

The Shift from Student Services to Student Success Systems

Guest: Dr. Michelle Nelson, Dean of Student Success

Institution: Macomb Community College

Host: Katy Oliveira, Civitas Learning

INTRODUCTION

Katy Oliveira 00:00

Today we're talking about what it really takes to build a student ready college with Dr. Michelle Nelson of Macomb Community College. This is a massive mindset shift that stops asking if students are ready for college and instead asks if colleges are ready for students. Our guest, Dr. Nelson, is the Dean of Student Success at Macomb Community College. She's a native Detroit and the first in her family to earn a PhD. She has over 20 years of experience across both academic and student affairs, where she is committed to breaking down systemic barriers and building a campus culture centered around the needs of students. In this episode, we'll be unpacking a few big ideas. We're going to talk about why shifting from a reactive approach to a proactive one completely changes the game when it comes to catching students early. We'll dive into the hidden curriculum of higher education and look at how the unwritten rules of college can trip up first-generation and adult learners if we don't actively dismantle them. Michelle explains how smart data visibility doesn't replace human relationships — it acts as the ultimate enabler to create meaningful touchpoints. And finally, we discuss why student success takes a village and why it is not just the business of student services but a college-wide effort. Welcome to Next Practices. I'm so happy to speak with you today.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 01:28

Yes, thank you for having me here.

Katy Oliveira 01:30

So we'd like to start by having you introduce yourself to our audience. If you could tell us a little bit about yourself and the work you do to impact student and institutional success.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 01:40

I serve as the Dean of Student Success here at Macomb Community College. My work focuses on — I describe it as creating systems, not just services, to help students persist, whether that is to help them start, stay, or succeed. I believe that my job is to help close equity gaps here at the institution and really help students thrive in their experience at the college and as they prepare to move on into their communities.

Katy Oliveira 02:19

I love how you describe that you're not just developing services, but that you're developing a system — and that really aligns closely with how we at Civitas Learning think about it. We might've already gotten the title of the episode right here at the top because it's such an impactful way to think about the work that you do to help students thrive during their experience.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 02:46

Absolutely. My work and the team that support the dean's office — they are doing work from advising to student engagement to career services, and wellbeing and student conduct as well. When you look at all of that, it can exist in silos or it can exist as an ecosystem that's really trying to find ways to support students early, often, and along their journey. So I changed my mantra — not just talking about student services, but as the dean, as the strategic leader of this area, it's my job to foster and examine it through that systemic lens.

FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE: USING DATA AS AN ENABLER

Katy Oliveira 03:46

One of the primary focuses you mentioned was the shift from the institutional stance we usually see — reactive care — to proactive care, and moving away from academic dismissal as a conclusion of an experience versus early intervention at the beginning of one. You've noted that many students, especially part-time and first-generation students, face a hidden curriculum and many systematic barriers that make their path feel ambiguous and confusing. How has your team used data as an enabler to see those barriers early — and how does that early warning change the way your team is interacting with students before even the students themselves might realize they're off track?

Dr. Michelle Nelson 04:56

What I like to think about is that it is not the students' fault they're getting caught in the trap of our bureaucratic loop of college. Among my colleagues, we talk about this notion of the rules of the game — and oftentimes students may or may not know all of those rules, whether that's the degree catalog they're on, number of credit hours, et cetera. One of the things with early warning and using data in a proactive way is to get in front of those indicators. We use the language of leading and lagging indicators. If we begin to look at what I call microbehaviors that come up early — not 'you're failing the class,' but 'you missed a class or two, your attendance is slipping, you missed a quiz' — let's begin to talk about opportunities where we can support you early. The data enables us to look at populations at a large scale. We're an institution of over 27,000 students between our four-credit and our workforce community — we don't have the manpower to reach every student every single day. So leveraging data early and often allows us to see who's on track, who's off track, and create opportunities to build those relationships. Data gives us the indicators, but it doesn't tell us the student's story. When we can reach out and be curious and partner with that student early and often, we create what I call psychological momentum — so students know and trust that there is someone watching their back, someone who's part of their village, whether they raised their hand or not.

WHAT MAKES A TOUCHPOINT MEANINGFUL

Katy Oliveira 07:39

I love your usage of the word 'village' — it really goes to that 'system not services' approach. I think sometimes when we start thinking about data and technology, the concern is that it's going to move us further away from relationships with students — that it's automating interactions. But really it's automating the transactional pieces to allow more space for the relationship, because students really crave that connection. Can you describe what actually makes those touchpoints meaningful versus just another automated outreach — and how do those moments help your students develop a sense of belonging and academic identity?

