a whole wants to be an institution that embraces individuals with experience in foster care.

**Chequita Brown:** Now, what about the students? Because working with youth-in-care, and I know Kate can attest to this too, sometimes just being open to receive support is a struggle or even the idea of self-disclosing. That foster care background is a challenge for some. And so, when we talk about creating this foster-friendly environment, part of how it will work is the students must be willing to, in some ways, identify with that label. And so, how are the students responding to this idea? And what would campuses need to do to increase their comfort with wearing that label proudly, and getting the support that they need in order to self-disclose that information to get the support that they need?

**Tricia Wagner:** Yeah, I'll start off by saying a couple of things and then we have something really cool that Anna is going to share. But I would say, Rock Valley is just now implementing CRM - customer relations management software that will help us in many ways with recruitment, with tracking, who our individuals are, having some processes that can take place when a student does self-identify or disclose at the time of admission or that kind of thing. I would say colleges having the ability to kind of find the students is really important because they don't always speak up and say, you know. We have many kinds of anecdotal stories about having more students in a population than we knew.

The other thing is with our foster care serving agencies in the area, one of my goals is to build such a working relationship with them that we kind of know them and maybe their youth, or at least through them their youth, so that when their students come to us, there's already a relationship, like, they know RVC like we're part of that extended family. So, I think that is going to help with self-disclosure because

students will feel like they'll be delivered to an institution that they're already familiar with, they already will have heard about, they already will have known some things about it based on the discussions that may have been happening in their foster home or with their caseworker.

**Anna Wandtke:** Yeah and I wanted to share an e-mail that just came at 10:30 last night, and it was from one of our people who work at the foundation, which provides scholarships and emergency funding for students. And she has been attending the Foster Progress sessions, and she sent an e-mail just saying how grateful she was for Kate's teaching and all of this and how it really raised her awareness. And she said she's not sure if it's just because her awareness is raised or if this is in fact the first time that in her review of scholarship applicants, she had someone disclose that they were from a foster care background.

So, if you don't mind, I'll just read the quote that she provided from the student. So, the student said, "It would really help me out because I am a child in foster care, and to see that I've accomplished such measures would not only shine light on me, but show other kids who are a part of the system that they are able to have dreams and desires, and that they are able to achieve them." So, I mean, what an amazing testament to what can happen, right? If a student has that wraparound support, has the financial safety net that can allow them to be able to pursue their dreams. So, I mean, that was just a kind of a divine coincidence that that came when it did, but I wanted to share that. Particularly with you, Kate, because what you're doing is making a difference. And it's just so rewarding to hear.

**Kate Danielson:** That's amazing. That happened so fast. What a coincidence. That's great.

**Chequita Brown:** And I love the timing of it, right? We did not set this up. [Laughter]

And I think it's a great segue into a question that I think it's necessary to ask because, Kate, you're doing this work with Rock Valley. You've been doing this work in the community for a while. You are a fierce advocate and just your work speaks for itself. But are there opportunities to partner with other community colleges? And what does this training, you know, the benefit of this training, how can this continue to spread throughout the state of Illinois, not *only* at community colleges, but maybe potentially at four-year institutions? What's the value there? Can you speak to that?

**Kate Danielson:** Yeah, I think there's tremendous value. You know, you had asked Tricia and Anna, like, how the faculty responded at Rock Valley, and I think their experience has been pretty typical. When people think about foster kids, they usually think about little kids. They think about children. I taught a workshop once to some caseworkers, and we brought some adults who had experienced foster care when they were kids to share their experiences. And one of the caseworkers said, 'I'm so glad you guys came. I feel embarrassed admitting this, but I never think about the fact that these kids are going to be adults someday.' And I was just like, oh no! This is something that we need to change.

