

Democracy's College

Episode 32: Integrating Equity Into Program Review

- Announcer:** Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P through 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, Dr. Amanda Smith talks with Dr. Heather Fox about integrating equity into program review. Smith is the dean of transitional opportunities and career education at Rock Valley College.
- Dr. Fox:** Well, welcome Amanda. I am so glad that you are able to join us today.
- Dr. Smith:** Thank you very much.
- Dr. Fox:** I have a handful of questions here about the work that you've been doing at Rock Valley College. You have been helping to lead an effort at Rock Valley College to improve program review by making it more equity-driven and innovation-focused. And I'd really like to start with a little background about the context that led up to this change; specifically, what were you trying to address by redesigning program review?
- Dr. Smith:** Well, the college as a whole is charged with breaching our community, including those in underserved populations. As such, we designed to really design a systemic approach to focusing on equity throughout the whole college, and we just felt that program review seemed like a logical place to infuse this.
- Dr. Fox:** Would you describe the redesign program review model and where the college is implementing the model?
- Dr. Smith:** Well, we've been developing a very prescribed approach to advisory committees, which will then inform program review. The model that was introduced through [Pathways to Results](#) was woven into our advisory committee structure, and each advisory committee now meets four times total each year. Twice as a whole group and twice as a focus group.
- The focus of the advisory committees rotates every year with the first cycle focusing on pathways in equity, and the second cycle focusing on relevancy and innovation. This establishes a continual assessment process, thereby closing the loop on assessment. The data that is reviewed in the innovative practices that would be implemented are captured for inclusion in the program review. In this way, program review itself will become a *living* process, rather than just a snapshot from a particular semester or year.

At this point, we are finishing up our second year of implementation. We started last year with two advisory committees, and then we added another advisory committee this year. Each year we continue to refine the process, and make sure that it really fits with the culture of our college. We plan to continue to add programs every year.

Let me just walk you through what we do in one year through this model. Say we're looking at equity and pathways—that would be our in-depth topic of focus for the year. And by this, we mean equity is ensuring students persist and graduate at equitable rates at the secondary- and post-secondary levels. And ensuring that we are investing resources and designing programs to address the needs of students with different experiences and educational background.

So we are specifically going to look at race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, age, and any other characteristics that we have identified as relative. Our first step is we look at the outcomes in equity selection. So we're going to look at specific outcomes that we find of interest. Whether that be the rates of completion or how many are getting to a certain point within their study, such as completing 15 credits in a certain area. That is done as the whole, large advisory committee.

Then the next step is our focus group. During the focus group, we're going to look at some data to really try to understand what's happening in our programs. This data is disaggregated so that we're able to look at *all* of those different characteristics that I mentioned earlier. With that, we're able to see if it's truly an area of concern that we should focus on.

Then in the spring, we look at the process and the practice. So we look at not only what are the big things we want to effect change with, but how are we actually doing it. And then we look at one of the actual practices at the college that we can effect change with that will really make a big difference on the whole picture. And then the last step that we have is that we meet with a focus group again, and we look at developing and implementing an intervention.

Dr. Fox:

And what changes have you seen at Rock Valley College as a result of the new model?

Dr. Smith:

We've actually begun seeing changes in all three of the programs. Automotive service technology, welding, and fire science. A new certificate was created in welding in an effort to better support our industry partners. Recruitment efforts for our automotive program has been refined in order to collaborate more efficiently with our secondary partners. As a result, we've been able to add a cohort of first-year classes and they filled already. And lastly, the fire-science program has been able to respond to a complete redesign of the curriculum to meet the changing required standards for fire science.

Dr. Fox: Were there any lessons that you've learned in the implementation of the new model, and are there things that you tried that did not work as anticipated?

Dr. Smith: Well, we definitely underestimated the time that the leads of each of the program areas would need to devote to the new model. This model involves the chair of the program constantly being willing to consider change needed to improve their programs, making it more accessible to underserved populations. This is way more than was required in the previous advisory committee structure, or even the program review, which was completed every five years.

We also didn't realize the level of involvement that would be needed from the dean of each area. We found that without a dean to hold the chair to a timeline, it was very easy for the deadlines to get missed. Our chairs are responsible for so many different things that it can just get lost.

Dr. Fox: Do you have a call for action for those who want their college program review processes to support equitable outcomes for their students?

Dr. Smith: Oh, we would *definitely* encourage colleges throughout the state to adopt a new program review process that considered disaggregated data, looking at ways to more effectively serve *all* of the special populations in our district. As we are intentional about making changes to our programs to improve outcomes for underserved populations, all will benefit: the students, our college, and our community as a whole.

Dr. Fox: Awesome. And the other thing is are any of these resources available anywhere?

Dr. Smith: Yes. We modified the resources that were provided by Pathways to Result, but we would certainly be happy to share all the resources so everybody can build upon what's already been started.

Dr. Fox: I really appreciate you coming in and doing this podcast with us today.

Dr. Smith: You know, we really have put a lot of time and effort and thought into this whole project, so I really appreciate you giving me the time to share it with our listeners. I enjoyed my time with you.

Announcer: Tune in next month when Kristal Raheem talks with Dr. Muhammad Khalifa about culturally responsive school leadership. Khalifa is a professor at the University of Minnesota.

Background music for this podcast was provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening, and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.