Speakers: John Fink, Davis Jenkins, and Hana Lahr

Topic: CCRC's New Book: More Essential Than Ever

Fink: The title "More Essential Than Ever" was one we picked because community colleges really are more essential than ever right now. In there's been sort of public questioning of the value of higher education. A lot of that has you know been thinking about with universities, but what we've known and we've been studying for many years at CCRC is just the importance of community colleges in their communities. They really are anchor institutions. They pull together employers, K 12 schools, local universities, and just serve as the place to expand opportunity. That's always been the case, but it's especially important now, given that there's increased focus on you know the return or sort of what is the payoff from higher education,

Jenkins: Much of the reforms we saw in the earlier phases after redesigning America's community colleges were focused on removing barriers to completion, and that's really important. Improving advising, improving information at the the start, improving planning, and but the thesis of the book is that that's that's important, but it's not enough. If we're going to continue to attract and retain students in this very competitive environment, when students don't have time, a lot of time, or money, and need to have many other obligations. We've got to strengthen pathways to success in employment and further education afterwards.

Fink: And what we offer in this book is a set of observations and ideas based on our research over the last 10 years studying whole college guided pathways redesign on how community colleges can continue to strengthen that mission of providing value by connecting students to clear pathways that lead to good jobs and transfer in a major.

Lahr: From the past 10 years of research we've been doing with community colleges across the country, we've learned a couple of things. One that taking on this type of whole college institutional change is challenging. It is difficult. It requires the entire institution, every department, every program, every office to really be involved in that work. But that it is possible, and we've seen colleges really take on this work and excel at it and implement new practices, new reforms, new programs that are designed at scale so that they're improving the experience of all students who are coming into the institution.

Fink: Much of the book really focuses on these frontiers for guided pathways that are really about you know better connecting students to programs of value that lead to good jobs and transfer in a major. These include things like you know ensuring that your programs are very clear what they lead to in terms of you know the wages that and

careers that students can access and and the majors and the applicability of that credit when students transfer to universities.

Lahr: So one of the big ideas in this book is you know we really want to help students explore, choose, gain momentum, and complete a program of study in a timely and affordable way that is aligned with their interests and their goals. And so, where do you start with that? So we're saying let's start at the beginning and just help students explore different programs of study, different careers that these programs are linked to, because there's not always a clear connection between a program of study and a career. So we said we worked with colleges and we suggested that they think about students first year, most community colleges lose around 45% of their students from their first day of college to the beginning of their second year. So, if we want to improve longer-term completion rates, we should start at the beginning and try to retain more of these students to their second year. So, we developed this framework. We called it Ask Connect Inspire plan that was really focused on program recruitment and onboarding.

Fink: We we talk about in another chapter about teaching and the importance of the classroom to get these sort of you know positive experiences for students to feel connected and feel inspired. For them to really scale on any community college campus, it really has to be done through the classroom and instruction that needs to be active and experiential and connected to careers. The

Lahr: Next chapter is about helping students complete on time and affordably, and by on time we mean on the student's timeline. So not you know necessarily in two years, but really on you know helping students develop this educational plan that shows them a timeline for meeting their goals, and then helping to complete that as affordably as possible. And this includes a lot of work on advising, monitoring students' progress, but also scheduling reforms to ensure that students can take the classes they need in the terms and on the days and times, and then the modalities that they want.

Fink: And another frontier area is about trying to create all of this as an on-ramp for high school students who just are so much of who community colleges are serving now, and thinking about dual enrollment really as an access point into into college for students who might not otherwise go, which is an increasing number of students, you know, not enrolling in any college, and so how can dual enrollment really not just be an acceleration strategy, but one that expands college access to a high-quality pathway through community college?