

Next Practices: Data-informed Strategies for Higher Ed Leaders

Episode 01: Access and Equity in Student Success with Karl Smith, Tacoma Community College

Katy Oliveira (00:07):

Welcome to Next Practices, data-informed strategies to shape the future of higher ed. In each episode, you'll hear from transformational higher ed leaders on how they're tackling today's most pressing challenges to make a difference for their students and institutions. I'm your host, Katy Oliveira.

Karl Smith (00:27):

Next thing you know is your staff is stretched really, really thin, and you haven't even gotten to the students who are in most need of the resources and support. And it's nothing against the students who are taking advantage and leveraging all of these different systems. They're doing great. It's just that they may not need the same level of engagement. And so if I need to do a second check-in on a particular group of students, I'm not gonna send an email to all of our students. I'm just gonna send it to that group of students so that they know that this is for them and that they have access for the additional support that they need. And that really is an equity framework where you can use different pieces of information and data. That's out there to make sure that the student who needs it most needs those resources. The most in order to be successful, gets those resources

Katy Oliveira (01:17):

Today on the show, I'm talking about creating more accessible and equitable student success services with Karl Smith, Vice President for Student Affairs at Tacoma Community College. But before we dive in, take a moment to subscribe to the show right there in your podcast app to stay up to date on the latest creative data-informed approaches to student success. Karl, thank you so much for coming on Next Practices. I'm really excited to talk with you today.

Karl Smith (01:47):

Good to be here. Thanks for having me.

Katy Oliveira (01:49):

I like to start since this is a show about exchanging ideas across higher ed, with you telling us a bit about yourself, your current role, and what motivates you to do the work that you do everyday.

Karl Smith (02:04):

So I'm Karl Smith, Vice President of Student Affairs for Tacoma Community College. I've been working in higher education for over 20 plus years. Now I started my career way back in 2001, fresh out of graduate school where interesting fact, I thought I wanted to be a teacher until I actually started teaching at the middle and high school level and decided, I wanted to do something else. So I started working in admissions and recruitment work started with the Office Minority and Diversity Affairs at the University of Washington, Seattle campus worked in there and worked my way up until I finally made myself the assistant director director started working in admissions and been doing this work ever since when I first started, the state of Washington had passed initiative 200, which outlawed the use of affirmative action in higher education. And so my early part of my career was working to recruit underrepresented

minority students to the university of Washington during a very difficult and challenging time, looking at changing practices of how we used to go about recruiting and outreach to student and even the admissions process.

Karl Smith (03:06):

And so during early parts of my career, I worked in recruitment admissions and worked at university of was Seattle doing holistic admissions reviews and reads and been doing it ever since. My passion from this work comes from being a first generation college student, myself, neither one of my parents went to college. And so it's a bit of a passion of mine to help students navigate this process. I always knew that I wanted to go to college. I'd had no clue what the experience would be like, how to navigate. And there was just a lot of hurdles and barriers that I had to overcome and try to navigate with some assistance when I was aware of it. And so that's just a little bit about me, but like many first generation college students, you kind of just stumbled into it and you, you kind of love it. And I'm hoping to give back to folks who look like me.

Katy Oliveira (03:51):

I used to say, I have, a similar background, first generation college student as well. And I used to say, I went to college and loved it so much. I never left <laugh> right. I have done something that's related to the university or college system ever since and seeking to help students succeed well with that. I think you started to, to ease into my next question, but I wanna open it up because I know that there are so many things that leaders are facing right now, especially in the wake of the pandemic, but many things that maybe were amplified by the pandemic existed prior to the pandemic as well in your, from your purview, from your position, what are the most pressing challenges that you're, you're seeing as a leader and also that you're seeing at your particular institution?

Karl Smith (04:37):

Yeah, there are, there are many challenges and the pandemic only heightened the challenges that many people face accessing higher education. When I think of our community college system prior to the pandemic, the system was experiencing declining enrollment. A lot of our enrollment back in 2011, 2012 were connected to the employment rates. And over time as our economy has improved and fewer, more people are working and less people were unemployed. We saw the number of our students decline fast forward to a pandemic. And you only heighten the feed and rate of that decline enhances in our current situation. I would say the biggest thing is gaining enrollment back and finding what that new balance is. And there's a lot of challenges associated with the enrollment that we have, whether that is the pandemic itself, which we know is moving towards, hopefully an end in the near future, or if it's just the fact that folks got used to working from home and telecommuting and tele education as well.

