

Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 37: Advancing Equitable Outcomes in Higher Education with Focus on Transfer

Announcer:

Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students and P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Marci Rockey, a project coordinator at OCCRL, talks with Betsy Barefoot and John Gardner about their efforts to support higher education institutions in advancing equitable outcomes for students, especially as it relates to transfer.

Barefoot and Gardner are the founders of the Gardner Institute located in Brevard, North Carolina. Betsy Barefoot is a senior scholar at the institute and is involved in the development of instruments and strategies to evaluate and improve students' first college year and collegiate transfer. John Gardner serves as chair and chief executive officer of the institute, which was founded in 1999.



Marci Rockey:

In 2016, along with four other colleagues, you coauthored *The Undergraduate Experience*, focusing institutions on what matters most. The book includes the core themes of learning, relationships, expectations, alignment, improvement, and leadership. During the keynote address at the 2019 Midwest First-Year Experience Conference, you identified equity as an element that, if you were going to write the same book today, would be added. Could you talk about the importance of equity, and especially the responsibility that you believe institutions have to students as it relates to closing gaps in educational persistence and attainment?

Betsy Barefoot:

I think it's important, first, to state an assumption, and that assumption is that institutions, or any single institution, believes that it *is* important to make higher education accessible and inclusive for everyone. And I'd like to think that everyone believes that—sometimes I'm not sure. So I think we need to state that assumption, that *we* do believe that it is really, really important to make education at all levels, and in this case, higher education, equitable.

And of course, what is equitable? To me, equity means fairness, and that's not *necessarily* what is equal for individual students. So I think we need to draw that distinction if we're focusing on fairness or equity. And I'm really drawing from a lot of recent reading that I have done on inclusive teaching and learning. It's really important to focus on the individual student to the degree possible. You

know, I say that, and I know that that's tough. You can't necessarily design something different for every single individual student. But because of all kinds of differences that students have and their physical ability and learning ability, their past history, what they bring to a college or university campus, they really do require different approaches. And there's now *a lot* of very significant literature on inclusive learning and teaching, and that's how I think of equity. And just to give you a sort of run-through, it's really about being aware of your own bias or prejudices that you may not have thought about. When you attempt to treat students fairly, it's about building individual relationships.

Lots of authors talk about the importance of structure, that students who perhaps have had less success in academic life *really* do need more structure. They need to understand what's going on, why you're teaching and testing the way you are. And the acronym for that now is TILT, T-I-L-T. It's transparency and learning and teaching, and that's a really important body of information for your listeners. It's important to give all students lots of feedback, to find relevance in what you're teaching to their own lives, to help them be more self-confident, to foster active learning.

Everybody's heard those words and has their own ideas about what that means, to diversify content to make sure that you're not *just* using example that were developed by Caucasian males, but that you really try to diversify what you're teaching students. One big body of information that I think is really helpful here is what is known, again, by the acronym, U-D-L, universal design for learning, and that's, again, a good body of research and literature that can help folks assure that the way they are approaching higher education is equitable.

John Gardner:

Yes. We've finished this book, sent it to the publisher. The manuscript was in production before the election of 2016. Betsy and I have said a number of times, publicly, that if we had been bringing this book to closure after the election, we would have done some things differently. And one of the things we would have done is we would have called out this equity focus as a separate thing. Our original intent had been to embed that in everything else. We've long believed that, for example, if you have diversity programs, it's only in those programs that that objective gets addressed rather than trying to mainstream it and make it fundamental to everything you're doing.

So, the election, though, *clearly* represented or made clear that a lot of people who voted for Donald Trump felt left out, and much of the analysis and faulting in Hillary Clinton's campaign was that she and her team completely underestimated the way that rural people and people in "flyover America" felt that those on the blue East Coast states had utter disdain for them. And that certainly became more and more apparent to Betsy and myself.

At the same time, the work of the nonprofit organization, which Betsy and I founded in 1999, was marching along, and one of the things we were doing that

became even more apparent, coincidentally after the election of 2016, was the body of evidence that our organization has been collecting about the *grossly* inequitable outcomes for higher education in the U.S. as a function of race, gender, ethnicity, income. And that has taken on such an influential emphasis on the work of our nonprofit. At the same time, our board, they have been encouraging us to be even more explicit about the most important objective of our work is advancing the cause of social justice in our country.

