

Democracy's College, Episode 74

Student Leadership in Community Colleges

With guests Leonidas Hamza and Deana Schenk and host Nina Owolabi



Leonidas Hamza and Deana Schenk

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 and 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 senior research assistant Nina Owolabi talks about student leadership in community colleges with student leader Leonidas Hamza, as well as with Deana Schenk, who is the senior director for student success at the [Illinois Community College Board](#).

Nina Owolabi: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. I am Dr. Nina Owolabi, senior research assistant with OCCRL, and I'm excited to host today's episode.

This episode focuses on one of my favorite topics, being a former community college advisor, student leadership in Illinois community colleges. It is clear often that institutions of higher education are these critical places for student leadership development. Yet the narrative about student leadership so frequently situates in the four-year context. But how it manifests in the community college: frequently understudied and underappreciated. However, community college student voices are *powerful* and have been at the center of *key* institutional changes even since the opening of Joliet Junior College. And we'll link some more information about that because it's [a really interesting history](#). And that even continues today.

Community colleges are particularly special spaces to hone important skill sets such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, which are all transferable to both academic and professional context. These experiences are *especially* valuable for community college students, who may face additional barriers to success, such as financial constraints, work, family, life balance, and limited resource access.

At OCCRL, we've been partnering with the Illinois Community College Board in facilitating professional development with the Student Advisory Committee, and we're excited to have folks here today representing. Together, we're embarking on research that explores the lived experiences of community college student leaders in Illinois through the lens of student autoethnography. So, we are *excited*, really, to dive in. We have *great* guests who are helping to peel that curtain a bit and think about the student leadership landscape in Illinois. I think it will be a really rich discussion.

So, join me in first welcoming Deana Schenk, M.A., who serves as the senior director for student success with the Illinois Community College Board, where she works in close partnership with all 39 community college districts in Illinois to advance a holistic, student-centered approach to success. Her work [is] deeply rooted in strengthening the student support infrastructure within community colleges, recognizing that academic achievement is deeply connected to students' abilities to meet their basic needs and access holistic supports. She leads statewide initiatives that expand access to mental-health services, address food and housing insecurity, build coordinated systems of care that connect students to critical community resources. And in addition, she's led the developmental education reform and direct admissions, contributes to agency and statewide diversity, equity, inclusion, and access efforts, and serves as an advisor to the ICCB Student Advisory Committee, amplifying student voice of policy and program design. And if she wasn't busy enough, she is also a current doctoral student pursuing an Ed.D. in community college leadership. Kudos to you, Deana, and thank you for being a part of today's conversation.

Also, we have Leonidas Hamza, who is a student leader, a student trustee, president of Phi Theta Kappa Phi Omega chapter, and the former advisory chair for the ICCB Student Advisory Committee. Leo is also an herbalist and a biographical novelist. He is also pursuing multiple degrees in communication, sociology, public administration, and hoping also to look toward the Juris Doctor, too. Driven by a passion for transparency and civic virtues, he seeks to influence others and improve communities across Illinois through his insights and writings.

Welcome, all. To start, could you each maybe share a bit about how you became connected to student leadership?

Deana Schenk: I'll go ahead and start. And Nina, I just want to thank you for inviting me to be part of this podcast and for *all* of the support that OCCRL offers to the community college system. So, I really appreciate the chance to be here.

My connection to student leadership really comes directly through my work with the Illinois Community College Board, where I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to engage with student leaders from across the state through the Student Advisory Committee. And in this role, I get to help support and facilitate the work that students are doing by creating space for students to share what they're seeing on their campuses and then helping connect those experiences to broader state-level conversations. And a big part of this is making sure that student voice is not only collected, but it actually is used in a way that informs decisions and priorities at ICCB.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you. Leo?

