**Dr. Darla Cooper Interview Transcript**

**Equity & Kindness**

**AS** [00:00:00] For today's podcast, it's a pleasure to have Dr. Darla Cooper, who currently serves as the executive director for the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges, also known as The RP Group. She has worked in the community college system for over 20 years, having previously held institutional research director positions at a variety of colleges. She led Student Support (Re)defined, a landmark research project that examined what supports student success, and co-directed Through the Gate, a research study that examined what happens with students who appear to transfe,r but do not. Dr. Cooper has extensive experience serving as an external evaluator for several federal and private foundation grants and has worked on various other projects designed to promote student success, including the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence and the American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project. It's a pleasure to have you on the student success podcast, Darla.

**Darla Cooper** [00:00:57] Well, thank you for having me out. It's great to be here. Appreciate it.

**AS** [00:01:00] One of the things that I really love about The RP Group is the fact that I've had the opportunity to do so many projects with RP. We did a project on integrated planning. I've been involved in projects to do student focus groups, and to do customized trainings. So I have a big heart for The RP Group. Lots of smart, brilliant, hardworking people. It's a pleasure to have you as part of the podcast. One of the things that I like to start with guests is, if you can please tell us something about yourself, beyond your your experience, some kind of hobby or superpower you might have. What can you share with us?

**Darla Cooper** [00:01:40] Well, I'll start with a hobby that unfortunately I'm not able to do now, but I'm so looking forward to doing very, very soon, which is travel plus photography. I love both separately, but I love them even more when they're together. I love traveling the world. I've been to six of the seven continents taking pictures all over the world, and my home is my gallery. You ever visited me, you would see pictures, my pictures in every room. I do photo books for almost every trip to tell that story and help me remember where I was, what I was doing, who I was with, all of that. But I just I love it. I've missed it so much this last year. And I've already got a very long list of places that I'm ready to go as soon as I am able. And I like to think I have lots of superpowers, but the one I will share with you is, I see mistakes in writing, you know, I see the punctuation, the grammar. People call me the grammar police, it's fine, I'll take it. But I see it in a billboard. I see it in a magazine. I see it in a presentation. I see them everywhere. And so in some cases, it's a gift and sometimes it's a curse. But it is a superpower, I guess, depending.

**AS** [00:03:09] In terms of your travel, do you have a favorite place or two?

**Darla Cooper** [00:03:14] Italy. I love Italy. Maybe it's the food, might be the gelato, the pasta. I love that it has, I love history and I find Italy to be very interesting and in other parts of Europe, because it's the juxtaposition of ancient history, Roman history next to the Renaissance and literally in the same place sometimes. And I just that's that's just fascinating to me. So the whether, it's kind of like ours here in California. So that doesn't hurt. That's what always comes to mind.

**AS** [00:03:57] And when you take pictures, do you like, is it more of the people? Is it inanimate objects? A combination? What particular subject do you like to take pictures of?

**Darla Cooper** [00:04:09] I call them wonders, whether they are natural wonders or manmade wonders. I love architecture, beautiful buildings, but I also love the mountains. I love going to national parks. I did a whole trip through all the parks in Utah and I've been to a lot of the parks here in the West and just beautiful natural wonders. And so that's how I would probably describe most of what I take a picture of is some kind of either architectural or natural wonder.

**AS** [00:04:41] I think there's some alignment between you going to these different countries and you taking snapshots of a story, and I think, The RP Group. That's one of the many things that it does so well, is that it captures stories specifically of students, because The RP Group is, I believe it's unique in California. There aren't, I don't know of any other state, that has this nonprofit research and planning arm for their system. Could you unpack what is The RP Group exactly? What do you do? What are some of the projects, services? How do you support the field?

**Darla Cooper** [00:05:21] So we have our history as a membership organization for the Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness professionals that work at the California Community Colleges. We we call them IRPE, again, institutional research, planning and effectiveness. And so that is our membership. That is who we primarily serve. But we are of the California community college system. And so we also serve the whole system, primarily the students. And while most of us don't work, interact directly with students on a day to day basis, they have to be the center. And the reason for everything that we do, regardless of how many, let's say, degrees away from a student, we we might personally be. And so we work to support those professionals in their work, to support their colleges, to do research, to do planning, to do assessments, to make decisions to look at effectiveness, all for the success of our students. And so that's where we got our start. And that's what our our strategy is really is, to support the researchers on these campuses, these IRPE professionals, by doing research ourselves, by a lot of professional development, again, both that target the IRPE community, but also the broader community college community. We partner with different organizations to reach faculty, to reach administrators, to reach classify professionals. And we work with like Student Senate, for example, to try to reach students because we need to involve students much more than we do in our research of them. And it's something that we're cognizant of. And I'm not saying that we're there yet, but we are hopefully moving in that direction.