Dr. Michelle Nelson 08:58

Data tells us who needs support. It's the relationship that actually changes the outcome. It can change the projection of where a student might find themselves and turn the tide. For me, one of the things I really encourage my team to lean into is this concept of a meaningful touchpoint: how do we help students feel recognized, not just contacted? It's not about going after the student and saying, 'Hey, you're failing a class.' It really comes down to making sure that meaningful touchpoint is relevant, timely, and personalized. What I do like about the Civitas platform is that it gives us an opportunity to look at the data, look at historical notes and conversations, what the student came in for — before I make that phone call or send that email, I can gather the story of that student and then make it personalized and relevant. Those types of moments will build the relationship before the student even thinks of it as an administrative contact. It builds trust, momentum, and a sense of belonging. And I would add: my colleagues in student services sometimes forget that faculty are a partner in this. Faculty may be noticing things too. As we build those relationships with academic areas, we're able to piece that village together so faculty are empowered to step up, share, and raise the alarm on a particular student so we can do the outreach.

FACULTY AS CRITICAL PARTNERS IN THE VILLAGE

Katy Oliveira 11:35

Getting faculty to be part of the village is a real challenge that stumps a lot of our partners. And it requires institutions to think in this holistic ecosystem where responsibilities are shared across the entire institution. How has your institution expanded the meaning of support, and how does that unified view of student data and student experience empower faculty to be part of that village?

Dr. Michelle Nelson 13:14

Faculty don't just deliver academic content — they are critical partners. They are the ones who might get the phone call: 'I'm missing class because X, Y, Z is occurring in my life,' or a student is failing because of an undisclosed disability. Allowing faculty to know that they are empowered to report and share — and that we are going to respond and walk with them through that process — is very important. In the past, our academic alerts were fully automated: faculty would send an alert and an email would be automatically generated from the dean's office saying 'you are having trouble in this class, go to the library.' But you missed about three different touchpoints and relationships that student had already formed. You missed the faculty touchpoint, the advisor, the navigator. So we actually reduced and restructured that so the message comes back from the faculty member directly — 'Hey, this is Professor Susie and I'm concerned about your academic success.' And we've seen a shift in how many students open, respond, or head to the tutoring center because it came from their faculty member rather than a title three levels up that they've never even interacted with. Our philosophy is that faculty are managing their own caseload — 30 students in a 15-week class, seeing them two or three times a week. Why not leverage that information, make it easy for faculty to raise their hand, and then partner alongside them?

Katy Oliveira 16:16

Faculty get so much face time with students and build real relationships. Leveraging that natural bond makes a lot of sense.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 16:30

I'm not saying it's perfect at Macomb — we have a lot of work to do. But we're becoming more intentional about being inclusive with our faculty. Our vice president and our provost work very closely together. Oftentimes when we need someone for a strategic initiative, you need someone from student services, you need someone from academics. We try to maintain a really collaborative and transparent relationship, because without the other, students are the ones who could fall short.

BUILDING A STUDENT READY COLLEGE: DISMANTLING INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Katy Oliveira 17:15

A major part of the work you and your team do is centered on the student ready college philosophy — moving the burden of readiness from the student to the institution. You've pointed out that we often assume adult students should know how to navigate things like grade appeals and faculty outreach, which isn't the case. How is access to data and being able to see the students' holistic experience in one place helping to dismantle those institutional barriers and shift the burden of readiness from the student to the institution?

Dr. Michelle Nelson 18:29

I'm really big on an asset-based approach rather than leaning into the deficit. The antiquated way of looking at student success is to ask, 'Are they student ready? Are they academically prepared? Are they mentally ready?' But we know students have so many other competing priorities — adult students managing children, parents, a full-time job. One of the things I believe in strongly is reducing that blame on students. What we began to do is look at the data through this lens of what I call 'toxic combinations.' We know that students get a degree plan and we want them to follow it, but sometimes that doesn't work for their life situation. So they find themselves taking math and accounting and chemistry all in one semester. The data helps us identify those students. I may not be able to change their decision, but I can put in front of them the math section that has supplemental instruction, the tutoring schedule — 'Hey, I'm here because I noticed you're taking these classes and I think you might need some additional support.' Looking at the data without judgment, because we don't know why the student is taking that combination. We also create advising campaigns so timely communications go out. Another population: students on academic notice. It's too late at the end of the semester to reach out. Students on academic notice need outreach at the beginning, the middle, with relevant messages: 'Have you been going to tutoring? Do you have an academic success plan? Come see me. What does academic notice mean?' The goal is to address the signals and symptoms before they become a crisis — because a crisis is when a student is on academic probation, which means they may have one or two semesters left before it becomes detrimental to their completion.

