

# Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education

## Podcast 5: Culturally Sustaining Practices Across Institutional Types

**Host Krystal Andrews:** For our fifth and final episode, we discussed culturally sustaining practices that support racially minoritized students across institutional designations within a community college sector. For this episode, we will hear from Dr. Vicki McGillin, resident fellow with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in undergraduate education; Marcus Peanort, associate dean for student affairs at Montgomery Community College's Germantown campus in Maryland; and Jameta Rogers, director of TRIO Student Support Services at Prairie State College in Illinois. I was also joined by my colleague Colvin Georges Jr., a graduate research assistant in the office of Community College Research and Leadership, for an insightful and engaging discussion about the important role administrators play in creating campus spaces, services, and policies that reflect the needs of racially minoritized students within the respective roles of our panelists. Let's take a listen.

And welcome to our newest episode of the podcast, "Culturally Sustaining Stories Across Institutional Types." To get us started today, I will allow our panelists to introduce themselves.

**Vicki McGillin:** Hello, my name is Victoria McGillin. I am resident fellow at the Gardner Institute in Brevard, North Carolina. We are a not-for-profit organization that work with colleges and universities across the United States, helping them on teaching, learning, student success, retention and completion, all of our work focused on advancing equity, social justice, and mobility in higher education. I'm a clinical psychologist with my doctorate from Michigan State University, and have served as a faculty member and academic leader on both public and private colleges and universities. I retired, or thought I had retired, after serving as provost at Otterbein University in Ohio. Prior to that, I had served as vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Linfield College in Oregon, and I've served as the associate provost of Texas Woman's University in Texas.

I've had the experience of working at both large urban institutions and small rural colleges, and my work at the Gardner Institute has focused on assisting institutions improve the academic success, retention, and completion of their students, most recently with cohorts of small and rural colleges. And so I've been asked to speak in particular about the experience of the rural colleges. In our work, we guide institutions in the creation of a diverse representative task force to examine evidence disaggregated by race, gender, Pell eligibility, first-gen, all of those, and coach their teams through the development of their own institutional plan and the implementation of the plan to address student success.

I'm not a product of rural cultures, but I have lived in rural locations in most of my adult life, and I feel that most of my interest in working with both diverse minoritized populations and working with the rural colleges comes from my own research experience and the exploration of the concept of resilience. And when I'm thinking about resilience, I think both personally and professionally about something that's more than grit, more than growth mindset, more than the internal factors, but it has to include the external support systems that are available to enable students to access the skills and the talents they need to develop in order to be able to succeed. So, I'm eager to engage in this conversation today, hopefully with those perspectives in mind.

**Marcus Peanort:**

Hi, this is Marcus Peanort. I am the associate dean of student affairs at the Germantown campus of Montgomery College, which is in Montgomery County, Maryland, right outside of Washington, D.C. Thank you for the invitation to participate in this conversation. My institution is a large, comprehensive, multi-campus community college. We have an unduplicated annual enrollment of about 54,000 students, about 31,000 of which are credit students in fiscal year 2018. So, in my role as associate dean of student affairs, I chair our campus behavioral intervention team, and I also adjudicate student code of conduct violations, and then I support the various departments within our college-wide access unit from what we call our Raptor Central, which is our entry point for incoming students and also continuing students to get services in our phone line, our assessment centers, our recruitment office, as well as the Germantown campus counseling and advising faculty and staff that support students with the academic advising piece.

**Jameta Rogers:**

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this pertinent topic. My name is Jameta Rogers, and I currently serve as the director of TRIO Student Support Services at Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, Illinois. Chicago Heights is in the southland Chicagoland area. It's kind of urban area. I am a first-generation, low-income students survivor, so I am a TRIO Student Support Services alum. I've been in TRIO over 20 years. Over that time, I've worked with pre-college programs, helping parents and students understand the college process. I've taught college success courses. I've served as the director of dual credit, helping students to explore college at an early time while still supported by their parents, and now we're serving them, helping them to be successful at the level of college.

Student Support Services has been around over 50 years. It's part of the Higher Ed Act of 1965. It's one of the original TRIO programs. I'm one of the first people in my family to pursue a terminal degree, so continuing on in that low income, first generation stead. Thank you again for having me.

**Host Colvin Georges:**

All right. Research of culturally sustaining practices in Pre-K through 12 education context describes several key practices that educators can use to teach students in culturally sustaining ways. Those practices include: one, learn about students' backgrounds external to the school setting; two, integrate

students' cultures into the classroom curriculum; and three, examine your own assumptions in order to recognize privileges and biases. How would you define culturally sustaining practices for minoritized groups in postsecondary settings, especially community college settings, and what does this mean to you both personally and professionally? And then as a follow up, we wanted to know, are there any practices that you would like to add based on your experiences working with students from minoritized groups?

**Vicki McGillin:**

Great question. This is Vicki McGillin. From my experience, culturally sustaining practices are those that recognize and honor and work with the cultures of the students, staff, and faculty you have, not the ones you used to have. They involve recognizing the diversity of those cultures, how they've changed, and how that's impacting both students' lives and the lives of their families and their communities. And I think in particular about models that strongly understand the nature of the students' larger community, the community they come from, their family communities, their cultural communities. And in my mind this impacts the dynamics both inside the classroom and outside. This is about both classroom pedagogic approaches that engage students most actively and most deeply in an environment that is sensitive and aware of their cultural differences, and a whole set of cultural and campus experiences that are supportive of the students as well as their families' experiences.