You know, I'm thinking for my children all the time. About what they're going to become when they're adults and preparing them for adulthood. And so, I think that's something that we need to change in the system. It's like we can't *just* keep these kids safe for now. We have to be thinking about their future, and so I say that in the context of, you know, the higher education institutions, like, I think that we forget that these children are now, you know, they're becoming adults and they're on our campuses and they've been through a lot, you know, a lot of loss, a lot of trauma. And if we can get the word out and inform the college faculty and staff about these young people, some of their common experiences, the ways

that trauma impacts them and their educational outcome, then we can better equip our institutions to care for them and to and to help them succeed.

There's some really important efforts going on and conversations going on right now. Foster Progress is pretty small, and so we have had just kind of one-off opportunities like this one with Rock Valley to teach and to get in front of their audiences. But I'm always trying to take every opportunity from every college or university that's interested. As soon as foster youth are brought to their attention, like, without any variation, like, every single time, they're *very* willing and excited to learn and want to help. They want to learn, they want to help this population succeed. And so, I think there is a need for it and a desire for it.

A couple of years ago there was a bill passed that now requires all public colleges to have what's called a house liaison, and that is a person who is the liaison for both homeless and foster youth. Ever since that bill passed, and then those house liaisons started to be identified at these different institutions, I've definitely seen an increase in the desire for training and education on this population. So, for example, there's a big conference every summer called College Changes Everything. Usually when I teach at that conference I'll have, like, 10 people participate in my workshops, but this year it was 60 people. So, I just think this population is becoming sort of elevated in the mind of the faculty and staff on campuses. So there's a new awareness and a new desire for that training.

**Chequita Brown:** Thanks for sharing that, and I agree: There is a heightened awareness around this population, and it's necessary because for so long youth-in-care have been an invisible population on campus. And so, it's definitely necessary to have these conversations and to provide the resources that faculty, staff, practitioners, and even caseworkers, right, that they could use as something to go to, as you know, let me help this student. How can I help this youth transition from care to college, career, and beyond? And the resources are there, but sometimes people don't know where to look, and so this work is important.

We also know that research indicates that youth-in-care are more likely to matriculate at community colleges at a higher rate than four-year institutions, and with that comes its own challenges because most community colleges, they typically don't offer housing, and with foster youth that are transitioning from care, housing can definitely be an issue, right? And so, how can community colleges leverage trainings like this to increase the awareness of some of those needs to support students, and what are some of those potential barriers they need to be aware of when we're saying, 'Hey, come here, we have this foster-friendly campus.' *But* we know you might be facing this challenge, this challenge, this challenge. So, can you talk about some of those challenges and what community colleges need to do to be *prepared* as we are learning to identify these students more and more?

**Anna Wandtke:** Sure, I can talk about that. So, yes, as you said, we don't have dorms at Rock Valley College, but I think that in a way dorms are not necessarily a solution because as Kate has made us well aware, there are breaks and there are summers and then where are these students going to go, you know, the dorms are not available to them at that time. So, I really think that community colleges are just a fantastic platform for these students to step out into their next best life because as they have housing needs, we have a homeless liaison on campus who's working with the community here in Rockford; we have the continuum of care, and so that she's connecting with students who have housing needs with maybe a more permanent solution, not just sort of a stopgap measure during the semester, but providing them with housing assistance that can then be something that they're able to grow from.



In the same way our campus doesn't have childcare on campus. I wish we did, but what we do have is a working relationship with the local YWCA and their childcare solutions, so we're able to refer students over there and they're able to work with them about what the realistic childcare needs are in their lives and what supports they may already have in place. Through the YWCA they may be able to get a family friend or an aunt reimbursed for taking care of their children through the YWCA. So, even though we don't have the fix for it, as a community college we are *connected* to our community and we work with our community for the benefit of our students.

Even just going on an academic level, I feel like at the community college we are connected with business and industry leaders. All of the career and technical education programs have advisory committees. And so those community businesses are helping to shape our curriculum to make sure that our students are stepping into entry-level jobs prepared and with the skills that they need. They're partnering with them to create work-based learning internships. All of those things that are going to be so critical for these students to be able to have those skills to step into job security and job stability that will maybe provide them with a way to forge their own path forward.

