UPDATE

ON RESEARCH AND LEADERSHIP

Setting the Spark to Light the Flame of Equity in Education for All

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Office of Community College
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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The drive for educational equity across post-secondary institutions in Illinois continues to gain momentum from policymakers and institutional leaders. Yet, despite improving attainment rates overall, we know that pockets of communities across the state remain underserved by our current policies and practices. We are committed at OCCRL to supporting equity efforts through collaborative research and scholarship. We understand that measuring the "average" does not mean opportunity for everyone. Instead, we must continue to support progress among our state's most marginalized populations and communities. This edition of *UPDATE* summarizes a few examples of our focus – the role of an equity-centered mindset as part of program review, investigating college completion rates in rural areas across the state, and the relationship between prior learning assessment and racialized equity.

We are also excited to welcome back the "Democracy's College" podcast with an excerpt from a conversation on Former Foster care youth led by Dr. Chequita Brown. These narratives remind us that, as Ida B. Wells once said, "The best way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them." We hope this edition informs and inspires you to direct your light toward those hidden by the darkness of inequality.
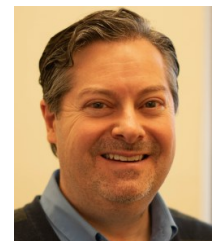
Dr. Lorenzo Baber

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Peer Review Initiative the Focus of March Program Review Meeting

OCCRL to assist by creating equity-centered rubrics in education streams beyond CTE

By Sal Nudo

The first in-person Program Review Advisory Committee (PRAC) meeting since 2019 began in a lighthearted yet introspective way. Meeting participants were asked to relate their favorite spring activities, describe something unique about themselves, talk about their goals, or say what they excel at, depending on what color Starburst wrapper they selected from a bag of the popular candy.

The varied answers and frequent laughs from the icebreaker activity at the meeting, which included staff members from the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), aptly led into the enthusiastic, in-depth conversations that took place at the I Hotel and Conference Center in Champaign on March 29.

"Going back to in-person (meetings) and engaging in conversations is beneficial," said Dr. Osly J. Flores, an assistant professor in education policy, organization and leadership at Illinois who began the meeting with the icebreaker. "I look forward to having more in-person discussions with the group."

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> " "Going back to in-person (meetings) and engaging in conversations is beneficial," said Dr. Osly J. Flores "

PRAC and ICCB coordinate a statewide system review of instructional programs of study provided by community colleges in Illinois. The primary goal of the committee is to support these institutions in making campus-level decisions related to the quality, cost effectiveness, assessment, and improvement of programs. A program review manual and supporting materials are provided by ICCB to guide the process.

The purpose of the four-hour session in March was to discuss the details of creating equity-centered rubrics for program review at Illinois community colleges. In addition, participants talked about how to attain, train, and support peer reviewers, which will include faculty and administrators, for a pilot initiative in program review starting in 2024.

Cherie Meador, dean of academic services at Moraine Valley Community College, has been involved with program review work for more than 10 years and has been a part of PRAC at OCCRL for two years. She said the advisory committee has reached a point in which members are looking at program review from an equity lens that goes beyond just CTE, and that there is a great deal of evidence-based benefits to having a peer-review process with program review, particularly for instructors.

"That feedback is very valuable for our faculty as they move their programs forward," she said. "It also allows for some external peer team building, so those who serve as peer reviewers will see the benefits of having that experience being on a team."

Along with the benefits to the colleges and the professional development that takes place, Meador said the peer-review process helps reveal what institutions may be neglecting when it comes to students, especially regarding equity in classrooms, spaces in which individuals have varied abilities.

"When you're so close to a program," Meador said, "sometimes you overlook what might be missing or something that you may not be doing well."

ICCB sent out requests for program review participation in April and will select review teams in May. Team training will take place

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over the summer, with the reviewing process to be completed by December. By the start of next year, reviewers will receive feedback from peer reviewers, thus beginning a pilot program in which there will be a peer review template.

The goal is to support program review processes through equity-centered rubrics across disciplines. OCCRL spearheaded that development with the "Equity-Centered Rubric for CTE Program Review in Illinois Community Colleges" tool, as part of a participatory action research study supported by ICCB.