Katy Oliveira 23:28

It's such a critical part of moving from reactive to proactive. At the end of the semester, you're exactly right — it's too late. It's almost like treating the symptoms without treating the cause. Think of how much more success is possible if we can get ahead and get students the right resources at the right time, targeted to their particular needs.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 24:07

Especially at a community college, we don't have them for four to six years. We want our students to graduate within two to three years. We don't have room for students to go through

their path blind. We have to be very intentional, we have to be able to see those indicators, and we have to be okay with outreaching and being proactive. And there's a balance — we're not going to reach all 27,000 students every single semester. But when we have intentionality, what does the cadence look like for students in our start category — those just beginning — versus students with 45 credits or more who should be preparing to transfer, enter the workforce, or pursue their bachelor's? Those needs look very different. So what does support look like throughout their entire lifecycle at the institution?

MILESTONES, MOMENTUM, AND CELEBRATING WINS

Katy Oliveira 26:29

Something you shared that I thought was really remarkable is that your outreach isn't only when students are in need. You shared that in your own PhD program, a mentor helped you navigate the unknown of your dissertation by forcing you to share your progress. You've translated that at Macomb into focusing on milestones and celebrating those milestones. Why is it so important to slow down, create natural checkpoints, and celebrate those wins alongside the student?

Dr. Michelle Nelson 27:11

Regardless of where I've landed, I have the degree and the experience — but some people are still on that journey. When you're on a journey, you have to look at it not as one big roadmap from start to finish, but as a coordinated effort one step at a time. Conditioning the student to celebrate along the way reduces the feeling that they haven't won, that they're not achieving, that they're not moving forward. I often say: support isn't extra, it's strategy. Creating intentional checkpoints allows us to validate their path: you've made the right decision in choosing this program of study, you passed this gateway course. Being intentional about celebrating that matters, because you don't know what it took for them to even pass that class — the internal sacrifices or external pressures they're juggling. My mentor taught me this directly. I didn't have anyone in front of me who had completed a PhD. She would make me explain the expectation — 'What is chapter one? What's its purpose?' She wanted me to ingrain that understanding and then celebrate once I met it. When students know that a particular course is a gateway in their chosen path, they see themselves as college material. They see themselves as that emerging nurse, that emerging engineer — it centers around their identity and their sense of belonging. We often talk about belonging as purely social: do they feel like they belong at the institution? But we want them to belong in the curriculum and the academic pathway they've chosen. We want them to see themselves in that picture. Completion of what? Completion of credit? Or completion of becoming a future nurse, a teacher, a radio technician in our community? Building that psychological momentum — reassuring them that the path they're on is one we recognize and support, and that they see themselves in that picture — that is some of the most powerful work we do.

Katy Oliveira 31:07

It's such a beautiful way to think about it. That positive reinforcement — you're on the right path, keep going, we've got you — it looks at them as a human on a journey to better their life and reach a goal, versus a number we're trying to get across a completion percentage finish line. Those metrics are important and necessary, but remembering what's behind those numbers — that's what makes the work meaningful.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Dr. Michelle Nelson 31:56

I really enjoyed the student ready college philosophy — we read the book as a team, as a collective unit, and it was quite transformative because we all saw ourselves in it. We're all asking ourselves: what system can we enhance or improve to make the student experience better, or is this creating a barrier? We're challenging and holding each other accountable to ensure that we are moving the needle toward reducing barriers for students, responding to their needs, and responding to the changing landscape of higher ed as a whole. Student success is such critical work. It's hard work. And when it's done with intention, using data-informed practice and a human-centered touch, I believe we can move the needle on what student success looks like at our institution. I want to encourage people to not be afraid of data. I'm a qualitative researcher at heart — I'm on the touchy-feely side — but I also know how critical data is to inform our practices, change our systems, and create that ecosystem that really promotes change at our institutions. It is okay to do it with a human-centered touch. What we are doing here at Macomb is really landing on a coordinated care and case management model so we can reach all of our students — not just the ones who know how to reach out to us, but the ones who are often invisible, the ones who haven't mastered the help-seeking behaviors to know that we're here to support them.

Katy Oliveira 34:53

Thank you so much, Dr. Nelson, for coming on the show. And if you're interested in checking out The Student Ready College, we'll link to it in our show notes and you can find it anywhere books are sold. Take care, Dr. Nelson — we're so happy to have spent this time with you today.

Dr. Michelle Nelson 35:13

Yes. Thank you so much.