

Democracy's College, Episode 58

Participants' Perspectives on OCCRL's Illinois Community College Leadership Institute



2023 Illinois Community College Leadership Institute at Parkland College in Champaign

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 occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, OCCRL research assistant H.M. Kuneyl, who coordinates the yearly OCCRL Illinois Community College Leadership Institute, talks with two individuals who are a part of the institute's first cohort. They are Andy Hynds, dean of math, science and business and the executive dean of academics at Richland Community College, and Brianna McClay, associate dean of student services at Kennedy King College in the City Colleges of Chicago.

H.M. Kuneyl: Howdy, everyone. My name is Kuneyl. I'm a fourth-year Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois in the College of Education. And I'm also the coordinator for the Illinois Community College Leadership Institute. And today's podcast is going to be talking with two of our inaugural cohort members about their experience and their work at community college leadership.

The Illinois Community College Leadership Institute, commonly referred to, by myself, as the institute, started as a way to bridge the gap between aspiring leadership in community college and the understanding that many community college leaders intend to retire within the next 10 years. This program was modeled after two conferences in the state of Iowa, and we're excited to be in our

second year of operation. So, without further adieu, let me go ahead and introduce two of our guest speakers today. We will start with Andy Hynds.

Andy Hynds: Well, hello. My name's Andy Hynds. I serve at Richland Community College. I am the dean of math, science and business, also currently serving a secondary role as the executive dean of academics. This will be my 17th year coming up at the college. I previously was math faculty, full time, and for the past 10 years I have served in the dean role.

H.M. Kuneyl: Brianna, would you like to go next?

Brianna McClay: Sure. My name is Brianna McClay. I am currently the associate dean of student services, advisor and transition. This is actually my sixth day in this role. Previously, I was the senior coordinator of the early college program at Kennedy King College, one of the seven City Colleges of Chicago. I've been within the city colleges of Chicago system for almost 12 years now. I started as an advisor. And I always tell people that I believe my story at City Colleges is unexpected progressive leadership because due to a layoff, I was actually placed from advising to a part-time coordinator of the Access Center. But it was kind of a blessing the way I look at it because I was able to learn a lot about a different department. And then, as a result of that layoff, I was sent to Malcolm X as an admissions specialist, then a college advisor, then came back to Kennedy King for the early college role, and now I am an associate dean. That's a lot of movement and whatnot, unexpected movement, but it was great movement, and it was great to build on for my leadership skills.

H.M. Kuneyl: Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing. I find that my inner student-affairs person is coming out, and I'm giving you aggressive head nods. But that really is an amazing journey. I think about my own start as an academic advisor and you're giving me hope for the future. I really appreciate you sharing that.

So, I wanted to go ahead and shift into our second question, which is, you know, whether it's in supporting coursework in your position as deans or it's in an individual, how does your work connect to CTE or continuing education?

Andy Hynds: As I mentioned earlier, I've been a division dean for 10 years, and the areas that I oversee have somewhat shifted over the years depending on personnel changes or just needs at that moment. Currently, I oversee the business and accounting and IT programs when it comes to CTE. The director of agricultural programs reports to me, and I've been able to watch those programs blossom over the past few years.

I also at one time had oversight of the skilled-trades programs: HVAC, automotive, welding, engineering technology. I have not been as hands-on as our faculty are, and I've not been as hands-on as the students are with CTE, but I've been able to watch how those programs grow. I've been able to connect with industry and with our K-12 system to figure out where the needs more are and how we can accommodate those needs.

We are located in Decatur, Illinois, which is right in the middle of the state; largely an agricultural and manufacturing community more than any other industries. In this role, I have mostly worked with our companies here in town, not just our major employers but our smaller employers, to make

sure that their job needs are being filled by training qualified people, helping people get to a good career in these fields.

Brianna McClay: I've supported CTE throughout my whole career at City Colleges in different ways, of course. In my last role, I think I was most hands-on with CTE for early college because that was one of the areas that we wanted to improve on as a college for our early college students. We wanted to offer more CTE and not just a couple of CTE classes, but CTE classes that led to the students having some type of credential after.