Participants of the March meeting agreed that equity-centered rubrics within program review will vary from program to program because each one is nuanced. Nina Owolabi, a research assistant at OCCRL who is just starting her work with the office's Program Review Illinois project, said it is not necessary to start from scratch when creating varied equity rubrics, but that the language should be adaptable from rubric to rubric to accommodate different disciplines. OCCRL, she said, can provide that assistance.

"Taking all these ideas and being able to, ultimately, truly support this process in a way that is most useful to those who are going to be using it," Owolabi said. "Really grounding what other folks are experiencing, what they're seeing, what they're doing day to day."

Meador said those who are closely involved with program review or curriculum in Illinois may want to get involved with OCCRL's program review advisory committee to better understand the process and discover inventive ideas coming from colleges.

"We work with what we have sometimes, and sometimes our resources are different at colleges, whether that's a human resource or financial resources, and so those sharing of ideas really allow us to be innovative in our own way," Meador said.

*Learn more about OCCRL's Program Review Advisory Committee at **occrl.illinois.edu/pri/advisory**.*

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Supporting College Completion in Rural Illinois

Spotlighting Communities of Color

By Jasmine D. Collins and Marci Rockey

The state of Illinois comprises 12.6 million residents across 102 counties. According to 2022 U.S. Census population estimates, approximately 14.7% of Illinois residents identify as African American/Black, 0.6% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6.1% Asian, and 60% white. In addition, about 18% of residents identify as Hispanic of any race. Although more than 8.6 million residents live within Chicago's nine-county region, geographically, the state is mostly rural. In recent decades, rural Illinois communities have faced significant educational opportunities and economic mobility challenges, primarily due to agriculture, mining, and manufacturing jobs being replaced by technological innovation and automation (Bieneman, 2016).

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For both rural and urban communities in the United States, postsecondary educational attainment and economic prosperity are closely coupled. However, urban degree attainment continues to outpace rural regions nationwide (Farrigan, 2021). In Illinois, rural communities exhibit lower high school and college completion rates than non-rural locales, and rural students are less likely to enroll in college immediately following high school. When rural Illinois students go to college, they are more likely than students from non-rural areas to enroll in community college (66% compared to 47%, respectively) (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2021). Rural Illinois comprises less than 1.1 million residents across 62 counties. The racial demographics of rural Illinois are roughly 3.4% African American/Black, 0.4% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.7% Asian, and 91.2% white with just over 3% of rural Illinoisans identifying as Hispanic of any race.

Given socioeconomic and demographic differences between its rural and urban communities, it is easy to think of Illinois as a "tale of two states" (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2009). With rural Illinois being over 90% white, one may also falsely equate rurality with whiteness, devaluing the needs of rural people of color who "face systemic barriers to opportunity, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, while giving rhetorical priority to the concerns of an imagined white rural monolith" (Rowlands & Love, 2021 para. 6). Taking a closer look at Illinois' rural communities, however, reveals that over 18,000 Black and 17,000 Hispanic/Latinx residents live within the rural counties of Alexander, Bond, Cass, Douglas, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lee, Pulaski, Perry, Randolph, and Warren. That is 8.5% and 8.1% of the collective population of those 11 counties, respectively. For simplicity, we have loosely termed these 11 counties RCCs or Rural Counties/Communities of Color (Collins & Rockey, forthcoming).

The average attainment rate of an associate's degree or higher for residents aged 25-64 in this cluster of RCCs sits at 28.5%, twenty percentage points below the state average of 48.3% (Lumina, 2023). Sixty-five percent of all Illinois residents aged 16 and up participate in the workforce compared to an average of 53.5% among these 11 RCCs. Lastly, at 15.5%, the average poverty rate among the 11 RCC counties is 3.4 percentage points higher than the Illinois state average of 12.1%.

Research suggests that affordability, college knowledge, individual aspiration, familial influences, and high school and community factors each shape higher education access, participation, and outcomes for rural residents (Roberts & Grant, 2021; Sowl & Crain, 2021). Given the prominence of community colleges as access points to postsecondary education for rural and racially minoritized students in Illinois, it is critical to consider this intersection in policy and practice. This perspective is especially important to understand in the context of the identified

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RCCs in Illinois served by 13 colleges across 11 separate community college districts (See Table 1).