One of the things that we hear at Rock Valley College a lot is we are this community's college, and I think that that is something that's very special about our college; that we are embedded in our community and we are looking out on our campus for the ways that we personally can help with things like a food pantry. We recently started a career class where students can get clothing for interviews or internships or job shadows, things like that. You know, emergency funding, bus passes, gas cards, things like that. So, we do what we can on campus, but then we rely on the folks in our community to help us extend that care.

**Kate Danielson:** Yeah, I think all of the things that Anna said are so important. Some of the other barriers that research and personal experience have shown to be true for this population in general is just the lack of support that these students have and the fact that they're navigating this road on their own. I think that one of the recommendations I made to Rock Valley and to every college that I speak to is to just be really proactive about their communication. This is true for many populations, not just foster youth, but just to be really proactive with their communication around things like what supports are available on campus, be it tutoring and academic support or financial, that kind of thing. And so, putting the information in front of the students rather than making it difficult for them to find, making them ask for it, is so important, and putting it in a way that is easily digestible and understandable.

Especially in financial aid, it's so easy for us, who have been working in the field for a long time to know the language, use the acronyms and the technical terms. But the first time you're going through applying for financial aid as a student, it takes a while to understand those terms. And so if we can, on a regular basis, be really proactive about making sure students understand what they're getting into financially and academically in all these different ways, I think that is really meaningful in helping students succeed on campus.

**Chequita Brown:** That was really good. Anna, something you mentioned in regards to the career tech ed path, these high-skill, high-wage jobs, and even going back to faculty, staff, people in the community, those partnerships. My thought is sometimes when we think college, the idea of earning a bachelor's degree, you know, go to the four-year or even go and earn an associate's degree. Those are the two things that tend to stick out in folks' minds when they say 'go to college.' But we know that there are *great* career and tech ed programs, especially [Anna] being a Perkins coordinator that students in youth

and individuals, adults returning, you know, after transitioning from career can transition into a new path within six to 24 months, potentially, and earn a *significant* increase in their income. I would like to spend a little time talking about some of the benefits to a career in tech ed programs for students who have foster care experience, and what does that mean? How can we leverage that short, quick program to help our students transition from foster care to career or get them to see the value in some of the programs that we're offering and not just focus on associate's degree or bachelor's degree. There are so many pathways to becoming a self-sustained, independent earner income post-foster care. So can you all talk about that and what we need to do to amplify, increase awareness about some of the benefits of career tech ed programs.

**Tricia Wagner:** Yeah, I can jump in for sure. We do of course have lots of students who transfer at Rock Valley, but the programs that are in career tech are *highly* supported, and in some ways, I think it's kind of a marketing challenge because students don't know what they don't know. And so they may not be aware of the benefits of that short-term training. But I kind of feel like short-term training, in a way, is a community college's wheelhouse. The number of programs we have, you put it so well, Chequita, just six to 24 months and you could have this kind of life-altering career, you know, opportunity.

One example is the WEI program, the Workforce Equity Initiative, which focuses on career tech areas. Some examples that she's doing: our medical billing and coding, mechatronics, CNA, and she has others. But while students are in the program, if they're eligible for the program, they're eligible to receive weekly stipends, food and gas vouchers, housing assistance, childcare assistance, completion stipends along with other things. The tuition is covered, she's able to provide supplies. So, there are sources of funding that are allowing students to very, very easily enter those short-term programs.

You're talking about barriers that disconnect between where the student is and getting them into that program either because of lack of awareness or, as Kate was describing, just lack of support for navigating. But a lot of the programs that are similar to that include case management, they include career navigation, they include job-placement services, So, you know, the dream is somebody enters the program, is supported while they're going through the program in such a way that they can complete, and then they're receiving assistance, finding employment. I think one of our big jobs is to make sure students are aware of opportunities like that. And that the pathway from non-involvement to enrollment is as seamless as possible and as smooth as possible with staff support.

