Democracy's College, Episode 56

The Use of OER as an Equity Initiative in Illinois Community Colleges

Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in the P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, OCCRL senior research assistant Nina Owolabi talks to several guests about the use of open educational resources, also known as OER, as an equity initiative in Illinois community colleges. In addition, OCCRL research assistant Aidana Sirgebayeva relates the findings of the OER research project that has been taking place at OCCRL for the last several years.

Nina Owolabi: Welcome to Democracy's College podcast with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. I am Nina Owolabi, senior research assistant with OCCRL, and I'm excited to host today's episode. This episode focuses on the use of open educational resources as an equity initiative within Illinois community colleges.

As many of you already know, open educational resources, also known as OER, are teaching, learning, and research materials that are available under an open-source or license agreement that allows for sharing, accessing, and repurposing for faculty and student needs. OER is not a new

concept and has a significant international history as a tool to make education accessible through no to low-cost materials. Some 20 years in, many community colleges see the value of OER to further equity, often elevating affordability of college course materials as critical to student success. OCCRL has been doing work over the last several years to better understand what OER is, its potential, and how it's showing up in the Illinois context, and now as we're closing out this project, thinking about where it can go.

So today, we are joined by an eclectic crew of folks representing different aspects of OER advocacy and really looking forward to a rich discussion, starting first with Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, the Renée and Richard Goldman Dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education and the *illustrious* former director of OCCRL. She is a foremost authority on community colleges, with much of her scholarship centering equitable participation in higher education, transfer, access and retention policies, minoritized student populations in marginalized institutional context, and racial equity and campus climate in postsecondary education pathways. She also oversaw the beginning of the OER project. Thank you, Dr., for being here.

Also, we have Magnus Noble. Magnus previously served as a student trustee at John A. Logan College, where he partnered with the John A. Logan College Foundation in creating a dedicated fund to assist students in purchasing their textbooks and course materials, and he served as vice chair of the Illinois Community College Board Student Advisory Committee. Thanks, Magnus.

And we have Heather Blicher. Heather is the director of the Community College Consortium for OER, or CCCOER, at Open Education Global. Her focus is to advance open education at community and technical colleges across North America, providing support and developing the next phase of open education innovation. She has 20-plus years of experience working in public and academic libraries, most recently working with open organ educational resources as an equity consultant and instructional designer focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And, fun fact, Heather first participated in a [podcast with me in 2020](#) as an OER librarian and is now the director of CCCOER, so this feels very much like a full-circle moment. Thank you so much for coming back.

And to round out our panel for today, we have Dr. Lorenzo Baber, who is the professor of higher education in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. He is also the director for OCCRL. Dr. Baber's scholarly interests broadly examine equity and social justice and postsecondary education. His research focuses include leadership within community college contexts, experiences of minoritized students and postsecondary STEM education, and the use of critical theory to inform higher education policies and practices.

So again, welcome, all, as we set the stage for our conversation today. If you could each maybe just take a moment or two to maybe share your connection to OER. And I think we can start first with Dr. Z-G.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you. Appreciate the invitation to participate. Always a pleasure to be at home with you all at OCCRL, mi familia. In terms of OER, a few years back, during my tenure at Illinois and with OCCRL, we wanted to take a look at what was, at that point, emerging in the state of Illinois, right? And so, to your earlier, you know, acknowledgement, Nina, it's not that this is something new. It's just that in the state of Illinois it was just becoming something that was

on the radar, and the attention that we were seeing paid to open education resources. It wasn't necessarily squarely placed at the community college sector, and so we wanted to take a look at that.

And so, at the time, as a part of an Illinois Community College Board grant that was funded through Perkins funds, we submitted a proposal; as a part of that proposal, we wanted to take a look at how do we broaden participation, access, and address issues of equity as it relates to the role of open education resources, and namely within Illinois CTE programs. Again, we understood that while this was taking place, it was largely four-year centric conversations within our state in terms of the campuses and what may have been trending, as well as a pattern of looking at what were maybe gen-ed courses or other types of courses, but not necessarily what might be within course maps of programs to study related to career and technical education.