It's also about equity and outcomes, particularly when you recognize how grossly disproportionate those outcomes are for minoritized populations. We see this most significantly with a lot of the colleges and universities that we have worked with, whether it's looking at DFW and incomplete rates in the gateway courses, what happens in those critical gateway experiences where minoritized populations are the ones that are *least* capable of successfully transitioning through the courses that will *literally* define their future in the classroom. And we see it as well in campus retention initiatives that are based upon 20th-century models that are very much modeled on a white middle-class notion that college is about separating the students from their family and culture and launching them out into the wider world on their own, rather than recognizing the ways in which they are embedded.

When I think about culturally sustaining practices, and I think about practices that I would want to see added, the *more* that we can do that truly recognize the cultures and the families that our students come from, and think about the ways in which we can and should be engaging and making them a part of the students' experience throughout their college experience that actually prior to their admission, to the extent that we can begin those encounters with the students in their communities, as far back as middle school, I think we'll have a *far* greater chance of ultimately achieving better outcomes, particularly for minoritized populations.

**Marcus Peanort:**

This is Marcus. Actually, I'm going to start with the second part of that question about adding practices because I think it dovetails nicely with what was just said

previously in terms of the community piece. And one practice that my institution implements that I think speaks to this culturally sustaining practices are community engagement centers. I do not in my capacity work directly with them, but I know about the work that they do. They're located throughout Montgomery County in Maryland. Like I said, we're like right on the edge of D.C. up into the border of Frederick County. We're a pretty large county, but these community engagement centers kind of bring our institution into the communities. I mean, we are community colleges, right, so we're already housed there, but physically our campuses aren't everywhere, so these community engagement centers are kind of an extension of our campuses. They're designed to empower students and county residents by connecting those underserved and underrepresented communities with the college. So that is the direct goal and purpose, is to engage with a variety of different communities, specifically right outside of our Takoma Park Silver Spring campus, which is the *right* on the Washington, D.C. line. There is a *huge* Ethiopian population, so we have a specific Ethiopian community center designated to provide support to that community by virtue of the populace there.

So, I think that just speaks to the community center focus and the mission of the community college. So, going back to the front end of the question, I'm no scholar of culturally sustaining practices, but I see it in the simplest form as inclusion, so any of those practices that are inclusive in nature and being in the student-affairs area, I think the office that comes to mind immediately for me is our Office of Student Life, where our students get to show up as they are, be who they are, and the programming, the opportunities, whether it's clubs or activities, really represents the essence of the various cultural backgrounds that students come from. There's a high level of visible diversity at the institution. There's a lot of boxes that our institution checks. To see that be displayed with the programming that the students are allowed to do, and free reign is great.

So I just find it to be that inclusive spirit at the institution that feeds into the culturally sustaining practices, even for myself as a professional. The ability to engage with other people that look like me and identify as a black African American male, so to be able to engage with other people within my institution that look like me, I've had similar experiences, either lived experiences growing up or also work experiences. It's just a great opportunity to keep rejuvenating me and allowing me to re-center our focus on the work according to our students.

**Jameta Rogers:**

This is Jameta, and the way I saw this question or this answer was the acknowledgement of the students. So, I concur with what my other colleagues have noted, and I think that we have to acknowledge the student and the background from where they come from, and to do that we develop our services around that. And I say "we" to include TRIO Student Support Services. We do that through intrusive advising, relationship building with our students, modeling, productive interaction with one another, because we need to build up our confidence, the confidence of the students we work with, because

before they came to the community college, they were in K through 12, and K through 12 the teacher was always right. You know, your parent would stand up for you if you were wrong, but as a culture, I know I was raised “Don't question the teacher.” And so, we try to help the students find their voice respectfully, help them to advocate for themselves, help them to see the balance between “This is taking ownership of their education and also learning leadership while at community college.”

It's difficult, it's challenging because it is a commuter school, but these are skills that the student will definitely need at the four-year institution level. One thing we've talked about on the institution level is bringing the families into the fold more, so having a family orientation so that the student has more of a support system when they're trying to work with their experiences. It's an orientation for everybody because we're working with first-generation students, so the parents, the grandparents didn't go to college, and so we need to work at it from *that* perspective with the student. Professionally, the way I do that is I hire staff who look like the students. It's my intent to hire staff who are *passionate* about empowering our students to find their voice, to be comfortable with themselves, to navigate the systems that our college uses so they can go on, because the goal of TRIO Student Support Services is that the student goes on to a four-year institution. And so, we're equipping them all along the way.

We try to present a positive black family. We serve a high population of African American students. Something that my staff and I talk about all the time is being able for them to see that, “Hey, you know, we're married, we have significant relationships, and we want them to see how that plays out,” or how it complicates life or how it *complements* life when you're trying to pursue an education. These are things that they haven't seen at home, but it will benefit them along the way because it helps them to see, “Hey, if they did it, I can do it.” We want them to see that we are from the same backgrounds as them, but also, we have been successful in our pursuit. I'm not a scholar on this topic as well, but I've researched it as I've been doing it a little while. The studies show that, you know, more of the students can see a person that looks like them be successful, model the way, then the more successful a student can be.

Personally, it's very important to me because I'm among the first in my family, like I said, to pursue a higher education, so I didn't have role models. I didn't have anyone to bounce my ideas off of, so it's important that I model that for our students and that my staff does that. My staff is passionate about the modeling, and it makes us vulnerable, but it also helps the students to see we're not perfect, but we're here to support them.

**Host Krystal Andrews:** This is off to a great start. So, our next question, can you describe your institutional type—for example, rural, minority serving, tribal college, what have you—along with the most rewarding experience that you've had when providing culturally sustaining practices at your respective institutions? What was this

experience like and how is it rewarding for you? Were there any challenges that existed when trying to support these communities of students?

