

Democracy's College, Episode 57

Developmental Education Reform in Illinois

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 associate Stacy Bennett talks with Joe Saucedo and Lee Roe, from the Partnership for College Completion in Chicago, to discuss developmental education reform in Illinois.

Stacy Bennett: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast from the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. I am Dr. Stacy Bennett, senior research associate with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois. Today, I am thrilled to be joined by Joe Saucedo and Dr. Lee Roe, from the [Partnership for College Completion](#) in Chicago, to discuss developmental education reform in Illinois. Hello!

Joe Saucedo and Lee Roe: Hi!

Stacy Bennett: I think first, can we just start out with you introducing yourselves to our audience?

Joe Saucedo: Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you for the invitation to be on the show. I am Joe Saucedo, pronounced he, him, and his, and I am working senior partnerships manager with the Partnership for College Completion, where I've been since late 2019.

Lee Roe: And my name is Dr. Lee Roe, and I am the academic program manager at Partnership for College Completion, and I've been with the Partnership since January.

Stacy Bennett: Could you tell me a little bit about the Partnership for College Completion and its history and some of the projects it's been working on and what you have been involved in?

Joe Saucedo: I can go ahead and offer some context here. So, the Partnership, or as we refer to as PCC, was established in 2016 here in Chicago, really as a result of a feasibility study, you know, that was done. There were a number of different community-based organizations, philanthropic partners who also worked together to understand, you know, what was going on in terms of degree completion as it relates to Illinois students specifically. It was well understood that there was a lot of research, a lot of practical direct services work being done around college access and getting students, particularly those from minoritized communities, Black, Latin X, students of color, low-income students, first-gen, for example. There was a lot of work being done to get those students from high school into college, community college, or four-year institutions, but there was little research or evidence around how can we really narrow the gaps in terms of graduation rates. And so PCC was established as a nonprofit organization to work at the intersection of both public policy as well as technical assistance.

And so, I was brought on to a very small team on the college and university partnership side a number of years ago, when at the time, one of PCC's signature initiatives, known as ILEA, was established. ILEA refers to the Illinois Equity and Attainment Initiative, and this was really the first

entry point for PCC in terms of working alongside, in partnership, with community of practice. These are 25 two-year and four-year institutions, both public and private, nonprofit working to ensure that more Black and Latinx students, as well as low-income students, were actually earning their credentials.

Stacy Bennett: So, why did PCC first become interested in getting involved with the developmental education reform movement in Illinois, and how did that movement get started?

Joe Saucedo: Yeah, so that I'll say, right off the bat, I know a lot of the work around generating momentum to advocate for policy, because that's really where it originated, really it required the team to work alongside other advocates throughout the state to advocate to our elected officials for ensuring that policy changes were being made to reduce the racial disparities around who was completing college and who wasn't.

And so, I'll say that well before legislation passed around developmental education, there was already data-gathering meetings that were being had with PCC, mostly our public policy team and our leadership at the time, meeting with other advocates, other community-based organizations to understand how big the problem was. And so, because, fundamentally, developmental education, you know, is rooted in racial and socioeconomic disparities when we think about the students who are often trapped in these courses that do not afford them credit, that often require an expense, a cost to them, that's really, you know, understanding how can we as a collective here in the state of Illinois do our part to shift the narrative, and all of that starts with public policy.

And so, I know that, while, you know, advocacy was being worked on by PCC and others, simultaneously, we had the Illinois Equity and Attainment Initiative that was off the ground, up and running, where we had 25 higher ed institutions who were committing to developing and drafting these multi-year equity plans. And it's noteworthy to say that of these 25 schools, at least a third, if not more of the institutions, when they thought about what are the strategies that are needed to ensure that more Black, Latinx, and low-income students were able to graduate, they had to incorporate strategies around reforming developmental education.

Stacy Bennett: It's interesting to hear. I mean, we all know that any sort of policy reform is certainly not done in a vacuum. It's done with many different partners, and it was interesting to watch this process unfold.

So, the result of the reform efforts was the Developmental Education Reform Act. For the general audience who may not be familiar, could you talk about what this is, what this bill does, and then how PCC was involved in the process that led to the creation and passage of the legislation?