The sociopolitical context of rural Illinois differs significantly from state leadership. The state-level policies have centered on a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, resistance at the local level is evident throughout the state. One of the community colleges that serve as an RCC canceled diversity programs in 2020, citing Trump's executive order that prohibited diversity training (Kyaw, 2020). When the state recently adopted legislation requiring libraries to adopt anti-book banning policies to be eligible for state funding, all 19 Senate Republicans that largely represent rural and suburban parts of the state opposed it (Savage, 2023). The broader context of extreme partisanship can serve as a barrier to anti-racist change at the local level. The contemporary political reality makes the lack of support for state policy initiatives to advance racial equity in education and employment in RCCs (Collins & Rockey, forthcoming) especially problematic for community college practitioners seeking to advance change in their local districts. As such, the below recommendations are provided:

Recommendations

- At the local level, leverage the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment required by Perkins V to engage PK-12, employer, and transfer partners in identifying and addressing localized racial equity gaps. This approach creates collaborative efforts to address the root causes of systemic and racialized gaps evident across educational and employment contexts in rural regions of the state.

- Rural community colleges, particularly those that serve RCCs, should utilize a race-conscious approach to the program review process. There are several OCCRL resources to support community college faculty and practitioners, including the "Equity-Centered Rubric for CTE Program Review in Illinois Community Colleges," found on the Program Review Illinois section of the OCCRL website, and the "Program Review as an Opportunity to Drive Anti-Racist Change" brief written by Marci Rockey, Colvin T. Georges Jr., and Jewel Bourne.

- Expand the Workforce Equity Initiative (WEI) and Illinois Education and Career Success Network (IECSN) into RCCs and the community college districts that serve them. While no RCCs are currently served through IECSN, identifying funding to support capacity-building in rural communities is a priority moving forward (Njuguna, 2020). For the few community colleges that serve RCCs as part of WEI, there should be an assessment of the extent to which there is participation from rural students of color.

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- Provide technical support for rural community colleges to develop and implement race-conscious equity plans as required by House Bill 5464 (Illinois.gov, 2022). This support could be modeled from that provided by the Partnership for College Completion which is concentrated mainly on institutions in the Chicagoland area.

- Prioritize state funding support specific to rural community colleges. State community college leaders nationwide have identified that those in rural areas will face the most significant financial strain emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic (Bray et al., 2023).

Table 1.

Illinois RCC County-Level and Community College Characteristic

County	Assoc+[a]	Black	Hispanic	Local CC[b]	CC Black[c]	CC Hisp[d]
Alexander	22.3%	30.8%	2.2%	Shawnee	14.4%	5.2%
Bond	30.9%	6.4%	3.9%	Kaskaskia	4.3%	2.4%
Cass	32.2%	5.7%	20.7%	Lincoln	10.4%	4.1%
Douglas	30.1%	0.95	7.6%	Parkland	13.3%	8.9%
Jefferson	33.6%	8.9%	3.1%	Rend Lake	4.5%	2.1%
Lee	31.7%	6.4%	7.2%	Sauk Valley	3.0%	15.2%
Pulaski	25.0%	29.5%	2.8%	Shawnee	14.4%	5.2%
Perry	24.9%	9.8%	3.5%	John A.	8.9%	2.1%
Randolph	22.7%	11.4%	3.7%	Southwestern	19.2%	7.0%
Warren	32.7%	3.1%	10.5%	Carl Sand.	7.1%	8.6%
Lawrence	26.8%	11.4%	4.2%	Frontier	0.8%	2.2%
				Lincoln Trail	5.5%	3.5%
				Olney Cent.	1.5%	2.1%
				Wabash	4.6%	2.0%

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Notes.

    a.   Percentage of adults aged 25-64 with an associate degree or higher as reported by the Lumina Foundation, 2021

    b. Local Community College as defined by Illinois Community College Board

    c.   Percent of undergraduate students enrolled, Fall 2021, Black or African American, IPEDS College Data 2022-2023

    d. Percent of undergraduate students enrolled, Fall 2021, Hispanic/Latino, IPEDS College Data 2022-2023

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Democracy's College Begins Anew!

Three-time host Chequita S. Brown brings her curiosity, in-depth questions, and enthusiasm to the first OCCRL Democracy's College podcast in two years.

Top left to right, Chequita S. Brown, Kate Danielson, Tricia Wagner, and Anna Wandtke

On June 1 OCCRL will revive its Democracy's College podcast, a series that began in April of 2017 with a show hosted by Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, who talked to guest D-L Stewart about racial equity and justice in educational settings.

