

Democracy's College

Episode 20: Student Affairs Strategies for Supporting Diverse Community College Collegians

- Dr. Fox:** Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in 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 at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu. In this episode, Francena Turner from OCCRL talks with Dr. Amelia Parnell, the Vice President for Research and Policy at NASPA, about strategies that student affairs professionals can engage in to support diverse community college collegians.
- Ms. Turner:** We'll go right into the first question. Dr. Parnell, you have a rich career from being a Policy Analyst for the Florida Legislature to serving as Director of Research Initiatives for the Association of Institutional Research to your current role as VP for Researching Policy for NASPA. Please share what attracted you to the field of higher education.
- Dr. Parnell:** I guess I should be honest and tell you that I really did not know about higher education as a field of study until I got through my masters work, which I had chose business. So, my real career goal as an 18 year old was to go into Corporate America, and so I didn't really have higher education or anything associated with it on my radar. I like to think of it as kind of serendipitous. I ended up at a university as a internal auditor after I finished my masters degree, and that's honestly what gave me the chance to learn a lot about how institutions operate.
- I shared an office with a colleague, and month after month after month as I was doing my work, I would come back to him and ask him big strategy focused questions like, "Why does an institution do this?", or, "Why do they do that?" "Have they considered this, or have they considered that?" Out of the blue, he said, "Have you ever considered getting a degree in higher education administration?" I said, "Well, no. Why do you ask that?" He said, "Because you are annoying me." Now, he didn't mean that like in a mean way, but it was truly, "You have so many questions that you need to dig into, and they're really big strategic questions. You might want to consider researching this."
- So, that's honestly what got me into higher education, but in terms of what has attracted me and made me want to stay, I think it's truly something much more heartfelt. I really do think of higher education as a vehicle to help people pursue their dreams, and in some instances, change their life circumstances. So, now that I'm in those positions that you named, so I'm researching topics that influence students. I'm discussing and writing about policies that should help them. I'm working with institutions about how they can gather more useful data to allocate resources appropriately. It seems like all of my prior work

experiences are now starting to come together. So, as long as I have opportunities to do those things, I'll stay attracted to the field.

Ms. Turner: Okay. Going further, in your role as VP for Research and Policy for NASPA, you have steered work on co-curricular transcripts and comprehensive student records. As it is important to capture learning beyond the classroom, can you share more, and in particular the findings specific to the community colleges that were part of the project?

Dr. Parnell: This really connects to this notion that sometimes people think community colleges, because of their commuter feel and that students are coming and going frequently, and in most cases they're not living on the premises, that perhaps maybe out of classroom or co-curricular opportunities are just not there. I would say it's actually the opposite. So, community colleges offer lots of clubs, activities, service experiences, all types of things that help students gain proficiencies, particularly in job ready skills.

So, from the project aspect, NASPA partnered with AACRAOs, so that's the Registrars and Admissions Officers Association, and we worked with 12 schools to help them do more focused work on getting students engaged in the co-curricular, and not just that but documenting what they've been learning and what they've been doing. So, two community colleges that stand out, two from the project, are Borough of Manhattan Community College, which has had a co-curricular transcript for years to document all the things they've been offering. Even before they became a part of the project, they were doing this because they thought that was just the right direction to go and to equip students with something that they could use to tell their story.

Similarly, LaGuardia Community College, they're doing an e-portfolio as well as badges, because they have so many hands-on learning experiences, service opportunities, and just all types of fun ways to keep learners engaged with the institution. So, I'd say the findings that are specific to the community colleges is that they really do have a lot in common with many other institutions that are saying, "The co-curricular environment is ripe with the opportunities for students to learn and give practical experiences." I would challenge the assumption that students on those campuses couldn't have just as much of a rich experience.

Ms. Turner: I would definitely agree. My formal higher education started at the community college level, and I was able to take part in so many activities. So, I'm a strong proponent of community college students being active on campus.

Dr. Parnell: Excellent.

Ms. Turner: What opportunities does NASPA provide community college practitioners and researchers?