**Vicki McGillin:**

I want to begin by differentiating between rural college students and rural colleges. Basically, one in six students are in rural schools, whereas only three out of 10 rural students have an associate's degree or higher. They are by definition experiencing educational system, cultural, and economic barriers. These lead to lower aspirations, financial needs, lower achievement level when they're in college, and there is actual resistance and tensions around leaving their rural communities because of the strength of the rural community. This all gets exacerbated for marginalized populations and students of color in general, who are even less likely to attend. Rural colleges, however, I'm speaking here about, for the most part, small institutions—they are located in areas of under 25,000 residents or fewer, they tend to fall into two large clusters: One is a group of institutions that, for the most part, were formed in the late 19th and early 20th century, predominantly religiously affiliated church-related schools that were shaped by immigrant farming communities to serve the children of those farming communities.

We also see HBCUs and tribal colleges that were set up specifically to address the needs of their immediate communities. You do tend to see some North/South divisions in terms of the number of minoritized students in those institutions. The second clusters are community colleges that were set up in the educational deserts, frequently located in rural parts of the United States, and set up to address workforce needs, particularly when the rural community, the rural economy started collapsing, and the idea of a good job not requiring a college degree right out of high school was no longer a given, living in those rural communities. We see there as well, the North/South division, in terms of the schools tending to reflect the nature of their surrounding communities in terms of representation of minoritized populations. One thing these schools share, whether they're independent church-affiliated schools or community colleges in rural settings, is that they're institutions at risk.

Their enrollments have all been slipping over the last 10 to 15 years or so. What we've seen in the independent sector, in particular, is enrollment slipping as these schools have sought to address the issue of the lack of diversity, particularly in the northern independent colleges, the lack of diversity in the populations. They tended to recruit minoritized populations out of urban environments, and when you think about how rural schools are actually pitched to high school populations, just go to a couple of the websites and you'll see the debate about urban versus rural colleges. You'll see that rural colleges are identified as great if you want a job in agriculture or the environment or maybe outdoor sports, wonderful if you're interested in outdoor sports. They have the advantages of having some less expense because there's fewer distractions. Most of your social life is going to be on campus. They have very little in the way of public transportation, so you're pretty much stuck there when you get there, and fewer opportunities in terms of internships, employment, et cetera.

It's not surprising that this is not exactly sounding like an exciting location, particularly for students coming out of urban environments. It's also not necessarily so exciting for students coming out of a rural environment if they're not seeking employment in the agribusiness area, looking for environmental jobs, et cetera. And that's one of the reasons we see their enrollments slipping. When I think about the best experience I've had with working with a minoritized population, I had the advantage in one rural college of working with a group of students that came in one of the earliest to the Posse Foundation collaborations between that institution and Posse, New York. I saw the *power* of bringing in cohorts of students, linking them with a mentor *right* up front, while still in high school. I also saw the power of their work with the campus communities to actually change the communities, to understand that it wasn't our job to acclimate these urban minoritized populations to a white, middle-class, rural kind of community and economy, but that it was our responsibility to actually change ourselves as a community.

And I saw the way in which they work with their Posse retreats that they would hold on campus to help the community grow year after year with more and more people involved in the process of *becoming* something other than a classic PWI culture, really changing experientially that institutional culture. It was personally involving, personally engaging for me when I began with that, with the first Posse cohort at my institution. The challenges are how do you replicate the Posse Foundation outside of offering 100% scholarships to students, and building an institutional culture that is willing to take on changing *themselves*, not just changing the complexion of some of the students who may enroll.

**Marcus Peanort:**

Montgomery College is designated as a minority-serving institution by the U.S. Department of Education, and specifically we're designated as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution. We have an enrollment of greater than 10% of Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander students. And this is unofficial, but I'm going to say it anyway: I think, considering our enrollment of Latino/Latina students, and the growing county demographic, I would say unofficially that we are probably an emerging Hispanic-serving institution, even though we had those designators. I don't necessarily hear that used as much within our institutional community in terms of us being a minority-serving institution, and I think because we have so much visual diversity, I think people sometimes would take it for granted. I think another interesting thing because of where we're located, we have a large population of international students, and our institution loves to talk about that.

I've been at Montgomery College for 15 years, and it's grown, obviously, in that time, and I think it's anywhere between 160- to 170-plus countries that are represented at our institution. We have students from all over, and I think it's by virtue of our location to Washington D.C. If I could, two experiences, I think, jump out at me the most, and one was early on when I first came to the institution in terms of engaging in Black History Month programming. It was something that did not exist when I'd come to the institution, or if it did it's kind

of here or there. So, I had the opportunity to pull together not only was it faculty and staff but the students, a *month* of activities. Greatest point, you know, we would have activities every day throughout the month of February designated as Black History Month activities and events. I just found it rewarding because it was really just meeting with people, developing this grassroots effort to create programming where students could feel excited about it, be involved with it, and reap the benefits of the programming.

And then also we have a what's called Boys to Men Mentoring Program for black and African American male students. And again, just being able to engage with students that look like me, some who had challenges, you know, similar to mine, but just to be that mentor, like how we talked about before, like mirroring, serving as a role model, an ear so students have that support person that they can lean on in times, especially times—now—to be that support person. So just being able to see students get to that finish line, and whatever that finish line is for them. Hopefully it includes a cap and gown, but if not, hopefully it includes a paycheck, right? So whatever that goal is for that student, just to be a part of that process I think is helpful.