Leo Hamza: How I got involved with student leadership was I simply, well, it wasn't simple, but I started at Danville Area Community College. I watched a lot of chaos in the world for many years, and I decided, at the age of 30, that I wanted to use my voice to be able to go and make a change, to help make a difference, maybe create a platform for others to be able to become leaders. I signed up at Danville Area Community College August 24th of 2024, and I came here and I was honorably selected to join a lot of programs that led me to a lot of different opportunities, a lot of different doors that came open. I just had to overcome some of my fears. I was never a public speaker. I just had to overcome those things and just move forward. So this way I continue to help other people.

Nina Owolabi: Wow, so powerful. Deana, I wanted to hop back over to you because it was really interesting to hear you say it's not just about opening the space for student voice, but also really ensuring that those ideas are moving into action. Can you speak a little bit about how student input from the SAC specifically moves from ideas to action or decision-making?

Deana Schenk: Absolutely, I'd be happy to. So, student input through SAC is really intentionally structured to move that conversation into real impact. And it typically starts with students identifying issues based on what they're experiencing on their campuses, whether it's challenges with financial aid or transfer, basic needs, access to resource, or any other number of challenges they might face. And from there, we do create the space for the experiences to be shared, to be compared, and be better understood across campuses, across the state. And I think one of the things that is really exciting to see happen in these spaces is that students very quickly realize that what they're seeing locally is part of a broader system-wide issue. So, they start to see that they really can have an impact.

And so from there, the work becomes much more focused and collaborative. They have committees and they have discussions and they refine those concerns into clear priorities and actionable recommendations, *both* for things that can happen at the state level and things that they can take back to their own campus. And so, they're really not just naming problems, they're thinking through what changes would actually make a difference and how those changes could realistically happen institutionally or statewide. And it helps shift that student input from individual experience to collective *solution*-oriented thinking.

And then the next step is that their recommendations are often elevated to the ICCB leadership through our ICCB student board member, where they can be discussed with the board, can be involved in strategic planning, and in some cases, it ends up being part of our legislative conversations. So, it's important that there is a clear pathway that students can see how their ideas go from their initial discussions to consideration at higher levels, which really enforces to them that their role is meaningful and it's connected to real decision-making.

Nina Owolabi: Absolutely. And I would imagine that part of that is also connected too to Advocacy Day. So, I'd love to actually hear from both you and Leo about what that experience is like.

Deana Schenk: Absolutely. So, I'll just give a little context and let Leo kind of really jump into it because he was so essential in the development of this year's Advocacy Day. But Advocacy Day is really a strong example of an idea to action coming full circle. The students have taken those ideas that we've been working on, and now it's time for them to bring that directly to their legislators. And they're able to translate their lived experiences and the experience of students on their campus into *policy* discussions and very specific asks of the legislators.

What really stood out to me every year, but this past Advocacy Day in particular, was how prepared and confident the students were. They weren't just telling their stories. They were really connecting those stories to *broader* system challenges and proposing thoughtful solutions and insights. And it really highlights what's possible when students are given structure, information, support to engage at that level. So it's not *just* participation, but Advocacy Day is really an opportunity for leadership to *genuinely* influence outcomes in our state.

Leo Hamza: When it comes to Advocacy Day, I was extremely empowered because through the eight months that we went to all the different meetings with ICCB across the state of Illinois, we got little pieces of information, leadership information, heard all these different ideas from all these different individuals and very important roles within the state of Illinois. We were able to, as a *group*, come to a decision [about] what is most important when it comes to approaching Advocacy Day. Therefore, we made the formal decisions to focus on student needs, the college baccalaureate degree. There was another thing, I can't exactly remember what it was, but all three things that we decided to focus on towards the end, they all balanced each other out. It was like a dominoes effect. One would affect another, and the other would affect the last one.