Dr. Parnell:

I'd probably put them into a couple different buckets. My role at NASPA, as you mentioned, is that I lead our Research and Policy work, so I'll talk about those two things first. From the research perspective, we're definitely getting into more court issues related to higher education, so big and broader themes particularly related to how students learn, which environments they learn in, how they pay for college, all sorts of things. So, from our research perspective, any time we're looking at specific issues like emergency aid to help students, or even the co-curricular learning opportunities that you just mentioned, or how we provide high quality advising, we always try to make sure that we get the community college perspective in there.

We do a number of surveys where we're talking to VPs of student affairs, or even front-level staff, or mid-level managers, and we're asking them, "How are you providing timely resources to students?" If we ever do a study and we don't have a strong enough representation for community colleges, we have to go back to the field, because it wouldn't provide the balanced narrative that we need to in order to influence our professional development offerings. So, from there, I'll segway into professional development. Yeah, the core of NASPA is a membership association to help student affairs professionals, get the skills and tools they need to do their jobs better. So, we definitely welcome the opportunity to engage with community colleges.

I don't know if everybody knows, but we have a dedicated Community Colleges Division, which is comprised of community college leaders from across the country, and they meet regularly and talk about issues or to that student population. We also have a Community Colleges Institute, which focuses on effective practice and it gives professionals a chance to network and share with each other. I'd say the third bucket is our policy work, which is where we keep community colleges in mind as we examine all types of higher ed issues like borrowed repayment. So, you know the tax legislation that's going through right now? That's definitely relevant to community colleges. We talk about issues related to concealed carry or sexual violence. Those are also issues that are not specific to one institution type, and we want to elevate the voice of the community college perspective too.

I know those last few examples are not the most happy examples, but I can say the policy can be fun. In all those areas, research, policy, and professional development, we're looking to provide a more holistic set of resources for practitioners and researchers to engage with NASPA.

Ms. Turner:

Okay. I'm sorry. Along the same lines, I've found that there are community colleges that don't have standalone student activities, offices, or student government organizations. Considering what we just talked about in terms of the necessity of certain skills and experience to transfer and employment outcomes, could you talk a little bit about this and the assumption that non-traditional, most often non-traditional by age, students aren't interested in engaging on campus outside of the classroom?

Dr. Parnell:

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I would definitely challenge the assumption that learners who are not traditionally aged are less interested in engaging with the campus outside the classroom, and it's because I think those narratives are put forward mostly because of the profile of students that we see in front of us about community colleges. For instance, we hear the narrative that they're often part-time or that they work lots of hours, but I honestly think that working and attending part-time are really not exclusive to community college students anymore. I think if you look at the profile of today's college students, it's changing, and that meaning more of them, both at community colleges and four year institutions, are working while they attend college.

The example I probably would give you to support my challenge of the assumption is the State University System of New York. So, SUNY, the system, has several community colleges in it, and they have been doing an applied learning initiative for at least the past three to four years. So, they break that applied learning program up into three areas. They have SUNY Works, which looks at cooperative education, practical experiences, and internships. They have SUNY Serves, which looks at service learning, and community service, civic engagement, and volunteering. Then they have SUNY Discovers, which focuses on kind of field study, and entrepreneurship, and things like that.

Within the SUNY example and the community colleges that are apart of that applied learning initiative, it may not be that every student is interested in all those different types of things that I mentioned, but honestly, going by the participation of community colleges in that system and apart of that initiative, I think that it's safe to say that community colleges' students are definitely interested. I think we just have to make the offerings more flexible so that we can consider their balance of work, and school, and family, and other demands.

Honestly, like I said, considering today's college student, that's not an issue that's core and specific only to community college students. So, a long-winded answer, I can say that I would challenge the assumption that learners who attend community college are not interested. I think they're very interested. I think it's on us to make the experiences more flexible for them, but they would definitely participate.

Ms. Turner:

I definitely agree. Among your research interest and expertise in student engagement and how student involvement, volunteerism, and campus organization membership affects retention, what role have you found student affairs professionals to play in fostering academic and social engagement that aids student persistence?