Karl Smith (05:37):

And so a lot of students have an expectation that they can fully learn online, and we are brick and mortar places with some online offerings, but for the most part, we still require students to, to come to campus. And that's the educational environment and experience that we created. You throw on so many other things such as we are in the process of trying to become an anti-racist institution. And so you have those components as well, and they just have big picture changing demographics. America is becoming an aging society. And as we age, the reliance of that traditional college age student goes down where that population will decrease for the next couple of decades and may not ever get up to the points that we saw in the early parts of the two thousands. So there's just a lot of different dynamics coming to us all at one time.

Karl Smith (06:26):

And some ways it's a bit of a perfect storm, but I like to say every problem is an opportunity for a solution. And so part of that is making sure that we change the college going behavior for many of our communities. College is such an important component to success, financial success, health, and wellbeing. There's just so many parts of our lives that if folks get their college degrees and education and credentials, it changes their lives. And as a first generation college student, I can definitely speak to that. And I'm sure there's many people out there who can as well, that the opportunities that have a college degree has presented to us is something that has forever changed not only our lives, but the lives of our families and our legacies as well

Katy Oliveira (07:07):

At Tacoma specifically, how do you assess how these larger external challenges are impacting your particular student body and different facets of your student body?

Karl Smith (07:21):

We try to do it with constant communication, not just with our students, but with our staff and employees, because everyone's being impacted. The whole system right now is being impacted. The students obviously are what the, the lens that we look through and they're most important. And they'll tell us a lot. Their behavior tells us a lot, whether they're registering for classes, dropping classes, midway through are unable to pay for their classes, just listening to and watching the trends that are going on on our campus are so important, but also talking to our faculty and staff about what they're experiencing in the classroom and their advising appointments and their counseling sessions in the community. And just asking big picture questions and, and just checking in. I would like to say that it's a very complex, complicated formula that we're using and scientific methods and all those things.

Karl Smith (08:07):

Yes. There's some data trends that we track and that we look at, but a lot of it still is just kind of the art of putting everything together. There's so many different elements of the data that you can look at. I remember back in the day, we could just look at kind of unemployment trends and now to tell us a lot about who was coming to college, or if you're recruiting high school students, you could look at graduation trends, the number of high school students that would graduate. And that would tell you who's who should be enrolling at your college. Things are so much more complex and complicated now with how our society is viewing education overall and how they think about receiving that information. Whether it's a masterclass online, a podcast, a YouTube video, there's just so many different ways that people can learn different things. And so what does that mean for our systems as, as relates to the value of a credential and what you can do with that credential once you complete it. And so those are, are some of the things that we're looking at and I kind of went in many different directions. And so there's one that I need to come back to just let me know.

Katy Oliveira (09:10):

Yeah, I was gonna ask, I think oftentimes when you're looking at these trends, you have what's happening in society as a whole, and then you have what's happening in your own community and then what's happening at your own institution and making sense of how broader trends apply at home with your particular students at your particular institution. I think sometimes in higher ed, we sort of paint with a broad brush, but every institution is a little bit different. They're serving a little bit different mix of students. They're serving different communities with different job markets and different kinds of skills training needs. So do y'all have a team of folks who keep an eye on I on trends you were saying you use a

combination of data and good old fashioned putting it all together and, and seeing how it applies. Do you mind telling me a little bit more about what that looks like on your particular campus and how you collaborate together with your colleagues to make sense of all of that?

Karl Smith ([10:08](#)):

Yeah, sure. No problem. So we have our enrollment management committee, which obviously is a pretty common thing. And most colleges around the country is a group of folks who are meeting in our case on a monthly basis to discuss enrollment enrollment at the college, but also looking at trends. And so your traditional enrollment management that looks at the admissions funnel of how students are moving through your admissions processes and also your retention components as well. From there, it's good to kind of look around and do an environmental scan and analyze what's going on. So we look at our local unemployment rates in our area. We look at our school districts to see their graduation rates, the number of students enrolled by grade level. The number of students who are participating in dual enrollment programs we're fortunate in our state, there's a number of state level dashboards that allows us to look at the two school districts that we are assigned to serve as a community college.

Karl Smith ([11:01](#)):

In this region. We take those things into consideration. We look at trends as, as we're changing at the four year college level to see what trends they have partnerships. So we partner with our local school districts. Therefore we are in direct communication with the superintendents of those school districts, with the counselors and the principals in those schools. We bring all that back to our enrollment management committee. We pull out the typical data stuff that we look at in the past during the pandemic, it's been really hard to predict trends, to see where things are heading. And so what we do from there is we just have open ended conversation and discussion. We ask people that little thought that keeps them up at night or that, that might be in the back of their mind at all times. And, and to see how we can use that information to do better outreach recruitment of students and ultimately support the students that we're trying to get to TCC.