So, the election in 2016 was a watershed. It certainly had the impact of further raising our consciousness for the importance of this kind of focus. It also brings up a fundamental question that spans the whole history of our country before we were the United States, dating back to the colonial period, and that is to what extent do our colleges and universities mirror the values of the larger society, and in effect emulate and seek to recreate the larger society in our campuses, versus trying to have campuses that have campus cultures that in some respects stand for an alternative set of values?

And in this case, we were part of efforts on many campuses to try to come across in our work as having different views. For example, towards the importance of immigrants in this country and the contributions they make. So many of the immigrants that have been coming into the United States are finding themselves doing work in rural parts of America that others have long found undesirable but that are necessary to make this economy work the way we've structured it. These people are doing work in rural America that they're still not being treated fairly or equally for, but they're playing a very significant role. That's another factor that I think figures the climate post-2016 that we didn't address.

In addition, Betsy and I have, in our work with individual campuses, we have been seeing the lack of equity that is afforded to rural people. I visited Virginia Tech last February where quite openly, there was discussion about the so-called NoVA people. NoVA stands for Northern Virginia. These are urban, upper-middle-class, prosperous, overwhelmingly white families and their students who now predominate at Virginia Tech.

And there's a lot of recognition that the original people that were designed to be the focus of service for a land-grant university are being neglected; they're not getting the same level of attention. Betsy and I have a couple we know here in our little town of Brevard, North Carolina, that has a daughter who's been very active in trying to promote more equity for rural students at the flagship university here in North Carolina, the public university, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where I think 20%, at the most, are people from rural counties.

And the whole university culture is being disproportionately shaped by all these students who are coming from more affluent, more resourced schools that are

producing highly competitive students who now dominate in the flagship university, even though that flagship university's being funded from taxes from people who live in many rural areas. In the same vein, Betsy and I were quite inspired by a visit we made to one of a very different kind of University of North Carolina campus, UNC Pembroke, which is a Native American and rural student-serving institution where we saw, quite remarkably, a public university making rural students a signature effort. And we did not give this that kind of attention in our book.

Marci Rockey:

The Gardener Institute's [Foundations of Excellence transfer service](#) was created to advance success for transfer students, a population that can often be overlooked across higher education research and practice. Can you talk about the work that you have done to advance partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions to support transfer students?

Betsy Barefoot:

Why *is* this population often overlooked, especially in terms of research? And I think one of the reasons is it's very, very hard to generalize about transfer students. We can make some assumptions about first-year students, at least at some institutions, about their age or the reason they're in college, but transfer students are kind of all over the map. So I think that's one reason, perhaps, that we *don't* see as much significant research on that population. But in terms of partnerships between two- and four-year institutions, it really is our goal to foster these partnerships, but I do have to say it's also a challenge for a whole variety of different reasons.

It's easier when the two-year and four-year institutions are in close proximity and when faculty and staff develop relationships with their counterparts at two- or four-year institutions. For instance, if advisors in those two locations know each other and know how they're providing information to students across the spectrum of education, it's much, much easier to make sure that there are no gaps in information. I know one thing that John talks about all the time is that transfer is really not a point in time or a period of time, and I think many of us have sort of considered transfer as this action that students take when they move from a two-year to a four-year institution or from four-year to four-year or two-year to two-year. Or I guess I should also say reverse transfer, a four-year to two-year. So there are lots of ways to transfer.

John in his work on transfer with a couple of colleagues have really made the point that transfer is really a student's total experience from the time they began at institution number one and have the notion that they want to transfer to institution number two, and that both of those institutions have a role to play in assuring that transfer proceeds according to plan.

And I guess I'm thinking, 'Well, there are many factors that are really critical,' but one that stands out to me is advising, helping students understand what their options are for transfer, helping them, certainly, take the right courses to

transfer, not taking courses that are really unnecessary and that perhaps exhaust their financial aid in ways that are not advantageous for them. I know that John has a lot of thoughts about this because of his work on an upcoming book. Talk about your book and about your thoughts.

John Gardner:

Well, first of all, the largest single subpopulation within American higher education right now are transfer students. They make up the majority of college students. If you define transfer students at either the sending or the receiving end, transfer has become the normative way to earn a bachelor's degree in the United States. *But* these are students for whom American higher education was not designed. The community colleges that are producing most of the transfer-sending students were not designed for the transfer function; they were designed for terminal degrees. They were called "terminal" very clearly in their catalogs, in the nomenclature, and there's still elements of a "terminal" culture that operates in community colleges. We have not fully transcended that, even though in the 21st century, the notion of any person's education ever being terminal is clearly obsolete. But we didn't design American higher education for these students.