Joe Saucedo: You know, back in March of 2021, that is when Governor Pritzker signed House Bill 2170 into law. The law, first of all, was very comprehensive. It looked at ways to effectively dismantle systemic racism across different sectors, including education, including workforce development. I also want to point out that, you know, in addition to PCC and a whole host of other community advocates who were lobbying for this legislation to be passed, it was largely led by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, and again, this was after, you know, a series of meetings, really years, I would say, of looking at data which pointed to the disproportionate outcomes that were negatively affecting Black communities, Black students as well as other students of color.

And so, within this bill, House Bill 2170, there was the Developmental Education Reform Act. And so, the goal, fundamentally, is how can institutions of higher ed, two-year and four-year institution, adjust their policies, reform their curriculum, and also adjust the ways in which they're placing students into these English and math courses. How are they actually doing so in a way that ensures the highest probability of students to be able to complete these entry-level math, English courses, credit-bearing courses in the first two semesters of college?

Because often, you know, if we look at data points, often community college students specifically are the ones who are enrolling in these remedial courses that don't earn them credit. But it's a surefire way for them to run through their financial aid as well if they're dependent on financial aid to go to college. And so, DERA was instituted so that institutions would be mandated, required by law to reform their placement measures to look at a host of measures, not just of students' performance on the ACT or other standardized tests, but to look at other academic performance in high school, for example, GPA and other measures to place them. And then it also looked at ways that institutions of higher ed could scale to implement effective models of course delivery.

And so, what PCC has done has really been working directly with schools to implement co-requisite model of reform. There's a lot of different ways to teach these credit-bearing, college-level English and math courses, but we've found that co-requisite models – this is where they're taking a credit-bearing English or math, for example, course, but there's some embedded tutoring. There are some other academic supports that are provided to these students to ensure that they're successful and that they can move on to the next course in their sequence.

Stacy Bennett: I know this legislation was a huge victory for advocates in Illinois. What is your advice for higher education leaders in other states who would like to see developmental education reform, or other equity-driven higher education reforms, in their state?

Lee Roe: I would say secure a team of individuals, preferably a cross-functional team, who believe in developmental education reform or other equity-driven higher educational reforms. It's desperately needed. And they create a compelling argument, a data-driven presentation to share with key leaders, and involve students in the process. Because student voice is critical in this as well. They're the ones living the experience of either having gone through developmental education courses and paying for courses that are not being applied to their credit. So, it's important to really secure that team and leverage leadership to understand that this developmental education reform is necessary.

Stacy Bennett: Tell me a little about the Illinois Development Education Equity and Action Network, and what types of implementation challenges and successes you've seen in your work with the IDEA network, colleges, and universities.

Lee Roe: We have a network of four universities and 13 colleges, developmental education reform and priority at their institutions. Really the challenges for them are financial resources, human resources, creating buy-in from key individuals at the institution, and sometimes faculty buy-in. But all the institutions that we're working with have made progress with their DERA implementation. The pace at which each institution is completing the reform varies. Some have made huge strides in eliminating their developmental education courses, while others are, you know, still in the beginning or middle phases of trying to work through eliminating those courses. And some

institutions have really worked hard to create the buy-in necessary for the reform to be successful. Like presidents are involved, provosts, all the key leaders are involved. And some other institutions, that may not be the case.

Joe Saucedo: Yes, I can add to that. You know, IDEA network, you know, we formally launched it in December of this past year of 2023. So it's still relatively new for us. We're constantly learning alongside our partners. I think it's helpful to note, too, that with all of these institutions, as Dr. Roe mentioned, we've got 17 who are active participants in the network. We spent a fair amount of 2023 recruiting, outreaching to these schools, talking with their provosts, for example, or in some cases the deans of liberal arts and sciences or wherever math and English are housed. You know, we met with them to explain that, you know, our effort as a third party, you know, nonprofit organization was not to create more work for them. Because often, I think that's the recurring theme we hear from our partners and our colleagues is that, you know, often they're told that they have to comply with these unfunded mandates from the state or from government, and it can be distressing to them, especially given just how heavy or how full their plates are on a day-to-day basis when we think about serving students. And so, we were very clear with them that our goal was to help them streamline the goals that they've already set for themselves, because in reality that reform was already part of their strategic plan. And so we wanted to make sure that we offer resources by way of technical coaching, by way of convening these communities of practice throughout the year to hear from subject-matter experts in the field, and really our goal again is to help them, you know, meet their goals a lot quicker and more efficiently. And so we have data-sharing agreements with all of our partners. We have memorandums, MOUs that were signed in the recruitment phase.