Karl Smith ([11:55](#)):

And so once we get that information, we take it to our leadership team, the leadership team chews it. And ultimately comes up with enrollment forecast for the next year. The students play a big part in that, but a lot of their voices when it gets to my level is indirect. Part of that enrollment management team has the director of advising. It has the Dean of retention, the Dean of enrollment, various academic deans from around the campus community. And then it has some frontline staff like staff who are over our recruitment efforts. We also have a outreach partners meeting where everyone who's involved in outreach on campus and recruitment on campus. They all come together and have a conversation about what they're seeing in the school. Some of the things that we've had to face that are unprecedented is access to students right now during the COVID period, college fairs and stuff were paused.

Karl Smith ([12:42](#)):

High school visits have been paused and the way that you interact with high school students and people in the community, all those things have changed. And so we're having these discussions, there's just, have you been able to get in contact with students? What's been the response, what are some of the thoughts that they have? The advising director might come back and tell us? Well, you know, I've talked to this number of students on my caseload and many are just saying that it's a difficult time to head back to college right now, whether it is the rising cost of rent and they need to work a certain amount of hours in order to afford the rent that they're in, or if it's just family dynamics or in some cases mental health, mental health is huge issue right now, amongst all, all people, but it definitely folks are trying to get to

college as well. And so those are some of the conversations that we have, and then we try to make sure that we align supports on campus to reach out to students and connect them with those resources as well and highlight those resources.

Katy Oliveira ([13:37](#)):

Yeah. And is this approach helping to alleviate some of, I know historically this is a historic time for enrollment decline. I think the average for community colleges is nine to 10%, depending on where you're looking. Are these strategies helping your team, your institution, whether those historic enrollment declines,

Karl Smith ([13:57](#)):

To be honest, to be determined. One of the most encouraging things that we're seeing is that we are starting to see the number of new students on a quarterly basis get back to pre pandemic levels. The retention rate is fluctuating pretty drastically right now, compared to where we were. But part of that is we have been fully online since the start of the pandemic with the handful of courses offered in person this past winter, we were hoping to come back in person with about a quarter of our courses being fully in person, a quarter of our courses being hybrid and 50% being online, we realized that we were getting ready to open up at the height of cases in Washington. And so we decided to pause that opening. And so spring quarter is the first quarter that we are back open with the modalities that I just talked about, the 25, 25 and 50 being fully online.

Karl Smith ([14:50](#)):

We know that that created some challenges for students. We know that some students who have been fully online for the nearly the entire degree program now we're asked to come in person. And that was a challenge. We know that there's also students, that was the flip side. They have been waiting to come in person, but they were hoping to start winter quarter just with the classes that they have offered. And so those are some of the challenges that makes it difficult to say, if what's working and what's not working, but the best indicator really is the number of new students that we got this quarter looks very close to what we have prior to the pandemic. And so that is exciting to know that a lot of what we're doing is working and it feels like folks are ready to return to higher ed and TCC specifically,

Katy Oliveira ([15:33](#)):

And TCC specifically for those folks who stuck around for those folks who've been attending online and now are able to go in a variety of modalities. How has your team's approach, or what's been your team's approach to supporting those students, to help them to thrive and remain enrolled in school during this time. And I mean, I know at any moment it's students need support to stay enrolled in, in school. So I know that it's heightened now, but I know that these things apply even in a non pandemic world as well.

Karl Smith ([16:04](#)):

A lot of what we did during the pandemic was to move a lot of our students support services online, along with the classes of course, but just making sure that students, if they didn't have to come to campus, they had a way to still meet with their advisor, ask questions of financial aid, ask questions of the registrar's office, do tele-counseling, set up their disability support services, work with veterans, all that stuff moved online. And what we're finding is as we come back, the convenience of the online world, many students still want. And so right now we're in the process of trying to manage the various ways that students can get in touch with us, whether that's through the phone emails, come in for our

in-person meeting, or if it's an online meeting and giving students the flexibility to meet us in all of those different spaces.