Moving beyond that, we wanted to try to create a space to explore and to further our understanding, one of within the community college enterprise in Illinois community colleges. You know, what's that definition and understanding of OER? How do we think about it as a tool to mitigate issues of uneven access in terms of reducing costs for students, thinking about how not just to reduce, in some cases eliminate, costs if we can. Thinking through who was having access to these materials in terms of a differentiation that we were seeing based on proximity and cataloging in our library. Folks can speak more to that, those with expertise there. But again, what are the materials? To what extent are they provided in CTE in terms of content and materials? Who's accessing the materials? And what different levels of access are there based on different communities and resources within those communities? And when we say open educational resources, is that akin to open access? Because sometimes you can have what appears to be OER materials, but they might not still be accessible in some ways, right? So that could be because of copyright pieces with regard to who's prepared said materials with faculty and IP issues. There's also access cost sometimes. So open isn't legally accessible and open.

And then, which student populations? We were curious about the demographics of students in terms of who was benefiting or not, and their experiences with how they access the materials or what type of wraparound supports, particularly as we think about our library faculty and the management of those resources or the quality controls as well as the maintenance of the OER materials. And so again, it was an exploratory look, and it really was about getting baseline information within Illinois community colleges and largely around CTE.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you. I'll pass the mic over here to Dr. Baber, who ended up picking up the project.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, so I would say I came on board in the middle. So, I certainly appreciate Dr. Zamani-Gallaher and her vision for this project. You know, I didn't have a lot of knowledge about OER, open educational resources, in general, and then thinking about that as an equity tool. So, I think, again, Dr. Zamani-Gallagher just deserves great credit for her vision in terms of thinking about this concept as an equity tool and really shedding light on a hidden cost, a cost that we don't think about that does have implications for access to course material and equitable access to course materials. So, for me, it was just thinking about this from a new light, so I do appreciate it.

And then, you know, as we move forward with the project and the survey and the quantitative interviews, I was really intrigued by librarians as an example of leaders from the middle. So, we think about this concept of leading from the middle, and as we saw in some of our findings, librarians have this nuanced perspective from their position in the middle or upper-middle of that organization at the community college that intersects multiple subunits. Librarians stand between the nexus of student services and academic affairs and thinking about OER across that nexus where perhaps upper leaders or senior leaders in each of those areas don't have that nuanced perspective to make those connections. So I thought that was very interesting.

And then finally, the concept of the diffusion of innovation, which I hope we get a chance to talk about. I've never heard of the diffusion of innovation theory. I love it. I mean, we're doing a book group for OCCRL, we're doing a review of the original book because I think, not only for this project, I mean, when you think about early adopters, the laggards, but just in the concept of equity, I think this is a concept that has been underexplored. When we think about equity in general and how there are people who are leaders who take a chance as early adopters who think from an instinctive perspective. And there are leaders who wait for the results and then follow, right? But I think for me, it was interesting that most people who think they're early adopters are actually probably more in the middle, right? And I think that's a really constant around equity, like, what we think are early adopters are actually in the middle. And that those who are *truly* early adopters usually don't get the credit because they're typically at institutions or in units, that have to be creative, that have to be nuanced, and so their ideas kind of get co-opted by those who come in later as opposed to getting the credit and being authentic and matching the integrity of the early adopters throughout the process of equity. So I think this was a good example of that as well.

So again, great opportunity to learn as a scholar about a project as well as just thinking about theory and the ways in which theory can reflect practice and inform practice moving forward.

Nina Owolabi: Magnus, feel free to share your perspective of your connection to OER.

Magnus Noble: Well, OER is something I came into contact with as a student and as a student leader. It's had a great impact on students at my institution, and once I sort of found out what OERs we're all about, I used the leverage that I had as a student leader to sort of advocate on different levels with the Community College Board Student Advisory Committee. That was one of our main focuses over the last academic year with our student government at John A. Logan College. We appealed to faculty members and to college administration to find ways to not only make non-OER textbooks more affordable, for example, starting the book fund, as well as the implementation of OERs and sort of figuring out ways to help faculty members find out how they can make that work for them and their courses.

Additionally, serving as a student board member on the Illinois Board of Higher Education, some conversations I've had with other board members there about ways that we can work that in because the board of higher education not only overseas community colleges but universities as well in Illinois. So, we have this highly connected higher education system in Illinois that can really benefit and draw from one another's experiences.