But that's just one example. There's many community colleges, or all of us pretty much, have ICAPS programs, which is a program that kind of marries adult education, GED, and ESL with a certificate and degree programs, so you have a co-located academic instructor that's providing academic support and there are wraparound support. And then of course the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the WIOA programs, the one-stop centers, the Illinois work net centers. They provide an enormous amount of case-management tuition, other supports for individuals who are seeking training to leading to careers.

So, I think part of it is simply a communication issue that we just need to make sure that individuals we're working with are aware of these opportunities. We did a focus group, this wasn't with the foster care population, but it was with students with housing insecurity or low income. One of the things they told us that was a barrier for them about entering community colleges was just, 'I don't think I know how to get into the door of the institution. How do I do that? How do I go from where I am to enrolled.' So part of the work of Perkins and the institution and many, many wonderful people at Rock Valley who are

working toward change is making those inroads happen so that there is an on-ramp to community colleges.

**Kate Danielson:** Yeah, I would just add to that with my experience with this population. In Illinois, youth age out of foster care at age 21, typically, and that deadline is kind of looming for all of the teenagers that I work with, and it's difficult for them to invest now in something like a four-year degree where they're not going to be really seeing the fruit of that labor for several years. And so, a really straight path, and a shorter path, to a high-earning job would just be, I think, very interesting to a lot of kids. And it's something I'm learning from Rock Valley because my expertise is in the four-year world, so I'm learning from Rock Valley as much as they're learning from me.

**Anna Wandtke:** I would just mention as well that one of the great things about career and technical education is a lot of times there are stackable credentials. So, for example, you could start out with a very quick path to a CNA certificate and then you could be *working* in the field and then the hospital system very well may pay for you to go back and get your nursing degree. Or, if not, you'd probably qualify for Veolia funding, which could pay for your nursing degree. So, there's great opportunities to get in and out in the working field quickly, but that's not the ceiling. There's places to go from there. That's one step along your possible path.

**Tricia Wagner:** That's a really great point. One of our engineering professors has said that she's seeing students get their very, very basic certification and then spend some time working, and then they're in the place of employment and they're saying seeing someone else do a job. They're like, 'I could do that.' So they go back and get that training. And so setting up students in those systems so that they have the opportunity and the exposure to advancement. Hopefully they'll be lifelong learners and they'll keep coming to see us as they want, for their training.

**Kate Danielson:** Yeah, I love that.

**Chequita Brown:** I love that too. And the idea of being lifelong learners and stacking those credentials and to your point, a lot of folks don't know that that is an option. And you bring up a great point in regards to advertisement and increasing that awareness and just wondering, you know, when we're looking at a population like youth-in-care on campus, what should community colleges consider when communicating and advertising these services and support, specifically to ensure that population knows this is what I have available to me, this is what I can take advantage of without putting them on the spot. But how do we communicate to them? Commercials communicate to the people they want to attract, right? So how do we communicate to college students, former or current, that we have the services that you need?

**Tricia Wagner:** Okay, so here's the dream. One of the things that we've learned from our foster care agencies is that in many cases it's a very good idea to reach out to youth who are in middle school. *Very young* because there may be a point of receptivity there, not that there wouldn't be later, but that might be a good time. So, one of the plans that we have for this next fiscal year, fiscal year '24, is we're going to develop some marketing materials that are specifically designed for foster youth-in-care, foster parents, and foster care serving agencies so that students right away, at that time, can understand what the community college is, how welcome they are to come here, what they have to offer.

One of our employees, our GED coordinator, Lori, has experience as a foster parent. And she was aware that many students who are removed from the home don't leave with much more than a garbage bag with their clothes, and so she said what if we could find some way to get them backpacks so that they can have an RVC backpack that the foster care agency can deliver to them at that time and they can have that backpack. We kind of want to involve the college community in this. We want to do a drive to have people donate Rock Valley notebooks and pens and just a few specifically chosen goodies to go in that backpack as well as information about what the college is.