Karl Smith (16:49):

That's probably been the, the biggest key to making sure that we supported students during the pandemic. And so if a student needed tutoring, but the library's closed, then they had the option to take that tutoring online. We also work with our foundation to secure laptops and wifi hotspots, and also partner with a local internet service provider as well, to make sure that students have access to free wifi throughout the pandemic and internet services at home. And so as this online component becomes so important, and we know that prior to the pandemic, there was a digital divide. And so supporting students who were in those situations was a high importance. And we were able to pull that off during the pandemic. And many students were able to continue their education just based on having access to a computer and having access to dependable wifi. By

Katy Oliveira (17:38):

What combination of strategies and tools does your student success team use to monitor students performance at school? So not just their academic performance, but if they're thriving, if they are engaged, if they are in need of more precise or, or focused engagement or interaction or intervention, what does that look like? At Tacoma?

Karl Smith (18:07):

We recently purchased a software called Civitas Learning has allowed us to, I would say, move and respond how this generation expects to be interacted with. And when I say this generation, I, I should probably expand and not just a generation, but society and, and people now expect when you're shopping online and you enter the keywords for that pair of shoes that you like, next thing you know, it's following you around, because someone, some seller realizes I have that shoe. And I wanna sell that to you kind of the same expectation with students. Now when they have a need, they want salt at that point in time, but they may not always raise their hand to the college and say, this is what we need right now. But there's signs that there might be an opportunity to engage with that student. For instance, we know that if we're fully online and a student is not logging into their online account, that's a sign that that student may be getting ready to leave the college.

Karl Smith (19:00):

It could be as simple as maybe their internet service is down. Maybe they couldn't afford to pay it that month. Maybe their laptop was stolen, but that's a sign to us that someone needs to reach out to that student and just ask, Hey, how's it going? Is there anything that we can help you with? And then that student would more than likely if there is a challenge that they're facing, they will say, oh, this is what's going on. And then that gives us an opportunity to say, oh, let me see how I can support you. It could mean that that student is struggling financially and maybe they're struggling to pay rent. Well, we have resources on campus and with the federal cares money, we've been able to provide support to students. And, and maybe that student just was unaware that that was available because when, as you know, we send out emails out to students and we post on a website.

Karl Smith (19:43):

If they're not in need at that time, they just don't respond to it and pay much attention to it. They have very busy lives and education is just one component of all the things that they're trying to manage. And so it really is about right timing and having that message hit them right when they need it. And so

looking in our Civitas Learning software allows us to say, look, this student is showing signs, whether it is a drop in grade, whether it's not logging into our student information systems and we can see most of that stuff through canvas. And so our advisors are doing quite a bit of outreach. Our tutors and our libraries are using the information as well. So if there's a drop in grade and a course, they can reach out to that student and make sure that the student is aware of the resources that we have and the support that's available to them.

Karl Smith (20:27):

If the student indicates that they wanted childcare, we can even send out messages to check in and make sure when the childcare center has an availability, that's open, we can reach out to them as well. So there's just so many different ways that we're able to support students with various information that, that we have that quite honestly we've as an institution and not just TCC, but I'm sure around the country, we've kind of just waited for students to come to us and tell us when they have that need. Now we are a little bit better position to be able to say, I see something that's changed in your behavior and then reach out to them and, and see if there's a way that we can support the students or connect them with resources in the community as well.

Katy Oliveira (21:07):

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Katy Oliveira (21:44):

Oftentimes in the conversation around using data to proactively reach out to students and know what's happening in their lives in real time, or you don't know specifically what's happening, but you can see that something's happening. That shifted their behavior in a way that might not support them being successful as intrusive or big brother, big data. But more and more as I talk to our partner institutions, I find that students like you were saying, I find it really interesting. What you're saying about students have an expectation that there is information out there and they want the convenience almost, or the, the service of you knowing, Hey, I need help. And us proactively reaching out that that's almost the expectation because they've been kind of conditioned that way in other environments and other places where they're interfacing with society. And so I'm just curious, are you finding that it's maybe easier or more effective to get students connected to the resources that they need than in a previous world where maybe we mass marketed a service and students who didn't think it applied to them just kept on hanging out with their friends or doing whatever they were doing.

Katy Oliveira (22:55):

And the hand raisers were often the student, not necessarily we want help all students, but that wasn't necessarily the student that the marketing was intended for.

Karl Smith (23:03):

No, that that makes sense. First out, very succinctly students are mainly say, thank you when we do this outreach. And so when we do this, when we call intrusive advising, most of the time students say, thank

you. And in fact, I know of no situations where students said, mind your business and <laugh>, and leave me alone. Most of the time they say, thank you. And then it opens up a level of relationship and rapport with whoever's doing the outreach that may not have existed before, just because it shows that you cared more about them than just what they were going on in the classroom. Big picture wise, we asked ourselves that same question. And so I could give you a very specific example related to our equity work that we're doing on our campus. We know that the graduation rates and retention rates for underrepresented minority students is lower than it is for our average population, our average graduation and retention rate on campus.