**AS** [00:07:31] And speaking of moving in that direction, actually, I think you are there in many respects. I think with the landmark study of Student Support (Re)defined and the six factors, could you please explain that study? What are the six factors, A, and B, could you please provide examples of how colleges have used all six, if you want, or some of them just some real-life examples of how colleges used Student Support (Re)defined.

**Darla Cooper** [00:08:03] So Student Support (Re)defined is a study that we did where we went to the students and asked them what helps you be successful? And we learned so much. It's hard to summarize so, but we did identify what we call the six SuccessFactors and most of what students told us in answer to that question of what helps you be successful, fell into those one of those six factors or multiple factors. If you at the graphic of the factors, you'll see that they all touch each other. They're all connected with each other because in most cases you don't work with a student. One factor at a time. That's not the point. So let me tell you the factors first and then I'll get into what they look like in action. So I'm going to tell them to you in the order in which students prioritize them in terms of their success.

**Darla Cooper** [00:09:07] So the first one was directed direct. It means that the student has a goal and knows how to achieve it. It is not simply enough to have a goal. You have to know what you're doing, what you need to do in order to reach that goal. The second factor is focused. So that's kind of the keeping your eye on the prize, doing the work every day, staying motivated, time management, study skills. It's all the things that you need in order to stay focused on making progress towards your goal. And when we talk to students, they talk about those two factors of being kind of inextricably linked. They said things like what you can't be successful without. But, you know, you have to have direction. You have to have focus there. They go together. So focus came in a very close second to direct it. What was interesting was that the third factor, again, in terms of importance was nurture. And this was the factor where we got a little bit of pushback originally when we proposed it, in that we had people saying, that's not my job. You know, I'm not here to baby students or mother them, you know, and when we talk to students, it really came down to, does anybody care? Does anybody know my name? Does anybody know why I'm here? Do they notice if I'm not here? Do they care if I succeed? Do they care if I fail? Does anybody care?

**Darla Cooper** [00:10:41] And so that was that, that took some people by surprise that would come in right after having direction. And the focus is that people need other people to care about them. The the fourth factor was engaged, which is that students are active participants in their learning, not passive vessels that we pour information into, an that students need to be engaged in and out of class. And there's an onus on us to, first of all, explain to students why should they be engaged? What's in it for them? What are they going to get out of it? I think sometimes we just assume that students know, well, it's good for you or because I, because I said so. Right. Because I know what's best for you. We need to do a better job of engaging students by telling them why being engaged is important to their success. Similarly, with the next factor, connected. Connected is that sense of belonging, that sense of that you are part of something larger than yourself. Well, this is another one where we had students in the study say, why? Why should I be connected with what's in it for me? What difference does it make? And this is another place where we could do a better job of telling students why being connected is important. And there's all kinds of research that many people, I'm sure, familiar with that shows the connection between feeling connected in that sense of belonging and student success. The last factor is valued. And what I found interesting about that one is I think all of us have an inherent sense of what it feels like to be valued. If you have something to offer, you're able to offer that. And when you do, it's appreciated in some way. And so even though it came in technically, I guess, last when students prioritized it, when you talk to students about it, when I talk to students about feeling valued, you could see it in and what a different you could hear it and what a difference it made to their success. And I often challenged my colleagues to think about it from their own perspective. As an employee, perhaps at a college, when you feel valued by the college, aren't you just even a little bit more likely to put up with something to stick it out, to go the extra mile? Why would students be any different if they feel valued, if they feel like they matter to the college? Maybe they'll try a little bit harder, maybe they'll put up with some things that push through some of their challenges, seek out help because they feel like they matter. I really try to emphasize that don't read too much into the fact that it came in six out of six. They're all important, maybe not in the same way at the same time, same intensity to every student. But we need to make sure that we are taking those factors into account in terms of things that I've seen over the years of colleges implementing.