In *both* cases, the Black History Month programming and the mentorship program, the main challenge is money. There is no finances, no budget dedicated to the programming efforts. It was going to our campus vice president and provost, going to the president's office asking for money for programming to bring speakers and to have publications for the programming. Even for the mentoring program, there was a former senior vice president of student affairs that helped get a grant, but, you know, I think we all know grants tend to run out at some point in time, then you re-up, but at some point sometimes the money just goes, and then, what does that say if you have to keep grant, after grant, after grant, and not be a line item of the budget? Those financial challenges have been an issue, and now even more so with our mentorship programs and efforts specifically designated for black and African American students. Our president is looking to dedicate funds. She's asked our advancement area to look at funds solely for this purpose, because it is an area that she knows the college needs to focus on even more.

And then lastly, I think one of the challenges with the mentorship program is this difference between our African American students who are native to the U.S., born here, versus our students who may be from elsewhere who tend to academically excel. They just have different challenges from a cultural standpoint, versus our native born, if you will, African American students, just show in different ways, and just trying to make that connection with those students who, in some ways, you know, they may look similar, their experiences are different. So just trying to acknowledge and see students for who they are, as was mentioned in a previous comment.

**Jameta Rogers:**

Prairie State is a public two-year institution. We are a minority-serving institution where 80% of who we serve are minority students. We have been



categorized as a PBI, so a predominantly black institution. We are a burgeoning HSI, Hispanic-serving institution, and one of the things that we have done on campus to continue the thought of helping students along on their journey is we have a TRIO club that is a sprout-out of the TRIO participants, and so I mentor them and help them. I'm the advisor for that club. And so, that has been a joy for me serving as their advisor, and some of the things that we've done to support their time on campus, or their experience in this arena, is we have had real talks with that TRIO club and the Black Student Union have co-sponsored. That was this year. It was topics that the students chose, and you wouldn't think that they would be so happy, or to sit around and chat, but they want that space. They want the space that's carved out for them to share their experiences and learn from others. That has been rewarding to me. It's been a challenge to get participation.

I think my colleague mentioned about funding. The good thing about this particular endeavor is that it didn't cost much. It just cost our time and it cost the setup. You know, we really needed to make a safe space for students. We couldn't go too deep into some of the topics that they wanted to as they were psychologically based, and we needed to have therapists or professionals there to address the concerns that students brought up. But it's been a *great* community builder for our students, because students of color, any student of color, the Latinos or African American, they need somewhere where they can get together with each other, talk about their experience, learn, and we're trying to provide that for them. That's one of my greatest experiences because I want to be able to pass leadership on to my students, and I want them to be able to get the idea of reaching back and helping another student, and helping *themselves* in the process, seeing how it is for them to express themselves, talk about their experiences, and learn from them.

**Host Colvin Georges:** All right, so for our next question, how are culturally sustaining practices reflected on your campuses on a daily basis? Are there any offices or departments in particular that are modeling these practices most effectively? How so? And as a follow up, could you also provide some examples of how you are implementing Guided Pathways or similar frameworks on your campuses using culturally sustaining practices?

**Vicki McGillin:** I'm going to respond from the perspective of the rural campuses that we have worked with and some of the lessons learned and some of the work we do. The most critical lesson, and this applies across all the processes we do at the Gardener Institute, has been the understanding that retention, completion, student success is the responsibility of the *entire* institution. It doesn't belong in one office or one department. And teams that are engaged in doing strategic planning to address inequities in higher educational outcomes *have* to reflect that. So they have to draw from academic affairs, student affairs, student success, institutional research, enrollment management, coaches, residential life—they all have to be reflected on these teams, if the intent is to produce a plan that would reflect the full needs of the institution.

Secondly, evidence is absolutely critical if you're hoping to do something that is going to change the institution. It is critical that it be based on your institutional evidence, and that evidence you need to be able to get access to on a daily basis. We find that in the work that we're doing, whether it's working with teams of faculty and staff on transforming gateway courses or with institutions planning student success initiatives, that by disaggregating their retention and graduation or DFW incomplete grades by race or ethnicity or Pell, et cetera, you see the outcomes of your current practices, and it becomes very, very, very difficult to justify continuing to doing what you're doing and to imply that this is somehow all about just a meritocracy. We also see it with our looking at retention framework that, just as Jameta pointed out, that critical need for belonging is absolutely important for all of our students on rural campuses that are predominantly white institutions, that belonging is somewhat easier to come by for students who do not reflect other minoritized populations, but for students of color, those kinds of gathering places where there's opportunities to find and talk with faculty and staff or students who look like, sounds like, and reflect my culture is critically important.

This is also going to be issues that urban institutions are finding when they've attracted rural students, because there's a tendency to also identify ruralness with lack of intelligence—that need to try and shape and change rural students to make them sound and look like urban students in that urban environment is very much at work there. So, any initiatives that are culturally sensitive, that really understand the nature of creating a climate that supports the diversity of your student populations, is tremendously important if you're going to want to be able to give a dent in that. And finally, when we're talking about teaching and learning, we have found for our teaching and learning academy and our gateways to completion work with institutions that using, of course, transformation framework that is embedded in culturally informed pedagogies, that recognize that this has to be both personal, cultural, and impactful for students is *critically important* if you're really wanting to transform the kind of work you're doing on a daily basis.

One of the advantages of rural institutions is that they're small, and so there is that possibility and that potential to often turn around things on a relatively quick basis. That ability to implement more actively engaged pedagogies that lets students be more who they are in the classroom can produce very dramatic effects, even within a single semester.