I actually also had the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C., and advocate on a national level with the Association of Community College Trustees and talk about OERs there. Again, they have

had *such* a significant impact. There are several challenges surrounding them, but I really think that addressing those challenges will be much easier for students in the long run than continuing on with the traditional system of obtaining print or paid course materials and textbooks.

Nina Owolabi: Heather, go ahead.

Heather Blicher: So, I was a librarian when I first encountered OER, and so I've been one of those librarians working on the ground, kind of juggling everything that comes my way. You know, the reference desk, teaching instruction sessions, and then OER in addition to that. And so, over the years I have experienced a lot working with students and faculty. And now I have the privilege to be a part of the Community College Consortium for OER, which is a community of practice, and we're a part of the bigger nonprofit called Open Education Global. And so now I have the ability to work and support people from across North America, both U.S. and Canada, and provide professional development and opportunities for connection. And so, I'm really embracing that and really digging in and enjoying the ride because there's just so much out there that needs to be explored. And I've seen as a librarian in 2014 the focus of OER be completely on affordability to the move, rightfully so, to focus on equity and all of the things involved in that. And so, I'm really excited to be a part of the podcast. Thank you for inviting me back.

Nina Owolabi: Thanks, all. I want to turn the mic over to my colleague Aidana. Aidana, I definitely want to give you space to introduce yourself. Also share a bit about our study, some of our findings and things that we came to.

Aidana Sirgebayeva: Thank you, Nina. Hi, everyone. My name is Aidana. I'm a research assistant with OCCRL. This is my first project within OCCRL, Open Educational Resources. Very interesting project because I also study higher education for my Ph.D. degree.

So let me introduce you with the main findings of the OER project that OCCRL has led for the past four years. Within the research project, we have two main research questions we were looking for. So, the first one is how have institutions defined equity and what connections do they see with OER? And the second one was how are the community colleges elevating OER to support access to affordable campus materials in the effort to decolonize curriculums?

So, we have done this qualitative research, and the main findings of this study are, in brief, in three main categories. The first one, we have found that there is a varying degree of OER adoption in Illinois community colleges within each of them. And the second one is the faculty attitude toward OER was also very diverse, and it definitely impacted the adoption rate of OER with specific institutions. And the third one, we came up with the findings that surrounding ideological orientations and administrative influence, to what extent was OER implemented and adopted? And as Dr. Baber mentioned with the diffusion of innovation theory, it was either explored and implemented successfully or rather was staying in a stagnant state.

Nina Owolabi: So, we know that there's still more to be told, really, about OER practices. They're burgeoning in Illinois, but, you know, particularly with the establishment of the College Course Materials Affordability and Equitable Access Collaborative Study Act – lots of words there – but essentially was an affordability study that really elevated OER as this viable option to replace expensive course materials. And there's also, I think, current legislation that's working its way

through the state Senate that would establish a $3 million OER grant program, which is exciting, but still there's just multiple blockers that are keeping institutions from growing their own OER programs.

And so, I'd love to hear from each of you briefly, what are some of those main challenges that community colleges, either in Illinois or even more broadly, are facing when it comes to trying to implement OER.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I think some of the challenges, just to circle back on what Dr. Baber shared in terms of the, you know, what's undergirding the study, conceptual theoretical framing of the diffusion of innovations is really, again, how do we explain how ideas and technology spread? That's one, right? Then the other part, how do we look at OER as a resource, if not a reform effort that could assist us in the diffusion and spread of what could be more equitable experiences and outcomes for learners.

And so, I think part of the challenge, though, cuts right to the heart of some of the findings you just shared from this exploratory study is the adoption process itself is uneven. And so, we're going to have laggers. We're going to have early adopters. We don't necessarily have an ecosystem in terms of a social system where it's a broad-based adoption among community college educators or the sector or higher ed, more generally speaking.

I think another concerning issue is how do you market this? How do you promote this as a reform effort or tool, let alone an educational innovation? And, you know, our colleague was just talking about much of the attention, if you will, has been paid to, okay, so there's access and then there's the price point and it's something that's more nuanced than just, how do we get students access, how do we reduce or eliminate cost? But to think through, over the life course of a learner, how do we utilize OER in ways that encourage the learning communities, encourage collaboration that are nuanced based on modes of delivery for courses in terms of customization of what those materials ought to look like and include.