One of the things I'm most proud of exiting the position is that we are piloting culinary for our early college students. They should receive a basic certificate after two semesters in the program. And another thing I was very proud of is that last fall we were able to reboot our construction-carpentry program to our high school students. Chicago Public School actually has an organization called Chicago Builds where they house all of the students throughout CPS, juniors, and seniors, that want to take carpentry and construction courses. They're located in one of the underutilized high schools, like, one of the high schools with lower enrollment. They utilize the space there and they bring all the students together. And we were able to get them college credits along with their high school credits they were getting.

Currently, by overseeing advising, of course working with CTE, and overseeing career now, we work with CTE for job placement. Our satellite campus, which is Dawson Technical Institute, has a lot of our CTE programs, and I oversee the advisor there. So, that knowledge from early college is definitely going to shift with this and I'm sure I'll learn even more about CTE and be able to better support.

H.M. Kuneyl: I want to move to one more question and then kind of tie everything together, and that is just tell us a little bit about your experience with the Illinois Community College Leadership Institute.

Andy Hynds: It was an enjoyable experience for me when I went last year in May of 2023. I was honored to be the person chosen from Richland Community College to attend.

I've lived in central Illinois my whole life, so I've been to Champaign so many times, but it was nice to go there and stay there. Like, I never had a reason to stay there. I always could just drive back home afterwards. So, personally, I enjoyed going to Champaign, going to a nice restaurant that evening and just kind of soaking in the community, not only the U of I campus but the Parkland campus.

As for how it supported me with my career, at Richland we had several executive-level positions who retired at the end of 2022. So, when I went to this institute, we had a time at our college where there was a lot of the unknown going on, and I found myself having to learn some new things a lot faster than I expected. So, to be at a place with individuals who are in the same spot was really informative.

Something else that I appreciated was being able to see the perspectives of other colleges from throughout the states. I recall at dinner that evening I was at a table where everybody was from City Colleges of Chicago. I mainly work with downstate community colleges, and it was nice to hear different perspectives on the college experience at more than one location throughout Illinois.

Brianna McClay: Well, number one, I was definitely honored to be chosen to come. I was chosen by our college president, and that, number one, empowered me and kind of gave me the confidence that I can go as far as I thought before in this field.

I started to feel like I was being a little stagnant, even though I had a lot of success in the early college role, like, literally in program, when I was handed the position, we lost a lot of partners due to a lot of changes in leadership, and I was able to build our partnership back up. I always used to say I increased my enrollment by 50%. But after looking at the numbers, the president informed me, you've actually helped increase the enrollment by 100%. And I was like, oh wow. We literally went from having 175 students, when I first started this position, and about 10 partners to 27 partners and almost 900 students enrolled. And we completed our first graduates with an associate's degree prior to receiving a high school diploma. And all of that was great accomplishments and whatnot, when you look at it on paper or when I talked about it, but it was just I was being stagnant in my role because I kept thinking of different ways to enhance early college, but not necessarily enhance my personal path.

But being at the conference, talking to others and senior leadership really inspired me to branch out and kind of see where I can go. And I think after that I started looking to get back into my doctoral program; actually was enrolled in a doctoral program. I started in 2013, and I stopped in 2015. Never really continued. I looked back into that. And in addition to looking back into getting into the doctoral program, I started talking with my vice president, who I reported to at the time, to kind of talk about my goals and where I wanted to go in higher education. And I started looking at different associate dean roles. And I think that conference really empowered me to do so. I left Champaign thinking, like, oh, you really can be a dean within the next year or so. Or, you know, you can do this and you can do that and you have value and you add to, you know, rooms and whatnot, and you're supposed to be here. So, it kind of just gave me that confidence to keep it moving. And now I sit in front of you as an associate dean.

H.M. Kuneyl: That's all really exciting, and I am looking forward to your future success because I know it's coming. So, are you currently in a doctoral program as well?

Brianna McClay: I am not.

H.M. Kuneyl: Okay.

Brianna McClay: I'm still trying to decide if I want to continue with the program that I was doing or I've looked into other programs. I actually was trying to apply to get in like a leadership cohort here in Chicago through Urbana League. I was talking to some of the people about doctoral programs that they've been through that are also in education and kind of just weighing my options. I think I know which one I'm going to go towards. I'm not going to say it (laughs).