Karl Smith (24:01):

And so we had a student focus group come together and I asked that question in particular, I said, if we have a list of 600 students that we need to do outreach to based on the data that we see in our systems, if we prioritize that list based on race and ethnicity, and you were receiving a phone call because we are trying to improve the graduation rates of African American students, how would you respond to that phone call? Because I said, eventually all the African American students who are on the list would know that, Hey we're being called. And part of the reason that we're being called is because we're African American. And so all the students that we asked in that conversation, they had the conversation with, they said they would be appreciative and supporting a supportive of the outreach effort because if they did need the help, then they wanted, they would like someone to reach out to them.

Karl Smith (24:54):

It alleviated concern that I had that a student whose race was being used as one particular way to do outreach might respond differently. Now the message has to be right. You just can't get out there and say, I see you fell in a class. You need to improve. <Laugh> that's not the message that you want to send, but if you reach out to them and just ask them, I see your grade has changed in this class. We have some resources that you may not be aware of. And we like to offer some support to you. The student responds a lot different to that. And based on our open rates on clickthrough rates and some of the responses that we've gotten back, everybody's been appreciative of it. And so I think that there are some difficult conversations as you have access to this level of data on students about making sure that that message is right, making sure that the person who's doing that outreach uses the right framework.

Karl Smith (25:46):

You can be intrusive in someone's life and get the wrong message. And, and they will have the wrong takeaway from it. If it's a parent and you reach out to them and they're struggling partially, because they're struggling to find childcare. If your only response and resource that you're able to offer to them is that you need to figure it out. Then obviously that's not gonna help that parent out and that's gonna leave a bitter taste in their mouth. And ultimately it shows that you just don't understand what they're going through. And so it's also retraining your teams and your staff as well to make sure that they are practicing a certain level of cultural humility as they're going into these conversations and understanding that education is, is just one part of this person's identity that you're trying to support. Once you get that through and you have the resources and you're supporting students to help them find those resources. I think that there's nothing but positive that can come out of reaching out and using data to reach out to students who might be struggling.

Katy Oliveira (26:41):

Yeah. And having it be more tailored to their needs and understanding that needs are holistic and broad. And that it's not always a matter of just connecting them to an academic resource. It's about asking them what's going on with their life.

Karl Smith (26:55):

Very true. And it also gives us the opportunity to balance our resources in a correct way. Because you're right. We used to just send that same email message out to all students at different times in the academic year, whether it's you need to register or midterm to come up, come visit the tutoring center. And then typically what happens in those situations, the students are doing the best. The students who have learned to navigate the system, they show up first. And so whether, if it's an advising appointment and you send out the same message to all students to say, look, we have this opportunity for this advising. And there's a limited number of slots. Who's gonna show up the ones who are doing well in class who understand the systems and prioritize, even if it's tutoring, next thing you know, your staff is stretched really, really thin.

Karl Smith (27:39):

And they haven't even got to the students who are most need of the resources and support. And it's nothing against the students who are taking advantage in and leveraging all of these different systems. They're doing great. It's just that they may not need the same level of engagement. And so if I need to do a second check in on a particular group of students, I'm not gonna send an email to all of our students. I'm just gonna send it to that group of students so that they know that this is for them and that they have access for the additional support that they need. And that really is an equity framework where you can use different pieces of information and data that's out there to make sure that the student who needs it most, needs those resources, the most in order to be successful, gets those resources,

Katy Oliveira (28:23):

Right. Instead of it being that we just equally send them to everyone and whoever self selects, which is usually the student who has the advantage of being a self-starter or knowing how to navigate the system fills up. And then we have a capacity issue amongst staff, which I'm sure as any other institution across the us, we know that having enough staff to meet the needs of every student can be really challenging. And so it's a matter of providing the resources student needs at a given particular time so that you can have the capacity to serve students, how they need to be served

Karl Smith (28:56):

Very true. And the fundamental business model of higher education doesn't allow for truly customized support for every single person that comes through the door. It just doesn't work. We, the cost would be astronomical if you had an advisor ratio of one to 75 or, or something crazy like that in order to support every students in that concierge type way. And so most students are successfully navigating the process. However, and, and it's not as complex for some of those students because they probably are second generation or third generation. And they have resources that they're able to, to draw on or maybe the system was built for them and it fits their learning style. It fits their lifestyle. Maybe they are at that traditional college age and there's not a whole lot of things going on outside of their control. And so they do just to get, get the focus on school and that there's a lot of support outside the college that's given to that student, but many students and a growing number of students.