One of our local agencies, we reached out to them when we got the idea. We're learning that the steps here, the first step, is to go to them and say, 'Hey, is this a good idea?' And they said yes, that would be wonderful. There's a lot of foster care families have a family discussion time where they talk about certain topics and the agencies provide activities, and they said maybe there could be an activity book about careers. So, they've given us a few ideas of things that could be supplied. So it's a little bit of a work in progress about what *exactly* is going to go in that backpack, but we would be delivering these backpacks full of information, full of love from Rock Valley College to these youth, to the agencies so that they can deliver them to the students at a point in time when they need them. And the dream is, you know, I'm saying, okay, this is FY24. So in FY30 I *cannot* wait to see the students who come to Rock Valley College because they got this backpack.

**Kate Danielson:** That's so great. I love that. What you guys are describing Rock Valley doing is what we call in the in the college-access world creating a college-going culture. And it's really important at a young age; it's like a recommendation for high school. I was visiting my son's high school the other day, and every teacher had on their classroom door their name, the room number, and then also what college they went to and what they studied.

**Tricia Wagner:** Oh cool.

**Kate Danielson:** It's just kind of putting in the forefront of everyone's mind all your teachers went to college and creating the awareness of what the different options are and creating sort of this expectation, this is what we do here. We go to college. And I think it's really neat that you guys are actually doing that in a foster care agency like that. You're looping them into this idea of creating a college-going culture for their entire foster care agency, and then within their families as well. So you're getting your brand in front of them, but then also just, more generally, the idea that, hey, the next step for you after high school is college, potentially. Because so few students who have experienced foster care actually have someone to say that to them.

You know, there are a lot of biases against foster youth and what they're capable of. I just talk to so many. I met this woman who is such a *phenomenal* professional, *smart*, put-together person. She is a lawyer. She teaches law in a law school. She also runs her own little nonprofit on the side. Just really a high achiever. And she grew up in foster care. And when she describes what she was like as a teenager, no one could have predicted who she would ultimately become because she had experienced a lot of trauma, a lot of loss, a lot of hardship. Her family was homeless for a long time. As a teenager, she describes getting into fights, running away from home, getting kicked out, failing school. And so to know her now, and to think what she was like back then is just such a lesson for us - those of us who hold the keys to opportunity to make sure that we're offering those keys to everyone because you just never know. The most problematic child in foster care might end up being the next great lawyer who's turning around. And this woman, too, she donates care packages to our students now who are in college and she

sends them all these snacks and little gifts and also a note to be encouraging to them and say I know what it's like - I was in your shoes. And it's just so meaningful. So, I think it's really great that you all are creating that college-going culture for the agencies, the families, the whole community. That's really cool.

**Chequita Brown:** And not only just creating the college-going culture, but now we're saying when you get here, we have a campus-friendly culture that welcomes you. Because it's one thing to say we welcome you here. It's another to say now that you here, we got your back. We want to provide the resources for you because there's nothing worse than inviting someone over for dinner and you didn't prepare the meal. [Laughs]

**Tricia Wagner:** Yeah. A couple of things that are very cool. One of the ideas we have for something to put in the backpack is involving some student clubs to write letters to them. Because it is true that there's stigma. Adult education students also have a stigma where they absolutely are very little different than most college students because they lack a GED or came with an English language need. They're working so hard in adult education to gain those basic skills. And in many cases, lots of community colleges have these stories, but they'll come to college more prepared. But there's this stigma, a GED student or an ESL student, you know? But we know it's not true, so the students who are at Rock Valley College, even if they don't have experience in foster care, I'm sure they can tell students inspiring stories about how *they* came to college, how *they* connected with community college, how possible it was. And so having those notes and then our institution is also talking about peer mentors, those kinds of things embedded. Tutors. There's ways that once a foster care individual has entered the college that they will find staff support and peer support.