H.M. Kuneyl: Yeah. No, no (laughs).

Brianna McClay: Yeah, but I think I'm nailing it down, and now I have to nail down a real start date. My goal is definitely no later than fall '25, but there's no reason that I shouldn't start going in '25 other than I started a new job (laughs).

H.M. Kuneyl: Thinking about your individual goals, how you're supporting CTE, how you're working on your leadership journeys, were there any topics that we went over at the institute that really stayed with you or that perhaps you're thinking about differently in your new role?

Andy Hynds: For me, all of the sessions were informative. I enjoyed seeing different experts from throughout Illinois and the University of Illinois give their perspectives on different parts of higher ed. As I look back at those topics, I think the policy topics were most useful for me. And I say that because I think of my job as mostly an internal job. I supervise faculty and staff, and I have not had to do as much of the work going to Springfield or talking with legislators, learning about policy. Those kind of things are somewhat fresh for me, so seeing the perspective of how things work at the state level and how they work at the four-year level or Higher Learning Commission, those were really informative things to learn, just to get better and get out of my comfort zone and learn more about the external part of the position.

Brianna McClay: Once again, I would have to definitely agree. The policy part was most informative, just to hear a lot of different policy conversations and kind of, like, process of foreign policy at the state level was very informative.

My goals early on, you know, was to definitely be in politics and surrounded by education and whatnot and be a lobbyist and all of this. And so, you know, talking about that and hearing that kind of like struck up some things. But that's kind of why I'm still kind of in between with choosing my doctoral program. Originally, I was going for educational policy strictly, but now I'm kind of like going in a different realm, but knowing that all of my education background together could blend into where I want to go in the future.

H.M. Kuneyl: Yes, absolutely. I mean education's political. It always has been. It always will be. And we definitely see the connection there between education policy and government or political science, however you want to conceptualize that. Absolutely.

So, thank you for sharing. Of course, I'm shamelessly taking notes on what you're saying and using that to plan next year's institute, make sure that those topics are being repeated and future cohorts are able to benefit from your knowledge.

As you're thinking about what's coming next for you, and that might be a single project that you're working on within your current role or it might be that you're aiming for the presidency: What are you thinking about in terms of your leadership and how that has grown and developed or how do you see it developing in the future?

Andy Hynds: Well, for me it has a lot to do with what my current role is. Last October I took over a position of executive dean of academics. And what it involves is I'm still a division dean over Richland's, math, science and business division, but the executive dean position was an additional job duty of providing some mentoring to our other academic deans, many of whom are new to the job, as well as serving as the academic VP by proxy whenever our executive VP of academic and student success is not available. So, it's allowed me to see a little bit more beyond my own division and see a little bit of what happens at the executive level.

So, I could see myself, at some point, going further into an executive role at a community college. My expertise is on the academic side, but I want to be flexible enough to learn more about the

student success side of the college. And I kind of like where I am right now. There's a nice little taste of the executive roll while still doing a few things that are familiar. Now that said, this job changes every single year it seems, and as I go into a new academic year coming up, I'm really focused on maintaining what I do within my own division but also learning more about the process of mentoring supervisors in order to have that mentoring role for our academic deans here at the college.

Brianna McClay: My next leadership journey, I'm kind of like *in* transition with my next leadership journey. I definitely want to get this down pat. I am super familiar with student affairs. My background, my master's degree was counseling, adults and higher education, with an emphasis in student affairs, and I started out on this side of the house. But in early college, of course, I went over to academic affairs and I'm very familiar with academic affairs, so I'll talk from the short-term perspective first, which I kind of talked about a little already as far as my doctoral program.

But also, one of the biggest things that I want to accomplish in *this* new leadership role is kind of bridging the gap with academic affairs and student affairs. That's common throughout a lot of institutions and whatnot. Our big play now is retention. We're focusing very heavily on fall to spring retention and spring to fall retention. And so, I believe in order to get those goals and the numbers that we want, we have to work effectively as a full institution, and that includes academic affairs and student affairs being knowledgeable of each other's department. Within my first week in the position, I've already had a couple of meetings to speak with our English department, and I'm trying to start something called discipline liaisons where we have people from each discipline come over to the advisement office and help advise. You know, students want different perspectives other than the advisors' perspective sometimes. It's not necessarily that they don't trust in their guidance, but when you have content experts mixed with student-affairs and student-success experts, I think it's going to help retain the students and help the students trust in our guidance a little better.