So the tasks of redesigning the academy are enormously complex, and we're finding that the students who opt for this thing we call transfer, they, in some respects, look differently than the students who can obtain most of their baccalaureate education at one place or certainly most of that baccalaureate education at a baccalaureate-level institution. Transfer students then tend to be older, more likely persons of color. They are less well off financially, and our degree attainment rates for transfer students are disgraceful as a nation. You know, we're looking at a 10-year attainment rate of students who intend to transfer into baccalaureate institutions at about 15%--it's pathetic.

One of the many obstacles to social justice is the way the transfer function is working. We lay some of the blame here at the way transfer is conceived, the way we educators think about it. And unfortunately, those in the educational theory, higher education theorists, student personnel people, I think, have sold us a bill of goods. They have defined transfer as a developmental *stage*, as a *phase*, as a transition. We don't buy that. Transfer is a total experience that a student in this country has when she or he starts at institution A, perhaps not yet knowing or thinking about attaining a bachelor's degree, not even knowing if they can do college yet, but gradually finding they can do college and they want to stay in college and they want to increase their attainment rate, or for students who know they want to transfer.

If you don't accumulate any credits, you don't have anything to transfer. So the transfer experience begins the minute you register for courses and start taking courses. It doesn't begin when you sit down with an advisor two, three, four years later and talk about applying to another institution. And it also doesn't end when the student transfers from institution A to B. That's only the

beginning hurdle. After that, the student has to function and keep accumulating academic credit in the new institution. And there the problem often is that nobody owns these students. They're invisible and they are put into many different cultures where transfer students are an afterthought. We need a much more comprehensive definition of transfer in order to focus more appropriately on who these students need and where they go.

And you started out by asking us about Foundations of Excellence transfer focus. You call it a service; it is that. We have been offering our Foundations of Excellence process since 2003. This is a self-study process that produces an action plan that if the institution will implement that action plan, they will improve student learning outcomes and other measures of success. We did a pilot to look at transfer students thanks to the president of the University of Texas, El Paso, Diana Natalicio, who got us into a partnership with El Paso Community College and the University of Texas, El Paso to test out whether we could do this Foundations of Excellence process with a focus on transfer students.

We found that we could do that successfully. So we formalized this in 2010 and began offering this as a service to American higher education. Since then, we've had approximately 70 colleges and universities, two- and four-year institutions, go through this self-study process to design a comprehensive plan either to improve the sending rates of transfer or your receiving function as an institution, where you receive transfer students and you help them attain their baccalaureate-level desired credential. We did this in a collaborative framework originally with the two institutions I mentioned, then in 2012 to 14, we had 16 state of Kentucky community technical colleges all working with us in this process.

Currently, we have seven institutions in Tulsa County, Oklahoma, one community college, and six baccalaureate-level institutions, all of them engaging in this process to improve the ultimate bachelor's degree attainment rate through transfer in Tulsa County. We're also working in the capital city of Ohio, Columbus, with a large community college and a private college on the state community college in Capitol University to improve the successful movement of students between those institutions.

We've had three other very noteworthy partnerships, and really the only way that you can do this work successfully is you've got to get sending and receiving institutions working through, really, new structures and processes. And most notably, we've done that with the University of Central Florida, the second-largest public university in the United States, and Valencia college, also in Orlando. They have an *extraordinary* partnership which they call Direct Connect. Both of those institutions have been in the Foundations of Excellence process.

The largest public university in the United States being Arizona State, we've engaged them in our Foundations of Excellence transfer process. We've done *amazing* work, not only with their community college local feeder, Maricopa, but Arizona State is recruiting transfer students, and I mean thousands of them, from *all* over the country, from Illinois to California. They are the largest transfer institution in the country in terms of their scope and the focus of their work. Another notable partnership was between Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis and Ivy Tech. Again, IUPI previously being like a community college until the Ivy Tech system was developed some years ago trying to, again, increase the baccalaureate degree attainment.