**Chequita Brown:** This has truly been a rich conversation. As we prepare to wrap up, I would like for you to think about some closing thoughts you would want to share with our listeners today, specifically those who are saying, you know what, I want that at our institution. And it might be an advisor that's listening who may feel like I don't even know where to start. I'm just an academic advisor, but I have these students I need to serve. Or someone like Kate who is community-based and saying I need to send students to partner with this institution, but I don't know where to start. How can we create this culture at our community colleges in Illinois? And not just create it, but sustain it, and make sure that it is thriving. So what thoughts would you offer to a listener who's saying, okay, I hear you, but what can I do?

**Kate Danielson:** I think it takes having at least one person on campus like a Tricia or an Anna who is dedicated to this particular cause or population. And it takes that person just coordinating some things like trainings and on-campus programming and the communication that's going out. It's work. The relationship-building, the activity-planning. It takes time and it takes a specific, dedicated person, and so that's why I think it was so important that that legislation passed that said that we need a liaison on every college campus. It doesn't apply to private colleges. So, for those folks who are listening, I would just say even if the law doesn't apply to you, you can still do that. You can dedicate at least one person to the particular population.

And then I would also say, there's turnover on campuses and in agencies and things like that. And so, it's just making sure that you're doing some succession planning and passing the baton on so that when one cohort leaves, the next one is ready to take over the reins. So, it's people. The work takes people doing it.

**Anna Wandtke:** And I would say that we've been so fortunate that the institution has really wholeheartedly been behind the Perkins special-populations efforts that we've put together. Early on, we cobbled together a group of people who had shown interest, and we did a professional-development session that was mandatory, where we basically introduced the different special populations and talked to them about what the barriers are, what kind of support would be helpful, what the numbers were in Illinois, what the numbers were on our campus, just to kind of get that awareness. And then from that point of just kind of providing the initial information, we had people who were like, I want to be part of this.

And so then it's *not* just one person. Heaven forbid, if I was not able to show up to work tomorrow, I know that there's a whole group of people who have grown over time, and they can continue this work. They can keep it going. It's great because Perkins has that equity piece so embedded in it, so whoever would step into my role would find themselves having to wrangle with this pretty quickly, but I think it's so important to have a wide base of support, and that really is just a word of mouth, inviting people to be part. Do you know anybody who might be willing, who might be interested? And people start coming out of the woodwork. Because I think people have passions that they want to invest their time and effort into, and I think we're giving them opportunities to find that space for *you*, find the people and the students that you're passionate about their success and finding solutions for problems, removing barriers and finding supports that can just enable their success.

**Tricia Wagner:** My advice would be call Kate. [Laughs] Yes, call Kate. And find your local agencies and get connected with them. If you have that point person like Kate's saying, campuses *can* have those people. I think they are our teachers. They're our lighthouses. They are who we will rely on to make sure that we're doing a good job and doing things that they need us to.

**Chequita Brown:** Yes, call Kate. [Laughs]

**Kate Danielson:** Love it.

**Chequita Brown:** I echo that. 'Call Kate' needs to be a T-shirt. [Laughs] Because the work is great and the work that you all are doing, the partnership that just started with a phone call. It started with calling Kate. And we say that jokingly, but sometimes it's the simplest things that can have - it's that pebble in the pond that creates the greatest ripples. And so, the work that you all are doing with Foster Progress and Rock Valley is definitely commendable, and it serves as a blueprint for those who are interested.

So thank you, ladies, so much for sharing. We could continue to have this conversation. It could continue to go on and on because it's such a rich work. But we thank you so much for sharing with our audience today. Great conversation and we look forward to hearing about all the great outcomes that will emerge from this partnership that's already creating ripples in the field of education and child welfare. So thank you everyone for joining us today.

**Kate, Tricia, and Anna:** Thank you so much for having us, Chequita. Thank you. Thank you.

**Host Sal Nudo:** Background music for this podcast was provided by FASSounds from the website Pixabay. Thank you for listening, and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.