In the future. I look to possibly be a vice president or something of that sort, along with doing some more teaching. In the past, I have taught African American Studies course at a four-year institution as well as I've taught a few GED courses outside of the City Colleges. But I want to look into teaching with the City Colleges as well so I can always stay abreast with that academic-affairs side as I go on this journey to bridge those two divisions.

H.M. Kuneyl: I love it. I can totally see you as VP McClay. Absolutely. And I love the way you're talking about discipline liaisons and bridging the gap between student affairs and academic affairs. I would love if you were ever interested to write about that. I think that would be really beneficial for our practitioners and scholars alike to think about how you're conceptualizing that.

Brianna McClay: Thank you.

H.M. Kuneyl: Of course.

So, as we have community college-aspiring leaders coming up through the program, they will of course be getting their invitations in the spring. What would you tell someone who's thinking about coming into the institute and is maybe on the earlier end of their leadership journey? What advice do you have for them?

Brianna McClay: I would tell them to mix and mingle and take full advantage of the experience. One of the things I enjoyed was just meeting new people and hearing everybody's pain points and knowing that some of them are the same, some of them are different and just looking at different ways to tackle them. Like, we're all in Illinois, but some of us are way further in Illinois, some of us are down the street in Illinois.

It was very interesting and informative talking to the Moraine Valley team because, you know, they're very close to us here in Chicago. But just seeing, like, some of the different procedures and policies that they have and kind of learning from them. And I remember, Andy, you were talking about, something with early college in your school, I think.

Andy Hynds: Yes.

Brianna McClay: Yeah.

Andy Hynds: We had a partnership with Decatur Public Schools where they do the full associate's degree within their high school years.

Brianna McClay: Yeah, I remember talking to you about that and hearing your guys' plans around that and knowing that we have, you know, our partnership, SCPS, that gets the students degrees. From what I was learning from you, it seems like you guys have it a little more tailored than ours and what not. And I think it varies, too, depending on which City College you go to.

So just, you know, making sure that you're mingling with the different people and looking at that contact sheet and reaching out throughout the years, too, as you see fit and just taking advantage of the full experience.

Andy Hynds: Yes, I do remember that conversation, and I should mention that as an aside that our program with Decatur Public Schools will have its first graduating class in 2025. These are the individuals who finished their associate's degree while they finished high school. We learned about a lot in doing so. It's been a journey, but we're looking forward to seeing the first class walk two stages next year.

[Advice] I would give for people attending the institute is very similar to Brianna's. I remember I had a former colleague who said early in my career, don't go to a conference and talk to people that you see every day in your own building. Go out and meet some people. As I mentioned earlier in this conversation, I enjoyed talking to individuals who are from community colleges that are outside of my region, and I would say to anybody who's attending, seek out some conversations, ask some questions, learn some things, and share your own experience. I think sometimes we get so caught up in our own work that we think what we do is not that remarkable. But then we can share our story with somebody else and they can be amazed at what we're doing. Find some people and have those discussions, and also be willing to learn some things that might be new to you. Don't just stick to the things you know, but be willing to be a student and learn.

H.M. Kuneyl: I like that! I was writing that down. Be willing to be a student. I feel like that belongs on a poster or sticker somewhere. Absolutely.

Okay, so we're wrapping up now. I just want to say thank you again to our two guest speakers for coming and chatting with us. An amazing part of the institute is being able to connect community

college practitioners and scholars who wouldn't normally be in the same room, or might be in the same room but for a very structured schedule. And just be able to be in community with one another and learn from each other. And it seems like the two of you were able to absorb that. That makes me feel great as a coordinator. But also, it's great to kind of get to hold on to people and still be connecting with y'all over a year after the institute. So, I'm looking forward to seeing what happens next and getting to continue to work with y'all.

Andy Hynds: Okay, thank you.

H.M. Kuneyl and Brianna McClay: Thank you.

H.M. Kuneyl: Bye!