**Marcus Peanort:**

Wow, there's a lot of things swirling around in my head, so hopefully this comes out in a way that makes sense, but culturally sustaining practices reflected on campus, going to go back to an office that I mentioned earlier. I think our Office of Student Life is definitely a place where that comes out just by virtue of the diversity of the institution. Just looking out my window, watching students who at least seemingly appear to be different, engaging with each other, speaking in their native tongue, cultural dress, you know, it speaks to some of that cultural sustainability. Students can show up as they are and be who they are and it's

welcome, it's appreciated. And they can do that in a way that they feel safe about it. Another place that I think of that this might not necessarily come up often, but also our food service. I don't eat beef, but to go to the cafeteria to see beef patties and other types of options that speak to other cultures—food is an important part of our culture. So to see samosas and Indian cuisines and just food from other areas in the cafeteria, I think speaks to that culturally sustaining practice where students feel welcome. Nothing says *home* like a meal that represents your culture.

So I think that's important. Thinking about other areas of the college, so with food, though, we've changed our vendor for food most recently, and if I recall correctly, that vendor is a minority-owned, and I think woman-led, female-led organization, so I think that speaks to our business office looking for the opportunities to other areas that aren't necessarily big box or your typical food-service areas. I mean, I see some of those business practices in some ways being culturally sustaining, and then also marking the resources and strategic type of management area, doing things to *target* groups and hit areas where we're falling short. I've mentioned that I see our institution is an emerging-Hispanic institution. If I'm not mistaken, our enrollment of Latino/Latina students is above 25%, so maybe we are embarking upon getting those types of funds. The level of a Latino/Latina folk in our administrative ranks is slim. We have a lot of staff, facilities, lower-wage positions where we have a large amount of Latino/Latina folks in those positions but not necessarily represented in the administration, and not necessarily represented as much in the faculty, but yet 25% of our student population represents that group.

So I think our human resources area is looking at how do we address that in a way that makes sense, and we truly are reflecting what our students look like in the classroom and also in the ranks of the administration. Another one that I would probably shout out is my president's office. So my president is Dr. DeRionne Pollard, and I think just who she is as an individual, but also on her role as president, is a great model, and she encourages the college community, particularly our faculty, staff, and administrators to engage in culturally sustaining practices. I'm not sure when she brought this term to the college community, I mean, at least probably five or six years ago, but she started using this term “radical inclusion,” and it really was a call to action to the college to consider how we're ensuring *all* students feel welcome.

This may have been around the whole DACA conversations, the Defer Action for Childhood Arrivals legislation and all those conversations, but I feel like that term and that phrase really lit a fire under many of faculty and staff and administrators of the institution to do more, to have great conversations about inclusion and diversity and all that but moving more towards action and doing things that ensures that *all* students, faculty, and staff feel welcome at the institution. So I think, again, by virtue of who she is, a very charismatic, transformational leader, to see that message be *consistent* through her tenure at the institution speaks volumes, and even more so our board of trustees put a

public statement out saying they embrace the radical inclusion. Our county executive who is a leader in my immediate community and area was also involved. The county is embracing this idea of radical inclusion. So, just to see that to be a part of it, I think speaks to the culturally sustaining practices that exists within the institution but also throughout the county government.

**Jameta Rogers:**

We don't have many culturally sustaining practices at our institutional level on our campus. Sad to say with us being such a high-serving underrepresented student population. Similar to my colleague, we don't have a lot of people that look like the students in the higher ranks, but about a year ago we hired a VP of student affairs who is helping us right the ship where we are more student focused. His name is Dr. Michael Anthony. He has a broad experience with students, working with them and serving students of color. And so he's been helpful to help us to do that going forward. We have a male success initiative, so we have that on campus. We partner with them. We have Latinx outreach and they have an all-Latin alliance. We work with them closely to help do more modeling, as I talked about earlier, and intrusive advising for our students. We do workshops. With Dr. Anthony coming on board, he created an office of equity and inclusion, so, like-minded people can come together. So we come together with MSI, Latinx outreach, and Disability Services and we all talk about the Military Affairs Division. All of us come together and talk about how we can better serve students and some of the challenges that students can face.

So we're not at Guided Pathways; we're developing it, but we still use the intrusive advising model and the modeling, and we show them how to be successful through the workshops that we conduct with students.

**Marcus Peanort:**

Similarly, our Guided Pathways has not taken off as of yet. We are an ATD, Achieving the Dream, school, and I believe the Guided Pathways piece is a part of one of the things we're working on, amongst many other things. There's the Start Smart initiative, there's scheduling going on, which are all, in my mind, part of the Guided Pathways effort. I think that question is great, to be honest, about what culturally sustaining practices are part of those efforts. Honestly, I'm going to take that back to my institution, if I'm being honest, to see how that's being considered. I think academic affairs has its own master plan; some of what they're doing in terms of embedded coaches and all these support efforts. We have something called Achieving the Promise Academy where part-time faculty members are assigned to certain classes and students to help support them. And it goes back to another question about culturally sustaining practices or getting to know your students outside the classroom, and I think a big part of that is understanding the home environment students are living in, any academic deficiencies, not to any individual students fault, but just academic deficiencies they've experienced through their educational pipeline. Although not directly related to Guided Pathways per se, but these are initiatives that are embedding support to help our students be successful.

And I think it goes to what Vicki was saying about some things that are happening in terms of the data. We know where some students are not being successful in the classroom, so how do we buy them that embedded classroom support to help them be more successful? We know which classes students are getting Ds, Fs and withdrawing at a higher rate, so what support are we providing students to be successful? So I think some of those practices with those coaches and elsewhere throughout the college assist them being a culturally sustaining practice.