The latest Democracy's College interview with three-time host Chequita S. Brown will continue the podcast's focus on P-20 education pathways that highlight research and leadership. As always with OCCRL output, the realms of educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students are at the forefront of the conversation.

Dr. Brown's previously hosted Democracy's College discussions drew attention to youth-in-care individuals in Illinois and how they can access educational resources to pursue a postsecondary education, as well as the impact of campus-based support programming on foster care collegians' postsecondary access and retention.

In the upcoming episode, Dr. Brown and her three guests discuss strategies on how to cultivate a foster-friendly culture on community college campuses. Check out excerpts from the show on the following pages.

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Chequita Brown: I am so excited about this conversation with you all because this is such an important topic, and I know that this content will be a great resource for our listeners. Why is earning a college education so important for foster youth?

Kate Danielson, **founder and executive director of Foster Progress:**
The outcomes for youth as they age out of foster care are typically pretty poor. We're finding that much higher proportions of this population end up experiencing homelessness and unemployment and incarceration, among some other really difficult circumstances. So, a college education, I believe, is still the best way in our society for students to have that economic mobility and to become independent and successful adults. And yet, it's a really difficult journey and it's not one that we are meant to travel on our own.

Chequita Brown: I would love for you all to talk about this connection between the work Kate is doing with Foster Progress and even students in the community at large. We have a nonprofit and we have a community college. Where does Rock Valley College come in with that? Where does this connection come in at with what you're trying to accomplish for college students with youth-in-care experience?

Tricia Wagner, **director of adult education at Rock Valley College:**
We're in the situation often of working with students who don't have some of those built-in supports and structures that Kate was referring to that others may have. And so, the idea of someone struggling because of barriers or because of lack of preparedness or just because of life situations isn't new to us. Embracing the individuals who have experience in foster care is very natural as a way to try to help individuals in our community connect with postsecondary education.

Chequita Brown: What does it mean to have a foster-friendly campus culture and why is this necessary for students who have foster care backgrounds?

Kate Danielson: Judy Havlicek, Amy Dworsky, and Elissa Gitlow published a research brief about how we can improve the postsecondary educational outcomes of students in foster care in community colleges. And one of the main findings they published was how college students really want their community college, their institutions to know about them and their particular needs. And so Rock Valley and, specifically Tricia, reached out to Foster Progress with some questions about students they knew of, and then I let her know that we offer these trainings, and she took me up on it.

Tricia Wagner: I remember when I first reached out to Kate. I had heard about the mentorship program they offer. She educated me about her services, the scholarships, the advocacy,

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their work, and then staff development. I have an e-mail from Kate that says we have these three trainings helping serve foster youth with trauma-informed care. This promoting the success of foster youth in postsecondary and then financial aid for individuals with experience in foster care. And I just about fell out of my chair because I just thought this is *exactly* what we need. Those topics are going to hit all of the high notes for what we're trying to do to wrap our heads around how we can make our community college a welcoming and supportive environment for this specific special population.

Chequita Brown: There are so many pathways to having a self-sustained, independent-earner income post-foster care. Can you talk about that and what we need to do to amplify and increase awareness about some of the benefits of career and technical education programs?

Anna Wandtke, Perkins coordinator at Rock Valley College: One of the great things about career and technical education is a lot of times there are stackable credentials. So, for example, you could start out with a very quick path to a CNA certificate and then you could be *working* in the field. And then the hospital system very well may pay for you to go back and get your nursing degree. Or, if not, you'd probably qualify for funding, which could pay for your nursing degree. So there's great opportunities to get in and out in the working field quickly, but that's not the ceiling. There are places to go from there.

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Delving Into Racial Equity and Prior Learning Assessment

By H.M. Kuneyl

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Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has been a contributing factor in adult education since World War II (Travers, 2012). PLA was popularized by the G.I. Bill and the desire to evaluate knowledge gained by military training; however, its inception has proven useful to students who have gained knowledge and skills outside of the classroom, both civilian and former service members alike.

What is PLA?