**Darla Cooper** [00:14:04] I've just been so impressed with the the creativity of how colleges use them. There was one college where they had a competition where students wrote about a factor and the students who won got placed on those lamp, the lamp post banners all over campus. So they won. Like I said, they wrote this essay and were placed on a banner that said directed. And then you could go to their website and read what the student said about what directed meant to their success. Another school created a brochure based on the six factors for students to help to put that information in their hands. Like these are things that you can do and seek out to help to be successful. There are colleges that have used it to help frame things like their onboarding process, like looking at what are we doing to help students really be successful in setting them up for success. And how does being directed and staying focused and feeling nurtured, how does all of that factor into it? The other thing that we did in response to a request from a college was create a Ten Ways document. I was going around doing different presentations on Student Support (Re)defined, and one of the colleges asked me, well, can you just give me like a top 10 list of what faculty can do to support student success? And I was like, yes, yes, I can. And we went back to the data. We went back to what students told us and came up with these Ten Ways resource that came from the students. They're not our Ten Ways. They're not from The RP Group. These are things that students said helped them. They're also not hypothetical. These are real people with real teachers that made a difference in terms of helping students experience those factors. There's also another, so there's two 10 Ways just to clarify. There's one for faculty and one for anyone, anyone working at the campus. And that's one of our main themes from the study, is everyone at the college can and should play a role in student success. And so that the other 10 Ways Guide tries to point out, no matter what your job is, you can support certain success. And it may be in a way that's not in your job description.

**AS** [00:16:37] Thank you for that. One of the things I appreciate appreciate about you is that you're the leader of this organization. You've got a lot on your plate. You're providing guidance for it, but you're not afraid to roll up your sleeves. You're actually still doing focus groups. Your superpower, by the way, is very well known and it makes everybody that much better because everybody looks at their emails more closely, looks at any document before they send it. Your superpower, has an impact in a good way. So because you've done so many focus groups, I've done so many, too. But I'm sure you've done way more than me. Can you think about some of the top things that you hear educators say that, I'll be candid, kind of make you cringe because they make such big assumptions about students, but because you've actually talked with hundreds, if not thousands of students and seen all this data, quantitative, qualitative, or do you have any of your quote unquote favorites?

**Darla Cooper** [00:17:45] I think you mentioned the word assumptions. And that's kind of my biggest takeaway is and you talk about cringing. It's those assumptions that we all, and I'll put myself in that, we've all made, continue to make about why students do what they do or don't do. And I've talked to enough students to know that we're not always right. Actually, we're often wrong. We assume things about student motivation. I see a lot of assumptions that the student just doesn't care. The student is not prioritizing education or my class. This student is disrespecting me or my subject. And my question back to them is, OK, you know, why do you think that first of all, what where is this coming from to try to unpack that? And then I always ask, well have you talked to the student? Have you asked the student what's going on? And again, you're not going to go to them and say, why do you always come to class late? Right. That's not helpful. But to show, going back to that nurtured factor. Right. Going back and with some care, asking the student something more along the lines of I've noticed that you've missed class or I noticed that you leave early, you come late or you haven't turned in this assignment, is there anything I can help with? Right, and as opposed to assuming that the student, again, just doesn't doesn't care, doesn't want to do better, doesn't want to do the assignment, and I'm not saying that's never of course it is. We all have things. And think back to when we were in school, but we need to talk to our students, and more importantly, we need to listen. We need to listen, and that's what doing these focus groups has really done for me as a practitioner, is giving me a space and opportunity to listen to students. And we always include the student quotes in any of our reports. I personally like to debrief with the college where I'm doing the focus groups to kind of give them my impressions before the report comes out. Tell them what I'm seeing, things that may not make it into the report. But trying to tell the student's story, trying to be that I take I take this responsibility seriously as an advocate for students, because they're not always listened to, they're not they're not even asked in the first place so many times, and so it's done by heart, really some good. When I tell students in the focus group what I'm doing, I tell them that this is my purpose, that I want to hear from them. I want them to be honest with me. I want them to trust me with their stories and that I promise them I'm going to take your story forward. I may not be able to fix any of the things that you're telling me, but I will definitely carry the water and make sure that somebody hears what what you're telling me, and that's the biggest thing for me and why and one reason why I want to continue doing them is I never want to lose that touch of of hearing directly from students. And I'm so glad that I didn't necessarily, I'm not going to take a bunch of credit and say, like, well, this was something I said I was going to do when I got this job. It just I was kind of in the middle of doing things when I got this job. So I had to finish what I started. But in doing that, I said, I've got to figure out a way to to keep doing this, to keep that, you know, on the ground first hand experience.