Advocacy Day, it was extraordinary because I got to watch the SAC team come together as strangers. And then we ended as what I would say, long term, we're going to be friends forever now. I mean, we've made friendships. We networked across the state. It was very empowering. We got to see how important the community college baccalaureate degree could be. I was able to go ahead and use this whole CCB in comparison with the town I live in. We live in a very impoverished community here in Danville, Illinois. And so, I was able to talk to our representatives and I was able to use the example of my town to show how this CCB, how these two bills can benefit the economy here. It can benefit the lives of the students. It could benefit the taxpayers and the state as a whole. That was the message I used to be able to articulate how beneficial this would be and to bring the message to the other individuals in the SAC team.

Going to Springfield was a place, I never thought I would ever step into the Capitol. This path I'm on was never a path I ever intended on going down. In my early 20s, if I could go back there, I never thought I would be doing what I'm doing. And so, to have this opportunity and to be standing next to those other individuals that I'm *very certain* will be in very strong leadership roles in the future, it was just an honor. It was a wonderful opportunity. It was a wonderful opportunity to work with Deana and to meet everybody anybody else with ICCB.

Nina Owolabi: *What a moment* that you described. Was this one of the first times where you kind of really realized that your voice really does matter? Or were there maybe other instances in your student leadership journey that bubbled up for you that was kind of this 'aha' moment of, 'Yeah, I have a voice and I have experiences that are worth sharing and can make a change.'

Leo Hamza: It honestly took me a long time to find my voice, and that's why I did not go back to school until I was 30 years old. I just had a really different outlook on things, I could say. For one, I did not start speaking until I was 5 years old. I had an issue with articulating myself; therefore, I was very shy. But even so, my clear articulation did not occur until I was about 30. And that was when I joined college. I came here, I started writing, I started reading more, and I started to kind of pull the weeds from all the fillers from the way that I was writing and the way that I was reading.

In school, I overcame a lot of my fears, like I said in the beginning. In so doing, I began networking and meeting faculty and students and citizens across Illinois and politicians even. And during that time, I was able to, again, organize my thoughts, which essentially organized my voice. I began speaking while listening and organizing events. So, in this time I experienced things I never saw or heard before. There was applause and there was appraisal and even approval that opened up doors to leadership. These opportunities of leadership were with TRIO, PTK, ICCB, SAC, and even community things like the Vermilion Democrats and the Vermilion Republicans and Indivisible meetings and city council meetings. And now I'm the student trustee. So, it was just like a one door after another and all I had to do was just continue to show up and put one foot in front of the other and just continuously confront my fears.

Nina Owolabi: What I so appreciate about your story is I think what you have conveyed and what you've experienced is so connected to *so many* adult learners and learners who might be a little older, either coming back to college or coming to college for the first time and needing to be able to kind of navigate these different systems while finding their voice. But it's amazing that you were able to tap in to many of those leadership opportunities that were available on your campus.

And so I'd *love* to hear from you, and Deana as well, you know, as we think about opening up more of those doors for students to be able to access student leadership, what are some of the barriers that actually exist in *elevating* student voice at the institutional or state level?

Deana Schenk: I think one of the biggest barriers that we see in terms of institutional and state-level elevation of voice is consistency. And it's kind of a double-edged sword. Student

leadership naturally turns over really quickly at the community college, which is *great* because *more* students have the opportunity to be leaders. But it also can create challenges because it can make it a little bit more difficult to sustain momentum on these long-term issues. And it goes both ways. You know, the students will spend a year, usually. I'm very fortunate that with Leo, I'm going to have two years to deeply engage with him around this work. But we all know that policy and institutional change often take a lot longer than that to actually happen, fully develop and be implemented. And so that becomes challenging in terms of maintaining the momentum of the initiatives and the students' momentum.

But I will say, I think one of the things, again, that I found so impressive about this year's students was their commitment to the community college baccalaureate, which is something they are unlikely to benefit from, right? Because they're already actively engaged. Very much these are students who are planting a tree they will *never* sit under. So they are overcoming one of those barriers by still being very intentionally engaged in this work, even though they're not going to have that direct benefit. With that consistency, it's *really* important that we have strong handoffs, there's documentations, we share priorities so that we don't lose traction as new students come in.