Back to the issue around training. What are some pedagogical, promising practices in terms of teaching pedagogy or use of the materials? To what extent are the materials culturally relevant, so that as folks introduce them, and I know this cuts to the heart of a lot of what interests you and that you're passionate about and your hard work, Nina, is accessibility in terms of how do we address language barriers? How do we talk about universal design principles within this? I think some of that is still at play in terms of so many areas that have not been fully attended and present barriers to that adoption process or the diffusion of the innovation of OER.

So, there are issues around proximity and geography, right? Why *wouldn't* we want to do more OER when we need to figure out ways to support remote learners in terms of those within rural communities that may have education deserts or first-gen, lower income. But I think that also goes to a concern around, and the pandemic taught us this even more, made it more pronounced but had already been there, is issues around digital literacy.

So there's any number of considerations and challenges. But even in lieu of that, there's still high-quality pieces that are out. There's awareness at least. There's professional organizations that have

emerged in the last handful of years that are trying to coordinate efforts to see how we could, you know, have this friend, if you will, of OER.

Magnus Noble: Dr. Zamani-Gallagher covered so many of the areas that I was thinking about as well. And those three areas of findings that Aidana mentioned earlier, you know, varying adoption status between schools, the faculty attitude as well as administrative influence. I think those really concisely cover the challenges that we face.

One of the ones that I've chosen to focus on is faculty attitude. As Aidana mentioned, it varies so broadly. Many faculty members just don't know how it would work. Some are totally against it, some are all about it, some really, really get into it. So, finding ways to train or inform faculty members on how this might work for their classes. What I've seen is that it tends to be a lot easier, maybe it's just an attitude difference between faculty members and instructors who are in social sciences and the liberal arts as opposed to hard sciences and career and technical education courses, whereas OERs exist for all of those things, but it's a matter of knowing where to find them and then implementing them into their courses and changing your curriculum for each individual course to allow for OER's to be moved into those courses.

I think a lot of times students don't know what OERs are and they don't really know what to expect. So, it's a matter of giving students some background information and literacy on what OERs are and how they operate and why we're able to use them. I don't think it can be overstated how important support from administration really is. I mean, of course, every instructor has the right to academic freedom, which is incredibly important, but having administration behind you and saying this is really the direction we'd like you to move in. It's good for students. It's good for the school and we'd like to show you how it can be good for you as a faculty member. I think those are really important points to cover, and I think we have an interesting sort of starting point in Illinois as far as the sort of patchwork implementation of OERs that we have right now, but there's *a lot* more work to be done, and I'm excited to hopefully be a part of that.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, I think just picking up on that faculty hesitation, I think is really important. You know, typically faculty teach how they were taught, and so if they haven't had experience with open education resources as a tool, they may be hesitant to adopt it for reasons of comfort, of reasons of even, you know, as you shift anything in your syllabus in your course teaching, there's always in the back of your mind your student evaluations, especially for adjunct faculty.

So, I think this is where, you know, Magnus's point and others' points about getting the administrative buy-in, not just in terms of the OER, but encouraging and incentivizing faculty to adopt the OER and thinking about, for example, if you do have a dip in your teaching evaluations as you kind of get use and familiar with transitioning to these resources that that won't be "counted against you," or, you know, that won't be considered in your overall evaluation, particularly for faculty who might be more vulnerable based on their teaching evaluation. So, I think that's an example of where you can encourage faculty to adopt, but there's also has to be not only just incentives, but also, you know, nuanced conversations about the support that administration will give in terms of moving forward with this adoption and giving kind of that learning curve consideration.

Heather Blicher: What I'm seeing nationally, and I'm sure what you're seeing, it may not be specific to Illinois, is the different state legislations that are being passed that limit the use of language, you know, including anything involving equity or diversity. And this really limits people when they're developing OER or adopting or adapting OER for their courses.

I recently went to Oklahoma to co-facilitate an all-day workshop with an OER librarian from Oklahoma, and I had to go through my entire slide deck and take out any references to equity, diversity, inclusion. I had to be creative and use the new terminology that the institution has taken on to replace that. You know, the institutions want to keep talking about whatever acronym you choose to use for diversity, equity, and inclusion, but it's the states that are limiting that ability. So, any public institution that is bringing in speakers or offering courses, they then become very limited in what they can offer.