And so, we're excited, you know, to see where we go next in this upcoming academic year. And also, Stacy, I do want to mention that, you know, this work would not be possible were it not for the funding from Ascendium Education Group, as well as funding from the Illinois Community College Board, ICCB. That's thanks to the funding from those partners that were able to recruit and actively engage these partners throughout the year.

Stacy Bennett: Yes, it's nice to see the support for helping these colleges to be successful in their implementation.

Can you talk about some of the common challenges that colleges have faced or some of the more frequent challenges that they have faced in implementation?

Lee Roe: Some of the challenges always center around human resources and financial resources. Especially the smaller institutions, they are not receiving the funding that's necessary to support the staff that's going to be needed to create the staffing necessary to make the transition from their developmental education courses to co-requisite courses and provide all the additional supports that will be needed for the students to be successful within that transition.

Some of the other challenges: They've mentioned course sequencing. So we work with OMNI Education. OMNI Education is our technical-assistance provider who works with each of the institutions in making sure that they are making strides in their developmental education reform, and how to implement that reform at their institutions. So, it's very institution-specific in what they're working on, and it's a couple of institutions that have many, many developmental educational courses and they're finding difficulty in eliminating some of them because of where the

students are placed in their placement test or where the students pretty much are placed when they take the test or the ACT scores or their high school GPA through the multiple measures. So, they realize that additional support is necessary and sometimes they struggle in that area.

Stacy Bennett: Have you noticed that the challenges seem to depend on the type of college, or the larger systems, or the smaller colleges, or based on geography? Have you noticed any common themes?

Lee Roe: We just conducted some site visits to six or seven of our colleges and universities, and it's interesting because some of these institutions now said that financial resources wasn't the issue. It was human resources that was the issue. And that was flipped. For other institutions, it would be financial difficulties is the challenge because they need to hire so many people. So, it's kind of a mixed bag in that, by and large, most of them just say that getting the right people in place and those that are willing and dedicated to the elimination of developmental education courses is sometimes a challenge in key leadership roles.

Stacy Bennett: That makes sense. Yeah, I know a lot of colleges and universities are still struggling post-COVID, and they did a lot of human resources cuts during that time and now are trying to balance budget with getting some of those people back, so it's definitely an added challenge.

We now talk about some of the successes that you've seen from some of the partner schools with implementation that could maybe be modeled at other places.

Joe Saucedo: It's really interesting, Stacy, to see the diversity of institutions who are actively working with us. The majority do identify as community colleges, so two-year publics. But we have a small number of private institutions that we've worked with, even alongside the equity plan work that we've done for the past few years. We just hosted a mass convening. This was done virtually back in April with this group specifically, and we heard a case-study presentation from one of our private four-year institutions. And I think what stood out there, they were working on math redesign, and this was after a couple of years. This was also the result of being awarded a federal grant to investigate, you know, how are they getting students through developmental math, for example. And when they recognize how significant the problem was in terms of affecting their Latinx, Hispanic students, because they are Hispanic-serving institution, they were like, we've got to change this.

And so, the success story at this private institution was that, well, first off, this is going back to Lee's point earlier of how important a cross-functional team is. And when we say, you know, cross functional, we're talking about bringing together administrators with decision-making power. It's about bringing in the faculty, the course instructors in math and English for both departments. It's also bringing in student services as well as academic advisors. Those who are coaching and placing students into these courses. We've got to understand, you know, the full range of the student experience and their pathway.

And so, what the private school and their case study talked about was how they had hard data, hard evidence to show that, hey, you know, this is where students are being placed, and then this is the reality of students who are not moving through, not passing these courses and in effect are not, you know, positioned for success, you know, beyond the entry-level courses. And so they eliminated developmental math education, for example, and then they instituted a co-requisite math offering

and this required, you know, not only a redesign of the course to be taught. It required some professional training, learning, and development for the instructors who are going to be teaching that course. That takes time and money. It also required, you know, coaching up the advising team on how to appropriately place students and support them. They offered an embedded tutoring and then they instituted a math boot camp, essentially a summer bridge program that was all-intensive for students to kind of refresh their skills around basic math. All the things that, again, would set these students up for success in their first semester at the private university.