There are other barriers. So, there are some structural barriers in terms of how student voice is received and used, and that looks different in different places around the state. And so sometimes students have a feeling that they have less access to actual decision-making spaces where policies are discussed and shaped, and then in other places, they really feel very invited into it. There's a little bit of a barrier in terms of the clarity of how their input is going to be used, and then sometimes that can impact how they're going to see their contributions, even when their ideas are really valuable and thoughtful as well.

Third, and [then] I'm going to turn it over to Leo, is that there's sometimes a gap between how systems operate and how the institutions operate, and then really the day-to-day realities of what students are navigating. These institutional processes can be really complex and slow and procedural, and students have very immediate needs, lived challenges like affordability and workload and that type of thing. And so *bridging* that gap can be a little challenging, which is why it just makes it really important to create clear and accessible pathways for student input and to treat this input as a form of expertise so it doesn't become a barrier and that we are being very transparent about that decision-making so that students can see that they're being heard and their perspectives are being used to build that strength, strengthening that *engagement* as well.

Leo Hamza: Well said, Deana. I agree with you when you said that a lot of what we are doing, the SAC team, we probably *won't* be able to benefit from what we're doing. And I

considered that a long time ago. And I believe that the meaning of life is the adoption of responsibility. And you're right: The SAC team did adopt a big responsibility to carve a path for those generations that are coming after us. That is a big barrier that we are uplifting for those to make life a little bit easier for those behind us.

When it comes to barriers, I think the most important barrier, from my belief and my experience, is the barriers we face from within. Because if we don't overcome ourselves and our fears, our anxieties, and so on, all those things outside of us, you know, everything that you talked about, all the barriers that can be outside of us, they become almost nearly like it's impossible, but truly nothing is impossible as long as we overcome ourself. And that's why I think that we truly need virtuous leadership in these higher roles, these higher positions, because when you have virtuous leaders, then you have those of higher moral standards. And those of higher moral standards have essentially overcome a lot of those barriers within themselves, which has allowed them to become proper role models for society.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you for that perspective, Leo. I was really struck by this idea of, like, you're kind of *adopting* responsibility, responsibility kind of for future generations of folks who are going to be coming into the community college. It's a really powerful notion, one that isn't always embraced and talked about, particularly among faculty, staff, administration. And so, I'm curious, what do you wish these folks *understood* better about student leadership? What do you wish that faculty, staff, and administration at institutions held?

Leo Hamza: I, again, will use my school as an example, which is Danville Area Community College. Basically, faculty and staff here understand the importance of student leadership. Our administration, however, does not. Because of this, our school lacks student involvement. And schools should understand the students are the beneficiaries of said institutions. Community colleges are designed to be a place where students can create new opportunities, where they can discover themselves, find their voices, and essentially rebrand themselves. And the school, it *is* designed to benefit the students. As I said, the students are the beneficiaries of this institution. Faculty and staff and administration has already done so, which is why they have the selected, well, they *have been* selected for the roles, you know, they fulfill. Their duty should be, again, to be virtuous leaders, which are role models with high moral standards. And to be virtuous leaders, one must stop focusing, essentially, I'm going to be *real* about this: It's just, these individuals have to stop focusing on *paychecks* and what the dollar amount is and focus on how they can create better *opportunities*, which is often by *listening* to the students so they can graduate and become viable members of society.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you for that perspective. I think turning over to Deana, I'm curious: What have *you* kind of learned as you've engaged with the student leaders and you've heard about some of the different maybe struggles that they've had, and also *wins*, also successes that they've had. What have *you* learned from the student leaders that's really *changed* how *you* think about leadership or policy?

Deana Schenk: Working with the students has really enforced for me, both my time in the classroom, because I was a previous college instructor, and now even more so in my role at ICCB, that leadership and policy really have to come from lived experience.