**Host Krystal Andrews:** All right, our next question: At your institutions, do you embed culturally sustaining practices into your daily scope of work for students with intersecting social or cultural identities; for example, being Latina or Latinx, low-income, differently abled, and LGBTQ and other identities? If so, can you describe what that looks like for our listeners?

**Vicki McGillin:** I'll speak again more from the data and the evidence, and it's obvious that for each identity element for which you collect data, you're adding one more factor of disconnection from a culture that's predominantly shaped by white male privilege. And as you add them together, and curiously enough, the ultimate impact in terms of the students tends to be not added to the multiplicative. The more intersectionality that there is, the higher the risk there can be for students, with a higher rate of vulnerability for students in an environment that's not responsive to them. The good news from what we have seen in our work with small rural campuses is that when you do work on increasing cultural sensitivity in education for *all* the faculty and staff, the impact can be fairly significant. These are campuses that because of their size, don't have the ability to be able to hire individuals who look and sound like every possible identity combination, nor can they potentially create programs that are of multiple, multiple programs for all of the possible intersectionalities, but when you have done a good job of professional development for your faculty and your staff, helping to create a community that sees itself as responsive to the individual student, to the individual learner, then it becomes possible to tweak for each individual student response that best fits their known needs, rather than necessarily creating a separate program which isn't going to be possible on a small campus.

In fact, in many of these campuses there may only be one person who has “equity” or “diversity” in their title is, in this case, potentially the advantage because *all* students have at least one place they know they can go to. However, it's not a panacea. The most they can do, and the best that they can often do, is just ensuring that *all* places on campus, as much as possible, are places where students can feel significant.

**Marcus Peanort:** This question, for me gets at the beauty of diversity and having so many cultures intersect, but also the challenge. There's a challenge; you can't be all to everybody, which kind of what our mission is too, right, to not be everything to everybody. As community colleges serving our communities, we want to make

sure we're providing services to everybody, but that's the challenge, and it's hard to do. So I think, in my role as an administrator and dealing a lot less directly with students but more policy procedure that impact students, having that awareness is important. So I think what that looks like where I sit is really an awareness of what's happening, and listening to those folks in the trenches and the front line that are working with students—the counselors, the recruiters, the staff, and our records, our registration areas, those frontline physicians who have, especially coming up in the next few weeks, who are going to be working with students day in and day out, trying to get them on-boarded, trying to get them out. Just hearing the challenges and trying to understand the structures that we have in place, the policies we have in place, are making it difficult for students to navigate but also difficult for faculty and staff to navigate as well.

That is just *always* going to be a challenge, but just that personal awareness of the challenges that exist, and then being able to move from just, "Yeah, I see it, I understand it," to taking some action. Even with the whole COVID-19 pandemic, just the nimbleness that the institution has shown in the past two and a half months almost far exceeds what I have seen in the past 15 years to be quite honest. The speed at which things had to change and move to support our students *and* faculty and staff was amazing. I would say that the biggest thing is just that awareness and being able to *ask* those challenging questions, being vulnerable, being uncomfortable about some of the things that we just take for granted as an institution, and digging in and working it out so we can move forward to make sure our students have best experiences.

**Jameta Rogers:**

We don't have an embedded practice that's culturally sustainable for our students on campus. It's allowed but it's not embedded. Working with TRIO, we do work with the students and we have stuff that we have adjusted our services to be more responsive to the students we serve, but the institution as a whole is still working through that process. We work with the Office of Disability Services to help the students adjust to campus where they might have some challenges. One of the challenges that we encounter is that TRIO only serves 165 students, and we have different guidelines and restrictions with our federal funding. That is something that we struggle with. Since I've been there, we've been trying to make TRIO more visible and accessible to all the other students. We have a lot of changes on campus with leadership, and hopefully the changes will be embraced and our students will continue to be at the forefront of what we do every day.

**Host Colvin Georges:**

For our last question, culturally sustaining pedagogy has been widely recognized as an effective tool to improve student success and retention rates for those belonging to minoritized groups. Educational scholars have asserted that culturally sustaining practices build on traditions that affirm students' cultural identity by addressing existing social, racial, and economic inequities in schools. How are you able to do this effectively at your institutions? What are some

barriers that exist considering the current national climate; for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, widening political divisions, et cetera.

**Vicki McGillin:**

I've had the very good fortune with my colleagues at the Gardner Institute to work with Bryan Dewsbury, University of Rhode Island; Stephanie Foote in the Gardener Institute; and Mays Imad of Pima Community College in their work on developing curriculum on inclusive pedagogies and learning sanctuaries. This is a part of all the work that we do with our gateway courses. They are powerful in helping shape the classroom climate and to help shape a student's sense of belonging, because if they don't feel they belong in the classroom, it's very hard for them to feel justified and belonging to the rest of the campus. Part of this has really involved moving beyond the kind of Western intellectual model of disembodied mind, sitting around being instructed by another disembodied mind, and having that give way to a recognition that we are embodied learning persons who are coming together for the process of teaching and learning. These have been very rich practices, and we have been *very* inspired by the work that our institutions have been doing in employing those practices. But we've found that they are powerfully important when and if the faculty themselves can be fully committed to the process.

Partly this comes from a commitment above. You don't do what isn't rewarded by the institutions, so partly the advantage to that, we have strong support from the chief academic officers for institutions that are involved in this curricular transformation work. But for other institutions that is not always the case. You can also find more local sorts of resistances at the disciplinary level. I have this conversation with my STEM colleagues, who will insist that there is no such thing as culture in STEM, that science and mathematics is above culture, and therefore there's no reason to *change* their pedagogy because their pedagogy reflects the purity of STEM rather than the culture of the individuals for attempting to convey STEM knowledge to others.