And so, the results of that pilot were outstanding. Like they saw the numbers jump almost two digits in terms of student pass rates in the co-requisite math, and they decided to continue to iterate to offer that in the subsequent semester, and they have seen, again, incremental progress of the students that are placed in those co-requisites. But it took a *full* team approach in understanding how to enroll these students and how to support them once they were enrolled in the co-requisite math.

And, you know, some of the feedback that Lee and I heard from schools was that, well, this is a four-year private, you know, sharing their case study. How relevant is it to us as a community college? That's a fair, I think criticism. However, you know, this particular case study was developed as a result of looking at what a two-year public institution did over the past year in terms of a math boot camp. So again, I think there's ways to nuance some of these interventions, but I think that was a success story thinking, like, hey, here's how we actually took data. We leveraged that data in a way that wasn't accusatory, putting blame on the instructors as to why these students were failing. But it just said, look, this is the problem we've identified. Let's bring on a consultant and they did hire a consultant with their grant. Let's zoom out to understand where students are moving through the pathway, the course sequence, and where can we work with faculty to make some tweaks and make some changes.

What's really important to understand around the co-requisite model is that there's required embedded supports, academic supports for students. So not only are we waiting for students to be placed into these credit-bearing courses, but we're also making sure that they have access to all the academic supports from tutoring, from advising, from their faculty. It's again a full-circle, holistic approach to student success.

Stacy Bennett: It's really exciting to see all the innovation that's being used and then having this network set up. Hopefully that will make it easier for these innovations to be replicated in other places.

Kind of on that note, what are the next steps in PCC's work on developmental education reform?

Joe Saucedo: I'll let Lee kind of speak to that because we are, you know, I mentioned the Ascendium Education Group is one of our largest funders. We are currently in the midst of a second year of a two-year grant, and so we're excited about understanding what the impact is of participation in this network. So, we're currently working with you all at OCCRL to understand this. We're working with our own education, you know, technical coaches to understand that as well. But I'll say that the work so far, what stood out is that, and this is the feedback we've been getting from college and the university partners, is that it helps to have someone, or organization like PCC, as well as technical assistance providers like only education coaches. It helps when they have folks

that are checking in on them, that are asking them all the questions that are really holding them accountable to following through on what their goals are in terms of these DERA plans. Because it's one thing to write these plans, strategic plans, but it's another to actually implement and follow through and understand what's working and what's not working. And so, I think that's been the benefit of participation for them, for the schools. Is to have someone from the outside, you know, checking in on them and holding them accountable. I'll turn it over to Lee to talk about the future.

Lee Roe: This iteration will end in June of next year, so we are thinking of ways to continue to work with the colleges and universities, and we are leveraging our funders right now and their strong interest in this in really finding ways to get hands on with the institutions at their sites to provide that clear direction that would be needed and their support that would be needed.

Additionally, helping them with data and data analysis. That's one of the large things that came out of all of the feedback that we've been receiving. So, we're just trying to figure out ways that we can support those colleges and universities based on what the overriding needs have been. And we're continuing to seek out grants and other financial support to continue the work that we're already doing.

The last thing is just enmeshing DERA into ILEA so the work that we're doing is all related and one supports the other. Because we have to have an equity mindset as we're doing the DERA work, and we want to make sure that the students that all the colleges and universities are working with are on the trajectory to be successful with as minimal setbacks as possible. So that does mean that we need to work hard to get rid of the developmental education courses and provide that support that's necessary for them to be successful.

Stacy Bennett: As you were talking, I kind of want to take a step back and ask about how have these reforms been received by colleges and universities?

Joe Saucedo: I guess when we look at it and reframe this to align it with our mission, you know, with their goal and their purpose as institutions of higher ed, I feel like folks are willing to sort of get on board with change. So, I think in that respect, many of our partners that we've come in contact with, that we've worked with have been very receptive to the reform. Not necessarily reform itself, but they've been receptive to the support and resources that we, as an organization, have offered to them. They're just sort of trying to survive in many cases at their institutions, just doing the job that they're called to do.

But I think for us, it's always important to remind them that this falls right in line with their efforts to meet and serve, in effective ways, to meet and serve the students that they have currently, as well as how are they set up, positioned for success to serve students that are aspiring to enroll at their institution, so future students, for example.

And I think those institutions who have collected the data to understand their districts, right, to understand, you know, the students that they may enroll in the next few years, how adequate are they as institutions are they set up to enroll them and support those students, support their retention and the academic progress of those students once they're there.