As an instructor, I certainly saw firsthand how students were navigating challenges that didn't always show up in data, you know, working long hours, transportation or child care issues, that type of thing. These experiences shape how students move through college in a very real way, in a different way than those of us who are now in leadership positions may have navigated college. And these students don't always fit really neatly into the metrics that we typically rely on. So, looking at that lived experience has been something that has, you know, really expanded for me.

And again, at ICCB, it's become even more clear. When they share their perspectives at SAC, they're really connecting dots that we at the state level, and even folks at the institutional level, might miss. It's not just explaining what a barrier is, but *how* policies and systems can impact the way that make things harder or easier for those students. And we *need* to hear from them so that we can autocorrect, so we can do the things that are necessary for students. So, it's really a reminder to me that data tells us what's happening, but students are going to help us understand the *why* and what it *actually* feels like *on the ground*.

And I would just use an example of one of my big projects is student basic needs. At ICCB, and I've read all the literature, right? I have *looked* at all of the information, but *hearing from* the students who are talking about the *trials* and difficulties they're having accessing local food pantries, for instance, is *very different*, and it really elevates it to a new level in terms of thinking about how we need to take these voices into policy and shifts. It's just really shifted by thinking, seeing how much stronger solutions are when students are part of building them from the very beginning.

At the state level, this means engaging students *early* in conversations about policy, not just asking for input once those decisions are almost completely formed. When students *co-create* solutions, the outcomes are much more practical. They're more grounded in what the students need and definitely more likely to work across different student populations.

It's also changed, really, how I think about leadership more broadly. Students *aren't just* the beneficiaries of the policy. They are *very much* the experts in their own experience. And when we treat them that way and we build *structures* that include their voice, we do end up with policies that are not only more equitable, but are also more *effective* because they reflect these realities of the students.

That one-on-one time that I've had with students has changed *everything* that I've thought about leadership in higher ed and policy making. And I appreciate the opportunity to spend time with students so that that change and that shift could happen.

Nina Owolabi: I was over here *snapping* when I heard they are experts in their own experience. I was like, *absolutely*. And Leo, I want to turn this one over to you. It's like, you are an expert here, right? And so how would *you* like to see the SAC *grow or evolve* as you're getting to elongate your tenure, but even after you're gone? What is your hope for SAC in the future?

Leo Hamza: I think this is one of my favorite questions, honestly, because I was a member of SAC, as we all know, and SAC is all about leadership. We visit schools across the state, seeing and hearing many wonderful opportunities those schools have to offer. However, most of our time is spent in a single room behind closed doors, which we listened to a speaker, which is great. We've learned a lot and we gained a lot from that, made us a better student leader. But as a *leader*, I often wonder what others are thinking when they walk past our meetings. I wonder, do they have good ideas? Are they *shy* like I was? Are they involved or [do they] want to get involved and don't know how or where to begin?

A leader is only as strong as his weakest link, of course. So, I would like to see the Student Advisory Committee members giving speeches to student bodies across the state instead of us just *receiving* lectures from other individuals. I think that would be an exceptional thing to see. I would like to see the leaders of the Student Advisory Committee building other leaders. I think that's the most importance of being a leader. A student leader is not just leading everybody, but teaching everybody else how to become leaders and essentially becoming better than you are, becoming wiser and stronger.

And then SAC members could motivate others to overcome being shy and articulate the wonderful ideas they perhaps have caged away in their minds and to teach and *show* student bodies how to get involved on their campuses and even in their local governments. *That's* what's very important to me is you don't got to be politicians; just stand up and advocate. All advocating is is just standing up for what you believe in. Young adults need to know, they *must know*, that they matter. Like I said, they don't have to be politicians; but become advocates. Advocacy is very important. We all have something we believe in. So

when those beliefs are shared, you know, again, weeds can be pulled and articulation begins to *grow* through collaboration and experience. And this can build a really strong foundation. Our state needs *really good* leaders.