On the note of COVID, however, I did want to offer one tiny bit of hope. It actually may have helped, and if you had the opportunity to attend the *multitudes* of workshops that were happening free and online for any faculty member trying to learn how to do this work online for the very first time, and if there was any message that was consistent, it was that both faculty needed to be informed about trauma-informed teaching and learning, but they also needed, *above all else*, to teach with grace, as if this were a new concept that didn't need to belong in the faculty members' repertoire prior to the appearance of COVID.

To understand that their students were having lives out there, that they were dealing with those lives, that they were dealing with the COVID pandemic as well as everything else that was going on and wrong with their lives. And so as they thought about their teaching and learning, to take a step back and consider what was most important for students to learn at this point in time, and to consider how best their students could learn, particularly in an online or an

otherwise remote-delivered approach. And I think that message of teaching with grace, I *hope* it sinks in, because that is perhaps one of the only pieces of positivity and hope we can take away from this. What will happen in the summer and fall and beyond, we will learn.

**Marcus Peanort:**

I think one of the things that the institution is doing effectively, and I touched on this before, I mean, some of the coaching, but also, we have another program called ACES, Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success, I believe is what the acronym stands for, that focuses on students who come from various cultural backgrounds. How I identify these students is the academic low- to middle-class, coming from high school to college and not doing bad enough to be noticed, but not doing well enough to be noticed either. These are students that are kind of coasting and this is a program, it's a partnership with our local school, and I think that's one way that the institution is effective is programming, to get at some gaps in populations of students that sometimes are overlooked within our schools and within our community.

I think an important piece to what our institution is doing *better* is using data, data that we have, not only looking at the data and being comfortable with the data but using that to make informed decisions. Probably in the past three or four years, maybe a little bit longer, our institution started disaggregating data and looking at the performance, particularly of our black and brown, Latino/Latina students, and focusing on those disparities and what we should be doing differently to fill in those gaps. I mean, our graduation rate was not where it should be either, but just kind of the assumption that, "Oh, this group is not doing well" or "This group is doing better," but how do we put some things in place to turn that around? I think joining the ATD network has helped with that, and just *refocusing* on the data is important.

From the academic standpoint, and similar to what, Vicki, you were saying in that STEM area, one barrier for faculty in the academic side is that academic freedom is what I heard when she was talking; that faculty members have the right to teach their classes the way they want to, although that could be a barrier to academic freedom. In some ways it should be a part of the process of evaluation. The faculty member should be encouraged to think about how they can bring various cultural aspects into the curriculum-planning piece.

Thinking about our curriculum committee at our institution, I don't know how culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices are considered as new courses come up or as courses are re-envisioned; if it's not, it should be. As a part of that radical inclusion mantra, that should be something to consider. But nonetheless, I think the academic freedom could probably be seen as a barrier. I spoke about the visual diversity, so I think sometimes that's just taken for granted, and the assumption is that, "Oh, this is highly diverse students from all over the place. They're doing good," but as I said before that's not the experience for all students. We have some students struggling. We have a lot of students struggling. I think this pandemic has brought that to light in terms of the



requests through our foundation for support, essential needs, whether it's groceries or Wi-Fi. I think there's been some articles written and things published about students getting to campus somehow so they can access Wi-Fi, so there's still disparities, at least where I'm located. You assume because I'm in a highly affluent and highly educated county, I think there's some things that are just taken for granted and some things that are assumed, but, if anything, this pandemic has brought to light that there are some students who have gaps that need to be filled in order to be successful.

There's been some federal support to support some, but it won't support all, and all don't necessarily ask for what they need, too. So, it'll be interesting to see how things persist as this conversation on culturally sustaining practices goes forward. How we have to think about how we do our day-to-day work is going to change, and how we look at some of the work we're doing in this space of cultural sustaining pedagogy and practices will likely either be amplified or may have to change in some way.

**Jameta Rogers:**

I think that one of the things that we can do to support culturally sustaining pedagogy is to continue to create community. You know, as I've talked about before, I really think that our students need to see themselves reflected in staff, faculty members, administrators. They need to be able to *relate*. And I'm not saying that you have to be their friend or anything, but they do need to be able to see themselves reflected. Most of the research shows that students aspire to be what they see, and that starts at a very early age. When we're dealing with students who attend community college, they have already been dealt some blows in life. They wanted to go to a four-year; they didn't go, for whatever reason, whether it was financial or family obligation. And so, we need to, at the community college, be able to still give them an experience and a life lesson, but also let them be able to express and learn and grow. Creating that community helps them to do that. So in partnership with the other offices I talked about before, the MSI, Disability Services, Latinx outreach, we form a circle around our students and kind of bounce them back and forth between us.

If I'm not connecting with the students, one of them may connect, have a deeper connection. So, we really work on creating community but also accountability for our students. That's the big thing in our community where, if people don't notice I'm gone, then I'm just gone. But once you develop a relationship and a kind of "I know you're here, so if you're missing, I'm going to ask about you." The students appreciate that. It helps them. It helps the retention, it helps with all these things.

We are challenged with this pandemic that we're in now. We have taken to virtually advising our students. We do that through Google Meets, call them. And you would think if the student's not answering your email, they're definitely not going to answer your video call, but no, these students, that's how they communicate. They communicate through video, and they want to do Snapchat and all that. Now, we're not doing Snapchat, but we are letting them

see that we're at home working, letting them have our cameras on so that they can see us.