Karl Smith (29:56):

That's not the case. This is one piece I, I keep kind of coming back to, this is just one piece of their identity and it's very critical to their plans and their future plans and their success. But so is raising their children. So is keeping their lights on. So it's putting food on the table. So it's keeping a roof over their head. So is their mental health and their, their wellbeing. All those things are colliding with education. We just can't simply expect someone to show up and be all in on this and shut all those other things out.

It just doesn't work that way. And it's a luxury that few people have this day and age to do those type of things. And so we're trying to be more responsive to their true needs in, in doing so. We need to make sure that we understand those needs.

Karl Smith ([30:40](#)):

And that's where, whether it's our intake process, where when you go through orientation, students are learning about all these different things, but we're also continuing to learn about them. So we have a questionnaire that we pass outta orientation, and so we'll get more information on them. We'll get a chance to know who's working. Obviously we've always known if they are in school part-time but we also know if they're working full-time we know if a student's working full-time, if they're working during the day, then maybe we need to offer them group advising in the evening. Let them know when we're gonna be open a little bit later on particular days during registration, so that they have some questions that they can reach out and try to schedule a early evening information session or an advising session. So those are just some of the ways that we're trying to make sure that we customize their experience and support to that individual student in a way that's scalable and not necessarily reactive, but proactive to the needs of students based on what we know about them.

Karl Smith ([31:36](#)):

And we're getting better and better at it. There's so many other things that we're still working on. We do marketing campaigns to our internal students where we're kind of geofencing around the campus spots that they're visiting addresses, that they have making sure that when registration's open, that they are aware of that registration, we're looking at how would we, if students are visiting certain places on our webpage, how can we be responsive if they are going and looking for emergency aid, but they never submit the emergency aid application. That's a sign that maybe we need to nudge them and have an outreach opportunity with that individual. We're getting to the point where we're trying to see if we can explore, if a student is searching for payday loans and we know that they're a student, that there's an opportunity, we can reach out to them on those type of things as well.

Karl Smith ([32:22](#)):

And so we're trying to be as creative as your favorite store that you're going to, that you like to shop at. We want to be that creative, because they seem to always know when we want something and they send us an ad just at the right time that gets us to purchase it. Now we're not trying to get students to purchase anything. We just wanna make sure that they're successful in what they're doing. And so when they need a resources, we are able to figure that part out. Because I think it's, it's fairly rare for individuals to think of their higher education institution as anything other than supporting their education. But we do so much more. Now we're connected to so many community resources as well. And so if it's not happening at the college, chances are it's happening somewhere in the community. We're fortunate at Tacoma community college that we're located in a very supportive environment with plethora resources and number of partnerships that we're able to leverage in order to fully support students, not just on their academic journey, but even on their post graduation journey and even on their journey, considering that they're gonna go to college.

Karl Smith ([33:24](#)):

And so we're just trying to make sure that we're there for the students when they need us.

Katy Oliveira ([33:28](#)):

Do you find that this holistic care holistic support model is improving your student outcomes?

Karl Smith (33:34):

Yes, it definitely is not at the rate and pace that we would like to see. I'll pick on housing, we've been participating in a number of housing programs. We have a fairly unique housing partnership at Tacoma community college. It is with the Tacoma housing authority and we have a college housing assistance program. It targets homeless students and students who are housing insecure. We've been entering this program. I want to say for about four years or so actually been longer than maybe five, but we thought that if we can provide a stable living environment for students, that we would naturally see a change in the graduation rates for those students, we didn't see the change that we thought it wasn't immediate, but we do know that those students did have stable housing, which is one of the pieces that you need to just have your basic needs met.

Karl Smith (34:21):

And so meeting the student's basic needs is important. We expect that there'll be residuals that students housing will stabilize. There's probably some other issues that they're dealing with in one day, they'll receive their credential from Tacoma community college. It probably just won't be on our traditional timelines of two and three years when we like to see those type of things. So when you're trying to do the basic needs work, there are a lot of challenges that students are faced with in that it's food insecurities or housing insecurities or just their overall health and wellness. It takes time to see the outcomes of that. And it typically doesn't work on our timeframes, but it is still nonetheless the right thing to do to support individuals on their journey for education and everyone that we have, whether they've graduated from TCC or they have to stop out because even though you've supported those things, it just wasn't enough to get them over that final hurdle. Most of them always plan to come back and finish. They just need to take a break at this point in time to get their lives back in order. And we know that we were a small part in helping them get their lives back in order. And like I said, I, I think that they'll come back and finish their degrees, but also think they'll change the trajectories of future generations as well by completing that step and hopefully making a little bit easier for their legacy and their children when it's time for them to pursue education.