Nina Owolabi: And it sounds like that is happening at the Illinois community colleges. And I mean, what I love about what you shared, really what you're talking about is living into your expertise for the student leaders who are on campus, really *leaning* into that expertise *to be* able to kind of 'each one teach one,' right? To be able to continue to open up those spaces and doors for others.

With that, Deana, are there tips that you would give to those who are working with student leaders? Kind of holding the attention of what Leo shared, are there particular tips or advice that you would give to those who either want to work with student leaders or are currently working with student leaders on their campuses?

Deana Schenk: Yes. Thank you for that question because I think it's really important because there are so many people who *do* want to work with student leaders, but, you know, what does that actually look like? And first and foremost, show up as your authentic self, right? You're *asking* your students to come and bring the struggles that they're seeing on campus, the concerns they're having and being vulnerable, so the leaders need to show up in that way as well. Again, we are not the experts in this. I always say, 'I'm just here to take notes,' right? [Laughs] When we're in SAC meetings, I *often* say that. And so, I think bringing your own self there and then treating the students as partners, not as just participants. *Really* inviting them into meaningful roles where their contributions shape the *outcomes* and just shape the structure of the time that you spend together. So, it's about more than just checking that box for representation of students and individuals.

At the same time, yes, my job is to keep the notes and that type of thing, but also to create some structure without overdirecting. And so, I think that's a really important part. It's sometimes hard for us as leaders to not get in our own way. Students are going to be more effective if they have a clear framework to operate within, but they *also* need some flexibility to define their priorities, the approach, the flow of meetings, the focus, all of those types of things. So, there's a balance between providing agendas and timelines and decision-making pathways that keep the work moving while still leaving time and space for students to lead those discussions, to identify issues, and to propose those solutions. So just striking that balance, I would say, is *really* key to build both the confidence of the students and the impact that they have.

And then I think another thing that leaders really need to think about is how they're going to provide context and invest in the development of those leaders. Student leaders are

navigating systems that even those of us who are *in* those systems sometimes find complicated and difficult to navigate, right? Institutional governance, state policy, funding structures, those are *all incredibly* complex. So as a person who works with student leaders, I think it's really important to take the time to explain how decisions are made, who the stakeholders are, what's *actually* realistically able to be done at a state level versus a federal versus an institutional level, and, you know, where the influence exists for students to really help move their ideas ahead. So, I just think it's helpful to *build in* that opportunity for that kind of skill development and that understanding of processes, and as well as opportunity for things like public speaking or policy analysis or advocacy, because those are all important leadership skills to have.

I would say the third is to be really intentional about access and inclusion. Students face a variety of challenges being engaged in any kind of leadership role. I mean, they have time commitments, they have families, they have jobs and course loads. All of those things make it *really difficult* to engage. And then on top of that, people who engage in student leadership don't necessarily represent every student, as Leo spoke to. So being really intentional about how you can build *space* to bring other voices in to make room for those voices, I think is important. I'm still working on it. I have not perfected this, but even one of the slight changes I made when I became the SAC advisor was I started having meetings every month and one month would be virtual and one month would be in person because not everybody has the capacity to travel. So just trying to make small, incremental changes or decisions that can really bring as many people into that space as possible becomes really important to working with student leaders.

And then finally, pretty basic, but follow through and closing the loop with the students. If students take the time out of their extremely busy lives to share their ideas, they really deserve to know what happens next. You know, where is that going? And that is even if a recommendation really can't be implemented. Because ideas come up that can't happen this year or can't happen at the state level, but they need to know why it couldn't happen or where it could go next, what was considered. Because I think it's really important to demonstrate some respect for their contribution, and having that transparency is really going to build the trust. It's going to make sure that we keep engagement going forward, and it's going to reinforce that student voice is really an essential part, not an afterthought, of the work that we're doing.