So we think that partnerships are central to doing this work, but you've got to have a plan, and you've got to implement that plan, and you've got to make transfer students a priority. We were fortunate enough to receive, back in 2016, a planning grant from the Gates Foundation to advance our work around transfer students, and one of the outcomes of that grant is a forthcoming book from Stylus Publishing that'll be out in 2020. We're calling it a handbook because it's going to present all kinds of strategies for dealing with transfer students, including a much broader definition of who these people are and what transfer means.

Marci Rockey:

Thank you. I look forward to the book. Thank you for sharing that. So as scholars and consultants that advocate for institutions to invest in programs and initiatives that support students at different transition points throughout college, so including the first year of college, including transfer, how important are these kinds of programs to advancing equitable outcomes for students across higher education?

Betsy Barefoot:

I think we would argue that all programs that enhance transition, whether they're transition points for first year students or transfers, they're necessary, but they're not sufficient. We say that a lot, and I'll explain that more thoroughly in just a minute. But we know that there are many support programs that have, as an objective, making the higher education experience, again, *fairer* for all students. Of course, those include first-year seminars as well as transfer seminars, learning communities, even transfer learning communities, residence hall programs, residence hall programs for transfer students.

There is a wide range of these kinds of programs, but the real first-year experience or the real transfer experience happens in the courses that these students take. And these gateway courses tend to be high-risk courses for either population. And so right now, the bulk of our work is focusing institutions on the quality of, again, teaching and learning in these generally large, very important gateway courses, either gateway to the entire college experience or, in the case of transfer students, gateways to the major.

And we're finding some *somewhat* surprising, maybe not so surprising differences in student performance in these courses that varies by gender, socioeconomic status, and race. And it's very troubling, the results that we're seeing, in that often Hispanic students or African American students perform at much lower levels than do Caucasian students. So we're really encouraging institutions to focus in here on those courses, in addition to whatever else they're doing to support students. But the truth is, you can have the most wonderful support for students, but if you don't do something about the courses, the students are still more likely to drop out, and we've learned that from the research that we've done.

John Gardner:

Yeah, I'd like to reinforce that, but I'll put it into somewhat of a historical context. Very specifically, when our country adopted the Higher Education Act of 1965, in my judgment, it was where the most important actions that our Congress has taken in our history because it made possible higher education for vast numbers of students for whom the academy was not designed. The only other experiments we had with this in our country was when the Land Grant Act, which produced universities like yours, and then the Veterans' Readjustment Act provided higher education support for our citizens who'd served in the armed forces, but this was much more fundamental. And what we've done primarily in, now pushing 60 years, is we've tried to change the academy by adding what you call programs, and by developing a whole new profession, we still call it student affairs, but now there's another new profession that Betsy and I are involved in a study trying to measure where it's going, and that's this new profession of student success. It's what Betsy Barefoot called some years ago an "antidote." We would argue that the most significant problems that these students are having in higher education success is doing successfully the academic work that we demand of them. And we've created all kinds of initiatives that are antidotes designed to ameliorate the challenges of the classroom experience. And many of these programs have made very positive contributions. Betsy and I were very involved with one, the so-called first-year seminar, that's had a big impact on teaching students how to do college. But fundamentally, students are or are not completing college because of their grade-point averages and their ability to keep financial aid by making satisfactory progress.

And the failure rates that we're discovering in our work, leading to what we call voluntary attrition. The talk Betsy and I gave at Illinois State was—we shared some of that data. And what we're finding is that students leave very early and they leave voluntarily. We're not suspending them, and they're leaving after they get DWFI grades in a number of these courses. In some courses, more than half of the students who receive a DWFI are not back the following fall.

So we're arguing that the kind of last frontier of this work in student success now has to be more of a focus on instructional design, what the faculty are doing, and including how the faculty work with student-affairs colleagues. It's like we tried to avoid the faculty for 50 years and it hasn't worked. Retention is

basically flat. You could say even *that's* an accomplishment, and I believe that given the demographic changes. But it *isn't* sufficient. We're arguing that these programs and initiatives are necessary, but they are *not* sufficient. They're kind of grafted onto the academic experience, but they're really at the periphery. They're not the central focus of academic work, and they're often delivered by lower-status, more marginalized people, as is the instruction in gateway courses, much of which we've outsourced: adjuncts and nontenured faculty members, again, because the academy has not sufficiently valued that.

Marci Rockey:

So what call to action would you offer to our listeners, particularly institutional administrators, to create collaborative opportunities between academic and student services who advance equitable outcomes for students through both curricular and co-curricular initiatives?