So, it's a *strange* point in OER right now, I think, because it's the question of language and how can we still get the message out there to the people that want to learn and want to continue to work towards equity without using the terminology that the states are saying we can't use.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you for that because it certainly brings up the question of how *do* we expand this discussion of equity as we're talking about OER, because so much of the conversation really does focus on affordability, maybe because that's the easy thing for folks to kind of latch on to, right? But in this current climate, yeah, how can that conversation really be expanded? And why is equity still so important as we're considering and discussing what it takes to implement OER? And maybe we can start first, with you, Dr. Z-G.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: So, you know, the pendulum's been swinging for some time, and I appreciate that this has been problematized within this conversation because to your point, there's ways in which that hasn't necessarily been interrogated as we think about, on one hand, it's like that one step forward, two steps back. Oh, here's a method of trying to create broader participation and access of learners in terms of padding course material, different mediums by which, you know, one could access materials where it's just not, you know, kind of old-school, throwback; you have to physically be there and, you know, go to the reserves at the library kind of thing, but that we're also talking about the politics of education with regard to, not just that we make things more widely accessible, but who's policing that which is made accessible? And if you have access to it, has it been sanitized, stripped down, watered down in such a way where we're not presenting history or a subject matter within its entirety, right? We have states like Florida that is revisiting, like, should sociology be taught?

To Heather's point about doing work within certain states where you literally are tripping over yourself not to make mention of, you know, disability, race, race relations, gender fluidity, you know, and so it *is* as she shared, it's challenging. It's problematic on a lot of different levels because while we want to broaden educational opportunity, we're also stripping it in the same vein in some ways, right?

And I think there's also an issue related to thinking through equity in terms of how do we decide not just, you know, that in some cases it's open and in other cases it's not, and I think it gets back to the point about academic freedom and faculty. So, as a faculty member, if you are developing materials, to some extent, depending on the scenario, you may or may not have to have your open

educational resource open; that you can shut off access because it's your content that you created. And so, if you don't want anyone other than students registered in your course, it could be three sections of this class, but maybe if you're a student that's registered in two other sections and not that section but it's the same course, you may or may not be able to access those materials. I mean, there's a lot of nuance here, and again, ways in which we're not necessarily having equitizing behaviors across the board.

Magnus Noble: We talk about affordability; as far as equity goes, I really do think that affordability ties kind of inextricably with equity for low-income students, and traditionally students of color, you know, tend to trend more low income. So that helps in a lot of different ways there. But one thing that I noticed during my work as a student leader is, you know, most OERs are digital format, which is great. But some students prefer physical textbooks. So, just a very small thing that we noticed is that some students want those OERs to be delivered in a format which can be printed. That way they can still reference the material as a physical textbook if they choose to. For example, at John A. Logan College we have a free student printing office, so you can print whatever you may need. So, if instructors are offering these OERs, a student can print that textbook for free, say, if it's in PDF format or something like that. That way they still have access to the open, free material, but in a format, or in a medium I should say, that works better for them. So, and that can work with students that are neurodiverse, whether it be ADHD or on the autism spectrum, whether it's tactile or something like that, digital versus physical is something that should be considered.

Nina Owolabi: Really appreciate you bringing that up. You know, obviously affordability cannot be removed from equity. I mean, that is huge for so many students. And I also appreciate that you bring up students in general because when you're talking about OER, students are, in many cases, the recipients but maybe aren't necessarily *as* involved in its creation, right, compared to librarians, faculty, administrators.

So, Magnus, I want to pose this question to you. How might students actually get more involved in this conversation? Because that's part of equity, too. Student voice really being centered.