Nina Owolabi: And kind of a key takeaway that I get from that is, you know, you kind of noting just how important of an incubator student leadership is for, like, learning, for sharing, for collaboration, for mentoring and kind of uplifting that expertise that the students *already have* and helping to provide that structure. That's *so critical*, and I know

those are things that you're working to do into this next season with the SAC. And so as we wrap, I'd love to hear from you both: What really excites you most about continuing this work into the next school year?

Leo Hamza: It's exciting because I get to continue to perfect my voice. I get to continue to improve the way that I articulate myself. So this way I can get a clear message to other students so they can become leaders and *they* can go ahead and bring forth their ideas, their concerns.

This work is amazing. Like I said, it builds friendships, it builds connections, it builds a lot of bridges. As I said earlier, we all have a lot of great ideas. And when those ideas come together, we can build something much greater and much bigger. And we can actually make *really* great things happen in our great state of Illinois.

Deana Schenk: I will start by saying what excites me about continuing this work is just the direct engagement with students. At a state level, and even at an institutional level, leadership doesn't always get the opportunity to engage one on one or in small groups with students nearly as much as we would like to. And so, I am fond of saying this is my *favorite* part of my job. And Nina, you read my bio, so I have a lot in my portfolio, but this is my absolute favorite thing to do. So just continuing to meet these student leaders, I get so energized by being part of the group and just hearing what's happening and staying connected to the campuses. What's exciting about that is being able to then help translate that student voice into what we hope will be real, tangible change and continuation of growth to make the community college system better for our students. I just find that being in a position to help elevate student ideas and connect them to policy and decision-making is incredibly motivating.

And also excited about long-term term impact. The work that Leo was talking about around the community college baccalaureate—it continues to move forward. And as we see it progress and hopefully finalize, to think about what that's going to do for our system and for our students and for our state throughout the year. And that *comes from* the work we're doing with students directly. So I think that that's a *big* part of it.

And then what really just keeps me energized is the constant evolution of this work. Needs of students really are changing frequently, and it requires that we are very adept at *listening* and then *adapting* and improving how we engage with the students and how we respond to their needs. You know, there's just always more to learn, and that makes this work, you know, challenging, obviously, but also extremely rewarding. So, I'm excited to continue to learn from our students in the next year.

Nina Owolabi: And what a great note to end on. I wish we had more time. We could just keep going and talking about how amazing student leaders are and how important they are to seeing real tangible change move forward for community colleges.

One thing I just would like to throw out there is if there are students who would like to get connected to the [SAC](#) or [Advocacy](#) Day, how might they be able to do that?

Deana Schenk: Typically, the representative from each community college is the student trustee, but as Leo mentioned, he was president of PTK and was involved as well. So, if someone's listening to this and would like to get involved and is not the student trustee, certainly reaching out to their student government is always a good way to make sure that they're engaging. They can also reach out to me directly and, you know, find out how they can learn more about the work that we're doing. And I'm *always* happy to talk to students as well. You know, talking to their campus leadership can also be a way to engage. But going directly to that trustee, right, their student trustee and letting them know they're interested in engaging in it. Because I will say, I really lean into my SAC members to make sure students show up. We had over 200 students at the state capital this year for Advocacy Day, and that is *not* because of me. That was because of Leo and his peers who went out and brought people into it and talked about what *they* were interested in prioritizing and what they were bringing to the legislators.

So, if folks are interested in connecting, connect with your trustee, your student trustee, your student government association president, and *they* can bring you into these conversations and make sure that you know about Advocacy Day and the work that's being done. And the more students we have, the better, because then we *get* a more robust student voice involved in the discussion.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you again to both of you for being a part of the conversation today. If you would like to explore more on OCCRL's work on student leadership, please visit our website to find our [resource page](#). Again, thank you to our guests for being able to talk today about student leadership and coming to the podcast. And thank you all for listening.