We did a training with Dr. Woods, and he reinforced the modeling that we've done, because he talked about students need to see how you're adjusting. They need to see how you are handling this, that you have your kids at home, that you have other responsibilities, but yet you still are conducting everyday business. Because some students are tempted in this time to give up, and say, "Well, I can't do school right now." And so, we're really just trying to encourage them and let them know the challenges are going to come, but that doesn't mean that you give up on your goals. The students that we serve are essential workers, so we're still trying to work to talk about time management and how you manage online courses. These students wouldn't have been ideal candidates for virtual learning or online; that's why they didn't pick online courses. So, just trying to get them over that angst and that apprehension about pursuing online courses because even in a hybrid setting, it's not comfortable to them because you're asking students who did not interact with professors comfortably in the first place, face to face, now to interact with them respectfully, but still exerting themselves about their needs.

We still have more skills to give our students, and we still have more challenges to overcome, especially with this pandemic, because, as my colleagues said, it's just putting a spotlight on the disparity that exists for different students. You know, everybody assumes this is the age of the Internet—everybody has it. But a lot of our students came to campus *for* that access, a lot of our students came to campus for that escape, and so just still trying to help them balance all their personal with their educational pursuits.

**Host Krystal Andrews:** This has been very insightful learning. You know, we've been talking this whole time about how you all, in your campuses, are supporting students, even in a time of a pandemic, and being nimble and responding to the needs of your students, even if there wasn't a pandemic going on. And I'm grateful that we were able to have these conversations today; that we were able to engage with you all and to really hear what's going on in your respective spaces and on your respective campuses. So thank you all for sharing with us today. We hope as we move forward through these uncertain times, you all will continue to be able to do the heavy lifting that needs to be done for students to be successful.

**Host Colvin Georges:** To close out our episode, we would like to thank our panelists, Dr. Victoria McGillin from the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. The Gardner Institute is a not-for-profit organization that works with higher education institutions across the nation to advance equity and social justice. Marcus Peanort works at Montgomery College, which is designated as a minority-serving institution; more specifically, an Asian American and Native American and Pacific Islander-serving institution. And Jameta Rogers from Prairie State College, which is also designated as a minority-serving institution. More specifically, Prairie State College has been categorized as a predominantly

black institution. The conversations today truly gave our listeners an opportunity to hear from practitioners engaging in culturally sustaining practices throughout their daily work with students, faculty, and staff. From today's podcast, we have learned about the various institutional types that make up higher education, along with how culturally sustaining practices are defined.

Dr. McGillin so eloquently defined this concept as educators that recognize, honor, and work with the cultures of students, faculty, and staff that are currently on the campus. This concept involves educators being able to understand and acknowledge the diversity of those cultures, how they change, and how they impact students' lives, the lives of their families, and surrounding communities. However, even with this definition, it is important for us to remember that simply having a diverse campus community is not enough for educators to employ culturally sustaining practices. There needs to be action steps involved, specifically by faculty and staff, so they can create a welcoming environment where all parts of students' cultural and social identities are welcomed and valued by the campus community.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, these institutions enroll more than 50% of students from racially minoritized backgrounds. However, are institutions doing enough to ensure student success and sense of belonging for students of color? Marcus Peanort from Montgomery College mentioned that his institution has adopted a "radical inclusion" approach. The president of his institution, Dr. DeRionne Pollard, introduced this concept to the campus. Dr. Pollard challenged her faculty and staff to think critically about what they were doing to ensure that *all* students felt welcomed. She wanted faculty and staff to move beyond having conversations about diversity, but to create action steps to address the needs of students from racially minoritized groups. This was embraced by the local and campus community, which promoted student persistence and retention.

Our panelists all represented diverse campus communities and shared their stories about using culturally sustaining practices. Jameta Rogers discussed her role as an advisor to a TRIO club. Even though Prairie State College did not have culturally sustaining practices embedded, as she noted, there were specific actions that staff within her area specifically were doing to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly those that are black. Other culturally sustaining practices included forming partnerships with local community centers. Mr. Peanort mentioned that his institution was able to form partnerships with the local community, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. He described this practice as a way to bring college into the community. By doing this, students from minoritized racial groups were able to participate in collegiate programs, further preparing them for the rigors of postsecondary education. Another culturally sustaining practice that one of our panelists mentioned was having staff representation on the campus that is representative of the student body.

When students are facing challenges and navigating barriers, they want to be able to connect with someone that looks like them, and able to relate culturally. Jameta Rogers has been able to do this effectively through the relationships that she's built with the students of color that she serves. She also employs an intrusive advising model, coupled with role modeling positive behaviors. As a result, she's able to help her students to develop leadership, build their confidence, and advocate for themselves. As a community college practitioner, Ms. Rogers understands that the transition from a two-year to a four-year campus can be rough. And while her students are enrolled at Prairie State College, she wants to make sure that she's embedding skills that are individualized and will benefit them once they leave Prairie State. All panelists mentioned the importance of being data informed when working with students. Having institutional evidence to support the needs of students from minoritized groups are essential to building a case for additional resources and making changes to the campus as a whole, or, more specifically, within the curriculum, particularly within STEM majors.

Certain theoretical frameworks that are used in the classroom are rooted in whiteness and often benefit white students while disadvantaging students of color. When institutional leaders take the additional step of disaggregating data by race, they're able to recognize the disparities of academic performance and strategize culturally sustaining practices to address these inequitable outcomes.

Once again, we would like to thank our amazing panelists for their thoughts and insights on this topic, and we would also like to thank our listeners for joining us on another episode of "Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education."