Magnus Noble: Yeah, thank you so much for asking that. It's a fantastic question and I could probably say more about it than we have time for, but one of the things that students can absolutely do is get involved with their student government association at John A. Logan College. We have a student senate that is heavily involved in working with faculty and administration on implementation of OERs. And in fact, one of the things that we did when we decided to focus on textbook affordability is to hold a student focus group to discuss different modes of delivery. The traditional you buy it at the bookstore, there's the textbook, or should I say campus-wide textbook rental program. There's inclusive access, there's equitable access, which are very similar and totally confusing. And then there's OERs. And so we presented all of these various modes of obtaining course materials to the students. And once we sort of gave them enough information to sort of wrap their head around each program or each type of acquisition, OERs came out as the clear leader, and that's where we discovered that some students want it printable. But once we really got them to believe that it was free for the student, free for the instructor, and free for the institution, which they had a hard time believing, they really went for OERs, which is fantastic. So working with your student government organization is a great way to do that.

One of the other ideas that we had here that the student senate that Logan will continue to work on is every year the college holds convocation, which is at the beginning of every academic year. All the faculty and staff get together and have a big conversation about what the goals are and everything for the school year. And our student senate wants to be a part of that and sort of introduce OERs to every faculty member. There are currently 14 faculty members between full time and adjunct that use OERs at Logan, so we wanted to recognize them and give them like a golden bookmark, just as a positive reinforcement thing and say, hey, thank you so much for doing this. We appreciate all your hard work and then sort of on the sly, let the other instructors know that this is really something that they should be doing as well.

But in addition to that, we wanted to set up workshops where students collaborate with faculty members who have already implemented OERs. For example, we have one long-term tenured instructor here at Logan that at the beginning of last academic year, she spent the entire summer finding, vetting, and adopting OERs for *all* of her course sections, every different course that she teaches, and implemented them, and she found OERs that are able to integrate into the school's learning-management system to where they can be broken down module by module within the course. So, we want to work with her and some other faculty members to run these workshops to teach other instructors how to find them and implement them, how to vet them, and then integrate them into their courses with support from administration, who have been great so far.

Nina Owolabi: Really fantastic work happening at John A. Logan College. Thank you for sharing that.

I'm curious as we kind of continue this conversation around OER as equity initiative or as a way to kind of move equity forward, for institutions and participants kind of steeped in this work for years, a lot of the conversation, you know, is moving in the direction of centering *open education*, kind of versus solely focusing on open educational resources. Because we know OER can probably propagate the same kind of harm, right, in potential teaching and learning if not done with a particular mindset. And so, why is that an important shift, kind of as we discuss equity in community colleges, and how can we expand or kind of broaden that meaningfully? And Heather, I'd love to start with you with that question.

Heather Blicher: Yeah, so I completely agree that, you know, with open education you have to be more intentional than you would in any other approach. And so, recognizing that to be inclusive, you know, open education encompasses more than just free or low-cost textbooks and resources. Many of our panelists here today have mentioned that it involves diverse practices, policies, and pedagogy that support a more accessible, a more inclusive learning environment. And open education is flexible, it's adaptable, it allows for diverse teaching methods, teaching practices that go beyond the traditional methods, making the teaching more engaging and more effective for different groups of students. And it promotes a culture of collaboration among educators and institutions, and it allows for continuous improvement. So, you may think that you've finished, but then, you know, halfway through the semester you want to change your course, and you can do that.

Just to mention a couple of my favorite curriculum design practices along with Universal Design, which I think is a standard, there's also TILTS, you know, transparency in learning and teaching, and culturally responsive teaching. And there are others, but these all combined together creates a

more of a focus to be intentional on open education so that community colleges can create that more equitable, inclusive learning environment that not only, you know, lowers the costs for students, but also supports, as many of us have mentioned here today, those diverse learning needs.

Nina Owolabi: In the interest of time, I know we could really keep going because there's so many layers and levels to this. But to wrap our conversation, I would love to hear from each of you: Any final thoughts or recommendations, particularly for those interested in advocating for OER, open education at their institutions, as well as education equity. And we can start first with you, Dr. Baber.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber: Again, OER is a great example of a student-centered, faculty-led, administratively supported approach to equity. So, thinking about ways in which we center the students, led by faculty, supported by administrators from, you know, state policy that we've heard about earlier, all the way to responding to feedback at the classroom level, and then using that for the continuous improvement that I think Heather had mentioned just a minute ago.

Then the concept of equity, I think, is important and certainly, you know, as we think about some of the examples of the states that we've heard that are going in the opposite direction like Oklahoma, Florida, we could probably put Texas and our neighbors in Iowa there. Illinois is positioned to go the opposite direction to kind of stake a claim around equity. I think we're seeing that a little bit with some of the investment at the state level around OER. Certainly, you know, this project was supported by the Illinois Community College Board, and so they have an interest and we've even presented to the ICCB Student Advisory Board as well.