PLA allows students to receive credit for knowledge that has been received outside of the classroom (Garcia et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020; Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014; Klein-Collins et al., 2021; Leibrandt, 2020; Sullivan, 2018). PLA is mostly awarded by standardized examination, portfolio-based assessment, or by faculty-developed exams, which evaluate knowledge gained in nonacademic fields such as occupational and military service training (Garcia et al., 2020; Leibrandt, 2020).

Benefits of PLA

Studies have shown that receiving credit for prior learning increases completion rates for adult learners by 2.4 times the rate of those who did not partake in PLA (Hayward & Williams, 2015). These findings are especially true for Black adult learners who experience an "equity boost" from PLA, which closes the completion gap between Black adult learners and their White peers (Klein-Collins et al., 2021). PLA can also help students feel recognized for what they already know. In a recent study examining community college students' experiences with PLA, one student explained that because of PLA they felt like they were "not starting from square one" (Berek & Kortegast, 2022). In another, a participant was able to utilize PLA to receive college-level credit through the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and her skill as a heritage Spanish speaker. These are just some ways in which PLA can be used as a culturally affirming practice within the community college and higher education writ large.

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This policy brief examines previous research centered on racially minoritized adult learners and PLA usage. It is for community college personnel, educational researchers, and university stakeholders who have an interest in increasing degree and certificate completion rates. PLA has been shown to increase completion rates for racially minoritized adult learners, community college students, and low-income students (Hayward & Williams, 2015; Leibrandt et al., 2020).

PLA and Adult Learners of Color

Although PLA is theoretically available to all students, unequal access to it and underutilization remain concerning issues. Unequal access to PLA can also be examined through an intersectional approach as only 11% of adult learners receive credit from PLA, even though many more may qualify (Klein-Collins et al., 2021). These alarming underutilization rates parallel with usage patterns within low-income and Black student populations, which increases the urgency of targeting the intersectional population of low-income Black adult leaners who can benefit from PLA.

Leibrandt (2020) cited lack of information about PLA as a commonly reported hindrance across racial divides. Klein-Collins and Olson found that Latinx individuals participated in PLA at a rate of 15% as compared to non-Latinx individuals who participated in PLA at a rate of 45% (2014). Additionally, Black adult learners were found among the least likely to know about PLA of any racial group (Klein-Collins et al., 2021).

Recommendations

A review of the literature surrounding PLA and racially minoritized adult learners resulted in the following recommendations for increasing racial equity.

The first is to increase access to PLA for racially minoritized, low-income, and civilian adult learners (Garcia et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020; Klein-Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2018). Participants in Leibrandt's 2020 study recommend early and proactive advising to connect students with PLA and improve communication. Other studies took a more general approach, calling for transparency in policy that would aid students in understanding the eligibility to receive PLA (Garcia et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020; Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014).

The second recommendation to improve racial equity surrounding PLA and adult learners is to build up better avenues for communication. Participants in Leibrandt's 2020 study recommend early and proactive advising to connect students with PLA. Other studies took a more general approach, calling for transparency in policy that would aid students in understanding the eligibility to receive PLA (Garcia et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020; Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014).

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The third recommendation to improve PLA is to increase equity and access within the context of PLA by offering several types of PLA (Garcia, 2020, Goldstein, 2020; Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014; Klein-Collins et al., 2021). As mentioned, PLA can be administered in diverse ways from standardized tests to more individualized portfolio assessment, which can better suit a unique learning experience.

The last policy recommendation that will be included in this brief is reconceptualizing the price and affordability of PLA. Federal financial aid does not currently extend to PLA. Three studies are united in their recommendations that federal student financial aid be extended to cover the price of PLA (Garcia et al., 2020; Klein-Collins et al., 2021; Leibrandt, 2020). Currently, only Indiana allows students to use state aid to pay for PLA examinations (Gacia et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Moving forward, the benefits of PLA are well established and have proven effective for racially minoritized adult learners. However, Black adults remain among the least likely to utilize PLA (Klein-Collins et al., 2021). The pathway to racial equity runs through the need for financial support without which access to PLA is only hypothetical. Practitioners and policymakers must prioritize access and utilization of PLA as a vital mechanism to increase racial equity and retention within college degree and certificate programs.

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The mission at the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) is to use research and evaluation methods to improve policies, programs, and practices to enhance community college for diverse learners worldwide.

OCCRL was established in 1989 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The office is affiliated with the Department of Educational Policy, Organization & Leadership in the College of Education.

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