Betsy Barefoot:

We've actually done a lot of thinking about this, but I think it's really important for the folks on what we typically refer to as the two sides of the house. I kind of don't like that terminology, but sometimes it's what it is. But it's very important for those folks to learn more about what each sector does, their contributions to student success, but also to provide them *real* opportunities to work together. And those opportunities tend to be on specific projects. Academic or a student-affairs administrator can make the statement, 'We need have partnerships,' but until they design some sort of specific opportunity where partnerships are needed, that's kind of an empty phrase.

I also think it's really, really important for all of these individuals to respect each other's worlds. And I know John and I are often very concerned about the way we hear student affairs folks, in particular, make statements about faculty that characterize faculty as the enemy, and that's really too bad. I think this has grown up over a long period of time and maybe people aren't challenging it as they should, but I think it's very, very important to get rid of that kind of language.

I did want to reference for you and for your listeners something that we in the Gardner Institute put together a number of years ago based on three meetings that we held to focus on academic affairs, student affairs, partnerships, or maybe partnerships more broadly defined. But these meetings brought together folks from a number of campuses to really zero in on some ideas, and we developed a list of [principles for partnerships and student success](#). And these principles are available on our website. There are seven of them.

The first principle is that these partnerships are intentional and based on clear institutional vision and values. So if the institution, again, doesn't really value partnerships, it's kind of hard to get that across to their faculty staff, or anyone else for that matter. They're really focused around student learning. We know that student learning happens as much out of class as it does in class, that it happens as much from student-to-student contact as from student-to-staff or

faculty contact, so we really think that all kinds of partnerships *have* to be focused on student learning.

And again, the student-affairs folks should be very, very intentional when they indicate how their activities and various undertakings relate to student learning, and sometimes that doesn't happen. I've even heard folks say, 'Well, what does student affairs have to do with learning?' And that's a real red flag to me if they don't recognize that. Also, we think it's really important that these partnerships link rather than divide community numbers, and that means the careful use of language. As I referenced a few minutes ago, the notion that either side is the enemy is not good language if you're trying to create partnerships.

Also, we think that these partnerships can enhance the learning environment for everyone in the academy; that both faculty and staff can understand each other better if they know more about how learning takes place. Of course we think they should reflect diversity and inclusion. We think that these partnerships depend, not only on individual relationships, but also, and more importantly, on *formal* institutionalized connections. The problem with individual relationships is once one of the parties leaves, moves on to another place, sometimes the partnership goes by the way. So we think it's really important that these become formalized.

And finally, we think that partnerships are good, but that they also do have a profound impact on the institutional environment and, ultimately, on learning. If any of your members want to get access to these, they're in the public domain. I would like to make just a few statements about your question concerning rural students. I guess I wasn't a rural student exactly, but I certainly come from a rural area. And I had cousins who grew up on farms, who went off to the big state U, who spent about two weeks and left and came home because they were dreadfully home sick. You know, I've known this experience. But I think it's very complex.

And again, if you're a student from a rural area and you go to a college very close to your home, perhaps the transition isn't as severe. If you go to the big state university where a class may be larger than your hometown, that's a very, very different experience. I think that it boils down to the degree that you can make this happen. It boils down to relationships and helping those students develop relationships with human beings on campus, especially with other students who come from their same situation or perhaps their same neighborhood.

My own experience with getting into this whole topic was when I edited a volume of *New Directions for Higher Education* that focused on Native American graduate students, and there are not many of those, as you probably know. I mean, literally handfuls around the country, mostly in the West but especially upper Northwest. And in reading the various chapters that made up that

volume, they continued to emphasize respect for the institution, to respect the culture of the students for them to allow students to negotiate the home culture as well as the institutional culture, and again, the importance of relationships with individual people, with other students in the same circumstance. And I think it's really interesting from a research perspective.

Marci Rockey:

Betsy really addressed it, but with my own research focusing on the impact of geography on access to higher education for rural students, can you talk a little bit more about your own work with institutions that are being intentional about outreach and support to transition rural students into higher education?

John Gardner:

Yes. I have direct experience of that, including as a former college student. I went to a rural college. I went to Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio, town of about 15,000 in southeastern Ohio, very rural, Appalachian, very conservative. This was in the early '60s, but it's still the same. And I had come from an affluent New England suburb in Connecticut. And this was before the Higher Education Act, so the modern infrastructure for higher education as we know it hadn't been built yet, and the East coast was a net exporter of students out to the Midwest, and a lot of us ended up on rural campuses.