So again, as I've said with other equity projects, Illinois is well positioned to be the leader in the opposite direction, maintaining equity. You know, certainly we're not perfect, but we're continuing to fight towards those better angels and making sure that we provide resources like OER that will elevate equity and widen the pathway to postsecondary education, which we know is important not just for economic viability, but also for sociocultural equity.

So again, I think this is a great example of the project, the collaboration, and so I just want to shout out Eboni Zamani-Gallaher for leading this initial exploration. Certainly you, Nina, and Aidana for really developing the protocol and collecting the data and analyzing data and leading the dissemination. And, of course, Magnus and Heather for transitioning what our findings are to policy and practice at both the national level, state level, and campus level. So, certainly while this project is wrapping up, at least this iteration, there's a lot of work to do and I think, you know, we can be the leaders in continuing that effort.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you. Magnus, did you want to share?

Magnus Noble: Yeah, just like you said, final thoughts for people interested in advocating: Students get involved, get with your student government, get with your honor societies. Start talking to faculty members.

For faculty members, locate those databases, start vetting OERs, find ways to include those in your courses even if it doesn't work for everyone.

For administrators, think about how it can impact students. Get behind faculty members, get behind OERs. Provide research for databases for faculty members to choose from, to vet from. Those are the best ways.

And, you know, I wanted to thank you, future Dr. Nina, future Doctor Aidana, for helping out. Dr. Baber, we've worked together in the past. Thank you so much. And Dr. Z-G, thank you for all your wisdom shared today.

Heather Blicher: I'd like to jump in and say I think Illinois is a wonderful example of cross-institutional collaboration. I think it's so important, especially with like what we've talked about, the different legislations happening that are working against equity, to spotlight and to highlight the work of Illinois in encouraging collaboration between different community colleges, between community colleges and other universities, and four-year institutions sharing resources, sharing best practices. I think the more that we work together, the further that we'll get. Thank you for having me on the podcast today.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Hey, well, Magnus, Heather, Dr. Baber, it's been great to be a panelist with you, to share and learn from you in this conversation. And I'm feeling hopeful. And I think in terms of, I think you said some parting words or takeaways. I think one of the things we could maybe also think through: If we're trying to be more intentional about the utilities of OER, and particularly with the origination of the study being nested within CTE, is to do some more of the cross walking with instructional programs by clusters and pathways. You know, revisit those zip codes in terms of pathways and think about with the career clusters, say, bioinformatics, marine biology, health specialties, but going back and looking at those different program titles, zip codes, and career clusters and pathways is necessary so that we can think about guided pathways and the program mapping.

I think if we're also considering some of the legislation and the pendulum swinging in terms of the anti-DEI climate that we also have to revisit what's getting virtually pulled off the shelf, so to speak, since much of what's happening within OER are online resources; to kind of think about what are ways to circumvent and still provide access to textbooks, modules, materials that are, again, culturally relevant materials that are being policed in and removed. I think there are ways where we can have broader impacts if we target, you know, what are some of those classes we know are going to hit larger shares of students, kind of like a scale of economies. And so, to think about what those high-enrollment courses are and look at, do they have OER accessibility? Or what are the high-impact courses or some of the classes that are gateway classes, and make investments in OER resources for those, because there's larger shares of students that are accessing them. But then also some of the higher-level courses that are not just kind of those first- and second-year courses is going to be important to make sure that materials are available, open access in those areas as well.

Nina Owolabi: Again, thank you to all of our participants for being able to talk today about OER.

To our listeners, if you would like to explore more of OCCRL's work on OER, please visit our website to find our resource page. You can visit occrl.illinois.edu/open-educational-resources.

And as a panel, before we close out, we'd like to share special recognition to members of the original OER project team who were incredibly instrumental in helping to create the structure for, the planning for the project as we see it today. So much kudos to Dr. José Del Real Viramontes and Dr. Lisa Perez.

And also another special thank you to all of our participants for being able to talk today about OER and being a part of our podcast.

Thank you to our listeners for being with us today. Take good care.