Katy Oliveira (35:41):

Are you finding that even though the student may not complete the degree or transfer to the four year institution or get the certificate or credential and the timeline in which we as a society measure these sorts of things that students are more likely to persist with this kind of support from semester to semester,

Karl Smith (36:02):

We do find that students are more likely to persist. Like I mentioned, we're still pretty early on in using this approach of intrusive and appreciative frameworks of advising and outreach and some share that there's still some learning that we have to do to make sure that the message is right, to make sure that the resources are aligned to make sure that we have enough resources and to make sure that we're getting that message, not just right, but also to the student at the right time. So we're trying to get further and further upstream, not just waiting until the students transcript shows that they've had a decline in their, their grades, not just waiting to the midterm, but trying to figure out what are all the other behaviors that you see before a student actually stops out or before they find themselves in a crisis, whether it's a mental health crisis, those are all the type of things that we're trying to get upstream of.

Karl Smith (36:51):

And we're still figuring that part out. Admittedly, if there's someone out there who has figured those things out, let us know, and I'm sure we'll have to tailor to what we are doing here locally, because each context and situation is just so different. And so we're, we're really working through a lot of those things as we speak, we're putting emphasis on it. We're looking at the various data points that we collect to try to make sure that we're, we, we have the right pieces in place. And so it, it is still being built and developed. I always say it's, it's kind of like being in a car that you're driving across country. You know, you need some work on it, but you start it in Florida and you're trying to get the Washington. It goes and you'll get there. But you know, you're gonna have to stop and reevaluate change some things, some parts out along the way and that, and that's where we're at in the process.

Karl Smith (37:34):

But I have no doubt that we'll get to our target demographics, our target graduation rates. And a lot of that is like so many places people do this work are just very passionate. So I work with a wonderful group of people and staff who are committed to supporting our students. And I know I'm fortunate in that way. It's just a matter of making sure that we continue to learn, grow, listen to our students, see what their needs are and align those resources in a way that they can be successful and rebuild our college in a way that really meets their needs. And so I threw the term out the traditional college age student, and that's such a misnomer now, college students coming all different ages, races and ethnicity. And I think the only thing that's left over is that college was billed for 18 to 24 year olds.

Karl Smith (38:25):

And the way that we set many things up is really responsive to their needs. The students are sitting, our seats now are not necessarily those students, many cases they're older and that's gonna be a trend that we're gonna continue to see. And with their age comes wisdom and just more complexity to their lives. And so we need to make sure that we're ready to support those students. And that doesn't always mean that it's coming directly from the college. Sometimes it means that we're connecting with our community partners to make sure that they're aware of the needs of our students. And we're advocating on behalf of our students with our politicians at the state and local level, but also with our partners to say, as you're putting together this program, don't forget that college PR students present this way that yes, they have financial aid and financial aid covers these things, but it really does. It was not designed to, for, to cover the cost of a family that someone might be supporting. And so there's just a lot of different things that we're making sure that we're advocating for on behalf of our students.

Katy Oliveira (39:23):

There's no one size fits all answer. It sounds like students are so diverse. They come with so much different kinds of lived experiences and circumstances that providing them with the support that's gonna help them reach their academic goals is iterative and it's multifaceted and it takes collaboration across campus. And it takes being able to see them in real time and not necessarily rely on trends of the past, but to, to be able to know who your students are there sitting in the seat and then in time through their own behavior, connect them with adequate resources beyond academics,

Karl Smith (40:03):

Katy, you are so right. You said you need to be able to see them. That is probably first and foremost and you need to be able to see all of what they're bringing to the college. And you need to be able to appreciate what they're bringing to the college. Now look at that as a deficit, but asset, I think it's amazing when someone might be 67 years old and they value education so much that they decided to come back and pursue a credential at your college, I think is amazing. When a mother, single mother with four children decide that this is so important to me, that I'm going to come back to college, keep

food on the table for my children. <Laugh> get them to all their sporting events and activities that they need to be at that drive to be in this moment to overcome all the obstacles that might be in their way to say, this is so important that I'm not going to give up.