So I experienced this, and it was a wonderful experience for me, eventually. The college then is not the same college as now because it didn't have any formal initiatives, programs, efforts to make students feel more comfortable and assimilated, so it's a very different place now. And I experienced as a student that the ultimate integration for me in a rural environment came as a result of some things that faculty did for me, and also fellow students, particularly one student who had an *enormous* influence on me, who noticed I was not doing well and noticed I wasn't taking any notes in class and showed me how to do that, and such a simple, really basic academic skill that I didn't have. Once I started emulating him, it transformed my academic outcomes.

I think that there are things unique about rural students, but there are also things where they have a lot in common with students from many other sending environments. But in this case, I see in our work a lot of differences between males and females, but then again, we see this around the country. Males often tend to adjust less well. They're not as good at making relationships, hunkering down. They tend to be more homesick; they go home more frequently. And for some of them, they may have more occupational options in a rural environment than their female counterparts do.

I think that what Betsy was talking about and what we've been talking about already is that there are certain things that institutions should be doing to support these students, but ultimately, it's what the faculty do for them that matters the most. And I see, even on the smallest of campuses, the same kind of jockeying that I see in big places for power and status and budgets and staff,

and that jockeying is primarily between academic and student-affairs units. And I really feel this is a *huge* distraction.

And a lot of it now is in pursuit of a notion that the student-affairs profession has that they're driving for parity, and they're arguing that they are equally, and frequently they argue that they are even *more*, responsible for student success because student development "is the ultimate goal of the higher education experience," and that more than anything will determine whether or not students are successful. Personally, I don't buy it. I think it's *extremely* necessary, and I have long been an advocate for all that my student-affairs colleagues do to support the student academic functioning, but I think our priorities are really out of whack.

So I guess partly, I think it's unrealistic that a new profession that, at best, is about 50 years an establishment, in a few places in research universities it's older than that, but that this will somehow displace a lot of the power of a culture that goes back 1,000 years, namely the culture of the professoriate. I just think it's totally unrealistic, and it leads to a lot of misspent energy. One of the things that we're following and trying to collect some data on right now is this *new* profession of student success. And we've got a national survey out right now trying to collect some data on this, but what I'm seeing anecdotally is that a lot of student-affairs units are having partial dismemberment and having a number of their functions realigned into what's called student success, and that now we've got student-success programs in both student-affairs and in academic units and, again, I want to ultimately try to be able to substantiate this empirically, that my sense is that because this work on helping students adjust to college is now more established, you've got more academic people leading this work. And so the student-success initiatives are more likely to be more academic in nature. This is a very interesting landscape to follow. I think it's going to take a lot of readjustment on the part of what student-affairs colleagues are doing.

On the positive side, I find the most progressive members of the student-affairs profession are arguing that, fundamentally, higher education is about learning, and you've got a more broadly define learning, admittedly, but that the goal of student-affairs work, whether it's in a rural-serving institution or any other kind, it ultimately *has* to be in support of learning. And if what you're doing does not support the formal learning mission of the institution, you shouldn't be doing it.

I want to share with you an anecdote that really troubled me when I saw it. A few years ago, I was the trustee at my alma mater. I was a trustee for 12 years, Marietta College, and when I would go there three times a year for board meetings, I would try to get off the agenda a bit and go and find out what was really happening with students. And one time I mystery shopped the admissions office. I went through the campus tour and I heard a tour guide say to these prospective students that when you come to Marietta, you don't really need to

think about the town at all. Everything you need is right here in the college. This is where the action is.

And I was *horrified* that this young man said this because the last thing you want to do for rural students is to separate them from any of the environment that produced them. They're attached to that, they're proud of it, they respect it, it's what they know. And to say that the hub of this community didn't matter, that all you needed was college was, I thought, very alienating, very disrespectful. So it is about joining a new culture, and then you still have your previous culture, and then you become a kind of marginal man or woman, and you have legs in both cultures. You've somehow got to learn how to marry them.

And in a lot of our work, whether it's in the American southwest with Hispanic Americans or, in my case, working with Canadian universities, where I see in western Canada the decision to go to university is, in effect a decision to leave my rural home, and it is *traumatic* for students and families, because you go to the University of Edmonton or the University of Calgary or Regina University in Saskatchewan, and the odds are very great, you're not going to go back to your rural community because you're being prepared for an occupation that's going to take you predominantly to urban areas, or it's going to take you to other countries to work in the energy industry. And so going to college literally means separating from home and family.