Dr. Parnell:

Well, I think we have several roles, but if I had to list one at the top it'd probably be that of connector, so as you know, student affairs professionals who work in institutions. If we have a mission that's holistic, or hybrid, or the idea that integrated learning should be occurring, basically that what students are learning outside the classroom should connect really closely or as closely as possible to what they're learning inside the classroom, student affairs

professionals will be the ones that continually nudge students to connect their learning in that type of way.

They're looking at the places where learning happens, and I do think that to the extent that student affairs professionals can put that type of framing around learning for students, and talk to them, and encourage them to start thinking holistically about their learning, and how they might document that in the e-portfolio or a co-curricular transcript, how they might tell their story even before they graduate, I think students will start to see college as being worth their investment and they'll make more efforts to stay on the campus.

A second way I'd say in terms of connectors is that we have the capacity to connect students to mentors. I'll give you an example with that. Clinton University has their university professional internship co-op program, it's called You Pick. So, their Career and Professional Development Office runs it. Basically, in the past several years, they have placed hundreds of students from all types of financial backgrounds in paid on-campus work positions. In those positions, they pair students with mentors who help them both develop, of course, job ready skills, but they also mentor them about all types of things they'll need once they finish college.

So, I think an under-explored but soon to be extra-explored area of research will be the impact of on-campus employment, and not just for the purpose of earning a wage. Work study is fine, but I'm thinking about the number of student affairs divisions that hire students in housing, they hire them in recreation, dining services, other auxiliary services. Those types of on-campus work experiences both help the student connect their learning in tangible ways with what they're doing in the classroom, and it also connects them to professionals on the campus so they can make relationships with.

So, I think all those things add value for the student, and they see the investment of a whole lot of money as being worth it for them. I think that as we say that ... as we've seen the literature show, students who are more engaged and connected to the institution will likely persist longer than those who probably don't feel that way.

Ms. Turner:

In article published on higher education today, you wrote about several ways students affairs professionals could serve as change agents with racial diversity and student activism around inclusion, support, and retention. How might student affairs professionals best reach or engage students who may be skeptical and disheartened by university decisions or actions?

Dr. Parnell:

I read the questions that you gave me ahead of time, and this is the one that I think I spent the most time thinking about because it's so relevant, honestly, considering everything that's going on right now. If I had to frame it in a way that seems tangible, I might suggest that it all starts with the mission of the institution, and how decisions are made, and to what extent those decisions connect to the mission. Considering today's racial, political, social, financial

climate, I can totally understand why students would be skeptical, disheartened as you mentioned, and even maybe disappointed with the way their institution is making decision. I think that leads to my next point.

To some extent, I imagine that maybe students might have less of those feelings if the institution pushed harder to be more thoughtful and thorough with explaining how those decisions are made and how those decisions connect back to the mission. So, what I'm talking about is strategic communication, and that type of work takes a lot of time, and it's really hard. A lot of times, things are happening really quickly. The influence of social media makes it hard to get the narrative out there consistently, thoroughly, and into the right students at the right time, but I think it's necessary because typically one main question that students will probably have is, "Why?" "Why did the institution take this position? Why did they do this? Why did they not do that?"

I would imagine that senior leaders are having to make lots of tough decisions all the time, but to the extent that they can talk to students or explain to them clearly and help them be more informed about how those decisions connect back to the mission, it might ease a little bit of the skepticism. Now to be honest, I don't think the institutions will ever be able to make every student, or every professional, or administrator in the campus community happy all at the same time, but considering how much money we accept from student for them to come to our institutions, I think it's fair for them to ask a question of why often and in a lot of different contexts. It's on us to provide clear, good rational for how our decisions connect back to the institutional mission.

Ms. Turner: Thank you. My last question is, what call-to-action or advice would you offer our listeners relative to engaging diverse students and promoting equitable student learning outcomes at two and four year institutions of higher learning?