Karl Smith (40:54):

How could you not appreciate that and want to support someone who's in that situation? Because it is not easy in many cases. And I think sometimes we have come to these situations with the framework, oh, this is the easy all you gotta do is just go take these classes and you have your degree. And we assume that the coursework is the hard part that they're dealing with. And that's not always the case. Yes, the work is challenging and it's rigorous and it's supposed to be, but coming home to three people, looking you in your eye, three little eyes and, and trying to support them with their homework, make sure that the dinner is made for them and that their lived experience isn't diminished while you're taking time to pursue this education. And this degree, that's hard. <Laugh>, that's hard. It takes a heck of a commitment for someone to say that this is what I'm choosing to do at this particular time for the betterment of my life and for the betterment of my family.

Karl Smith (41:47):

And so I take energy and I hope that most people do this work, use that as energy. And, and that's kind of the why I can't remember think when we first start, you asked me, why do I do this? I do this because pursuing and getting a college degree, isn't easy. If it was easy, everyone would have one, but it's hard. And for the people who do it, I want to make sure that they have the best experience and reach the highest level that they're seeking to get the outcomes that they want. And so that's really why I do it. It wakes me up in the morning and it's, it's a passion I have of mine. And it allowed me to help people in a way that just I stumbled into. And so there's must be a teacher in me somewhere. But right now being VP of student affairs is kind of where my passion lies. <Laugh>

Katy Oliveira (42:27):

Well, as we close out, we've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything that you wanna share? Lessons learned pieces of wisdom. You've shared so much wisdom with our audience that we didn't get to today.

Karl Smith (42:39):

I think I touched briefly on just the equity work that's being approached here. I threw equity out there, because I know that that varies different by different institutions. So I think we have to be careful to make sure we define when we say equity, what groups we're talking about, who we really are trying to support and build this system for. Because I do think that how we allocate our resources creates the outcomes that we're looking for. And so if you know that there are populations that your campus who are struggling to meet their graduation and continuation rates, then you need to allocate your resources in a way that supports those students. Because it's not anything that's wrong with those student populations. It's something that's wrong with our campuses and institutions that we need to fix. And so that's kind of the big picture. One thing that I think applies to any college around the country is that students are capable.

Karl Smith (43:28):

They're capable in many different environments, but we do have to make sure that the resources are aligned to the support that they need and tools such as Civits Learning and I'm sure there's others out there give us the ability to be completely responsive to the needs of those students. And so there's no excuse. And so when you look at it and you see graduation rates, that might not be what you want or

you see under employment rates. If you're looking at your employment data from your students who graduate and there's something that we have a responsibility to do about it, it's difficult work. It won't come easy, because it's changed. And we are deconstructing systems that have always operated this way. And so if at times you feel that you're tired, demolition work is tiring, it's labor intensive and then rebuilding. It is tough, but that's the only way we're gonna get to the outcomes that we want is to demolish what we're currently have in place. Those systems that aren't working and rebuild systems better to support the students.

Katy Oliveira (44:29):

Do you use data to help inform what systems you're deconstructing and which ones you're rebuilding or, or relocating to.

Karl Smith (44:38):

We use data in various frameworks. And so right now at TCC, we're reviewing all of our policies. We're using a anti-racist framework to review the policies and we're using data to see if these policies are disadvantaging, any particular group of students. It could be policies such as what is your drop policies of when students are dropped? How does that information and data looks by ethnic groups and by socioeconomic status or by age, it could be when you send students to collections based on information along those lines, how are those policies impacting students? It could be registration, periods and windows and what time registration opens. And if you have students who are working maybe, or have children maybe opening up registration at certain times of the day, aren't necessarily advantageous for those student populations. And they're struggling to get the classes that they need. There's so many different policies and things that we've always just done because that's the way things are done, whether that's, it's always been done that way. Or if it's the idea that we're open from eight to five and that's why things are done that way, that just don't necessarily work for students. And so those are the type of things that we're trying to break down and, and reconstruct.

Katy Oliveira (45:48):

Well, Carl, I think we could have like a whole other hour long conversation. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your wisdom today. I really appreciate it.

Karl Smith (45:56):

And thank you, Katy. It's been a great time and hope we'll do it again one day.

Katy Oliveira (46:00):

Yes <laugh> Thank you for listening. Join us in our next episode to learn about high impact practices and academic advising with Leticia Wilson of Del Mar College, Next Practices is produced by Civitas Learning access more next practices and learn about how transformational leaders are moving student success forward by visiting <https://civitaslearning.com>. And if you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share it with a friend and subscribe anywhere you listen to podcasts to stay up to date on the latest data-informed approaches to student success.