So one of the things that I think has to be done, especially for these kinds of students, is we've got to find some ways to integrate the family into the college experience, and that's of course something we've tried very hard to get away from. We got rid of *in loco parentis*. For a good 30 years, we *totally* got rid of it until the Cleary Act of 1990. That's pushed us back into it, and then money has pushed us back into it in some places. Particularly the elite and the expensive places are now engaging with families to cultivate them and to raise additional money from them. But I think for a lot of the environment you're looking at, it's not about raising money and it's not about cultivation; it's trying to act on the recognition that working with rural students, it's a *total* life experience, and their families should be more integrated into this.

Very early in my career, I did a consultancy with a state college in Nebraska, and they were having a significant problem retaining students. And I did a focus group with students in a visit, and I learned that one of the things some of the students missed were their horses. I met students who missed their horse more than anything or anybody. And so I suggested to the college that they get into the business of leasing stable space so that students could bring a horse to college, and they actually did it. The higher education is not one size that you set down anywhere and you do the same things. There are adaptations that need to be made based on really understanding who your students are.

We're working with a rural public university right now in a project and we did some focus groups with students, and we were reminded about how *sensitive* rural students are to what their faculty and staff say about the local environment. Often, well-educated people who are not from rural environments, but who've chosen, maybe because they can't get employment in more urban areas, to be in these rural environments. They often make very disparaging comments about what is *not* available to them, and students are really offended by that. They don't feel they have the power to speak up and defend their environments, but they are very effected by that. And basically what they're asking for is to "Please *respect* me. I have a life that has dignity, and you're telling me you don't understand that.' That's something that we educators, we're smart enough to be able to figure that out. We ought to be able to behave differently.

Another thing in our work that I think the most disadvantaged, neglected rural students in America are the students on the 37 tribal colleges. Challenges in the rural tribal college, they are *amazing*. I have visited some. I will have memories of what I saw and heard for the rest of my life. The appalling treatment and the discrimination still goes on, but these are American citizens. They have served our country in many ways, and they will continue to do so. Generically, rural students, I think they need to be taught when they come in, especially, how to do college, how to be successful in this environment. They need to be helped in forming the kind of relationships that would support them. They need to have a curriculum in which they're going to be successful.

And we see this a lot in our work now in many rural institutions. You have faculty, particularly the older ones, who when earlier in their career, the demographics were different. Their students were disproportionately white. But now because immigration, especially, has reached every part of rural America, they don't know how to communicate with some students any longer, and they're struggling. We're working with a major southern state university system that has a number of rural campuses, and that is the elephant in the room: It's the rural students. They don't look like they used to, and they aren't. They're changing too. And often they're getting screwed too by the very people they elect to office. I mean look at how the tariffs are affecting the farmers in this country and the stresses that are increasing in rural America because of the foreign policy of the United States.

I'm frustrated by a lot of these things, but I have to say, 'Okay, John, what can you do in your own sphere of influence?' And that's what *all* of us have to decide, whether your sphere of influence is a department or one classroom or a campus, or, in my case, we work with a lot of campuses, and what we're trying to do is to look at changes in the way we organize the academic experience, particularly for entering students that would lead to more social justice that would lead to reducing these vast differences in rural and urban and suburban students alike between gender and race and ethnicity.

For me, that's the fundamental civil rights movement in this country. We've put together some rural institutions that are working with us, and one of the things we're stressing is this is not a deficit model. It's about looking at the strengths and the advantages of rural education. I just believe in that *so strongly*. The sense of community that is possible in rural institutions and how nurturing and supportive that is, if we can develop that in campuses that serve rural students, there's *nothing* we can't do with these students. The potential is unlimited.

But if we're constantly apologizing and talking about what we don't have, that's not helpful. What those students could be doing to support their learning in Marietta, Ohio, by getting involved in the community and having their faculty get them involved with the community and student affairs colleagues—every social ill that affects America is in that little town of 15,000 on the banks of the Ohio River. So we do not want to ignore that, we want to make that a huge laboratory for the learning of our students.

Announcer:

Tune in next month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher talks with Dr. Paul Gorski about his work in advancing racial equity, diversity, and inclusion in education. Dr. Gorski is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and EdChange.

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