Dr. Parnell: Okay, good. Well, this is the easy one, I think. It's not easy work, but it's the easiest suggestion for me to offer, and it's something that doesn't really cost a lot of dollars and cents, it's the investment of time. I'd say make time to talk to students. It sounds simple, but it's really very, very, very necessary. I think every student will always have a different story about how college impact them, and influences them, and why they choose to make an investment in higher education. So, I think we have to continuously fuel our minds and our hearts with those stories, because it makes us more flexible and thoughtful leaders and practitioners, and it helps us stay connected to why we do this work.

We have to make it intentional. We have to make time for it. So, in terms of practical examples and suggestions I'd offer, I'd say invite a few students that you don't know that have had very little, if any, contact with to go to lunch with you on the campus. Then after the lunch, follow up via email. Let them know that you're available and you're accessible should they have any questions or should they just want to know a little bit more about ... in case they want to know a little bit more about what's going on the campus. How's that for a long sentence?

First, if you see a group of students sitting together, especially a group that seem to represent a diverse background, go over and ask them if you can sit and talk for a while. If you do, ask them if their experience with the institution is what they thought it would be. If they say no and it relates to something that you can address, ask them can you keep in touch. I think that for all students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, they want to feel like their voice is being heard, they want to feel like their concerns matter and that they actually belong at the institution. I feel like we, as professionals of all types, not just student affairs, we can help with that.

So, it's a large task. It's a time consuming task, but if we each commit to helping directly a few students and we multiply that by all the student affair professionals and all the other administration on campus, we could really cover a lot of ground. My advice is just get out of the office a little bit. Make some time if you've got 30 minutes and you're planning to have lunch at your desk, pick a student and ask if they have some time to sit and chat with you. They'll probably look at you like, "Are you serious? Why do you want to talk to me?", but you would be surprised the number of students who would be really, really impacted by just saying, "Someone from the campus took time to speak with me, and didn't want something from me, and didn't want me to do anything extra, but just really wanted to hear my voice about how my experience is going." So, that's my advice. I know it sounds cheesy, but I really think it makes a big difference.

Ms. Turner:

Actually, I don't think it sounds cheesy. The reason for that is that I've been a part of conversations like that both here and at my previous institutions, and students can really tell when an administrator, or a professor, or even a staff member, we can tell when they're genuine. When we know that they're genuine, it really goes a long way. Oftentimes in my opinion, student affairs professionals have talked so many students off the ledge.

Dr. Parnell:

Right, right.

Ms. Turner:

So, I think that's awesome.

Dr. Parnell:

I agree. I mean, I think there are definitely going to be positions ... I think we get the lecturing in student affairs of having close contact with students. We're running the programs that students come to outside of classrooms, so we have a lot of access to them, but there are a lot of other functional units. I won't name them specifically to kind of call them out, but I think we could probably all name a couple functions that probably don't need to interact with students very much. Students might not even know who work in those offices.

I think we as student affairs can lead the way and pull a colleague from another office together. I'm not saying five professionals to one student, that's intimidating, but it might be that we partner with another functional unit and do like a lunch and learn and invite students and say, "Hey, this is your business

office. This is your registrar's office. This is your admissions office. Do you know how these function work together to give you the best experience possible?"

Again, it's more time. I'm definitely not talking about a new initiative. I know initiative fatigue is real, but what I am suggesting is that we work on the campus and students are there coming and going all the time. If we don't take a moment to talk to them just because, not because we want something from them, I think we miss an opportunity to get the real and relevant perspective of what they're experiencing. Like I said, college costs a lot of money, and so I know that we get those surveys from any other thing that we invest in, from airline tickets to Amazon. They want to know how your experience is. I think it's important that we do that from a customer service standpoint for students as well.

Ms. Turner:

Okay. Well, I want to thank you for agreeing to do this podcast today.

Dr. Parnell:

Thank you very much for having me and for the invitation. It was a pleasure to talk with you today.

Dr. Fox:

For more information about supporting diverse collegians through student affairs, we recommend that you explore the resources available through NASPA at www.naspa.org. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occr.illinois.edu/democracy, or send them via Twitter @occr. Tune in next month when Vilma Mesa, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Michigan talks with Dr. Tatiana Melguizo, Associate Professor in the USC Rossiers School of Education, about equity minded approaches to mathematics education. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.