So I think, yeah, to your question, again, they're receptive to the reform. I think they're definitely has been resistance. And if we had to categorize, like, where do we see most of the resistance? I mean,

oftentimes it's coming from faculty members, math or English faculty. And I think it's not hard to understand their point of view. We recognize we want to validate, you know, all the perspectives. But I think if we frame this as an equity imperative, as the right thing to do, you know, when we're aiming to support and serve students appropriately in meaningful ways, then the reform is necessary, right? Until we shift the narrative, until we shift the data points that show, you know, that race and economic status doesn't predict a student's ability to earn their credentials or to graduate. Until we get to that point, you know, reform is going to be constantly necessary.

Stacy Bennett: I think that's a really good point because change is difficult and so you really have to get to the true meaning and get that buy-in.

So, moving forward, based on your work with developmental education reform, what do you think policymakers and higher education leaders can do to ensure smooth and successful equity-driven reform in higher education?

Lee Roe: I would say that they need to continue to talk about this and talk with institutions, students, and PCC to find out what else is needed. This conversation can't cease. I mean, I know that at PCC, we continue to lobby for more legislation, keeping it on our policymakers' minds as it relates to DERA and equity and all the things that's going to be associated with students being successful in their college experience.

Joe Saucedo: I would also add to Lee's points, and he mentioned earlier just how critical the lack of human resources and funding has played in the ways in which, you know, institutions can advance change. You know, PCC along with another host of other advocates is working on identifying more adequate and equitable ways to fund institutions of higher ed in the state. So there's a whole push and campaign right now around equitable funding for public education here in Illinois. I think that's critical, you know, to understanding how institutions, given their demographics of students, given their population, their size, how are they positioned in a way that sets them up for success?

Lee mentioned the importance of students. Definitely that is something that anyone who is seeking to engage in reform, they have to create time and space to hear from a lot of their key stakeholder groups, and so we can't overlook the students.

I would say policymakers cannot overlook the practitioners, you know, who are working at the campus level to do this work. Often, the feedback we get from our constituents is that there's little regard for, you know, what their day-to-day looks like in terms of serving students. And so, I think creating that time and space on a regular basis is going to be crucial for any state, especially Illinois, to continue this work.

Stacy Bennett: Would you say the advice is the same for policymakers and higher education leaders outside of Illinois or do you have any advice for them?

Joe Saucedo: Yeah, I would say it's very similar advice. I *would* also add that, and this helped us at Illinois because there are other states who are much further along in their reform journey, especially around developmental education. I think about states like California, for example, there's also Michigan and others who, and Colorado, who have tackled equitable outcomes issues before. And so it's helped us to be able to observe and connect with, you know, stakeholders in those states to understand what it took, you know, how much time it took even, to enact the

change. And out of Illinois, how are they able to sustain the momentum around the change? I think that continues to be an ongoing challenge for us here when we think about these big, you know, problems in higher ed.

Stacy Bennett: There's no need to recreate the wheel. If everyone could just learn from one another and kind of share that information.

So do you have anything else to add or anything that I have missed in talking about developmental education reform?

Joe Saucedo: You know, this is just through my lens. Having worked at PCC for a number of years now, working with a good portion of our community colleges and public four-years: There is just tremendous power around collaboration. You know, working smarter, not harder is one of my mantras and I've seen it in action, you know, working here with our institutions. The importance of making sure folks are informed of what's going on. The power of data. Disaggregating the data as well by race, economic status, gender, other variables. I think that's crucial in any effort to make change happen, but I can't highlight more or enough the power of the collective and collaboration.

Lee Roe: Only other thing that I would add is that this is near and dear to me because I experienced taking developmental education courses when I was an undergrad student. And I knew I didn't need it, but I didn't know how to advocate for myself, and I didn't really even feel like I had a choice. And that just caused me to stay in school even longer and accumulate even more debt. And it just wasn't necessary. This is why it means so much to me. I've seen many of my peers in my undergraduate experience have the same hardship and stopped out. So, this work is critical to student success.

Stacy Bennett: Thank you for sharing your personal experience. I think that really has a huge impact when you're working on these issues to have had that personal experience is really helpful and also inspirational to those that you may come across when working on this.

Well, this has been really enjoyable and very informative, and I really thank you for joining us and look forward to watching this work progress.

Lee Roe: Thank you so much.

Joe Saucedo: Thank you.