**AS** [00:22:03] I have to say to one of my "favorites" is especially when guided pathway's was being rolled out, is that students have to explore and wander, they really, really need to wander. And focus group after focus group after focus group, students tell us, specially our students of color, I got a ton of pressure to get a job. And I had to convince my family that I had to go to college. And so I need the college to help me with a goal and to help get me through this as quickly as possible. That's got to be one of my favorites, because it's an equity issue. And that's why I wanted to segway into is that The RP Group has for a long time actually been focused on equity. We know that institutions, organizations, the whole world woke up after George Floyd, but there was already some things already in process at RP. Can you explain a little bit more about the equity work?

**Darla Cooper** [00:23:12] Absolutely. So I'll go back and say equity has been in our work for many years. Going back to students, part of Student Support (Re)defined. If you look at our original research question, we called out African-American and Hispanic/Latinx students and said, we want to find out if when we ask students what makes them successful, how do those two student groups say anything different? Do they say that they they need different support to help them? And the answer was yes. So, for example, we found that with both of those groups, they were more likely to say that failing a class would make them more likely to not return. And so this is something we can do something about. We need to help our students learn, understand the difference between being a failure and failing. They're not the same, right? We all fail. We've all failed at something and and we need to help our students. If you're comfortable, share your failures, because they look at us and they think it's like we came out of the womb this way, you know, that none of us had struggles we had to overcome. None of us failed. And so we we need to to share with our students and help them understand and keep going and understand that failing is a part of it.

**Darla Cooper** [00:24:48] Another example was nurturing. Our African-American students were more likely than other group to say that having someone at the college care about them was important to their success. So there's that, and our latest study, Through the Gate, we disaggregated that data from the start. That was always the intention to see are there differences, are our students from different groups experiencing transfer in a different way? We started with, just back up again, Through the Gate, as our transfer study that honed in on students who seemingly have completed all or most of their transfer requirements. But they haven't transferred. And so the natural question is, what's going on, what's missing, what kind of barriers are in place, but what is happening? And so, again, from the very start, you know, built in, we wanted to look at those kinds of differences. And we found differences there as well. For example, with African-American students. They were more likely to bring up transportation as a concern. Relate it to transfer. Will I be able to get to the university? Some of it sometimes, these things, are not that difficult to address. Another thing that we found with, I think, both African-American and Latino students, they were more likely to say that they had used transfer resources and that they found them helpful. So that tells us that we need to do a better job of making sure that these resources are getting to these populations. Another example was a lot of them are first generation students. They were more likely to say that they didn't have anyone in their circle, whether that's family, friends, neighborhood, who had gone to college. So we need to bring, let's bring some successful transfer students back and put them in front of the current students to show them this is this is possible. You can do this. Let me help you. Let me show you the way. So I said those are some of the findings. There's lots more that we found with with Through the Gate. But even with all of that, I'll go back to fall of 2019. If we can remember back a time before covid, the RP Group had been doing quite a bit of internal work trying to get our own house in order, clarify things, document things, etc. And we were getting towards the end of that work. And equity was starting to, that word was starting to be used more. It was starting to be much more of a focus at that time. And I started to to think about, well, maybe we should focus on this next year, meaning the year starting with like fall of 2020 going through academic year, the spring 2021. I needed to think about. OK, so we've included this in our work in the past and in the present. But what is our commitment to equity as the organization. How does it show up in all of our work, not just our research but everything that we do so planted some seeds at that time and starting even in going into 2020. OK, all right. Let's plan for this. Let's start looking at this. And then obviously the pandemic hit and some attention was drawn in to other places because of that. But then after that, George Floyd was murdered and the country changed. And it definitely created a greater sense of urgency and priority for us, The RP Group, to be looking and answering these questions about equity within our organization. And what does that look like? It also became really obvious, at least to me during that time, that we weren't going to be able to do this on our own because we didn't have the necessary expertise and that we were going to need help trying to understand equity and social justice and anti-racism on more than just perhaps an intuitive level. And we needed to be able to put ourselves in a position where we could help again, going back to our mission and our strategies to help the IRPE professionals in the colleges because they are in providing data and in providing disaggregated data, you have to be called upon to sometimes have and lead difficult conversations and those courageous conversations. And we are trying to work towards being able to provide that kind of support to that. So what we've done so far in this regard is we've created a task force that is morphing into a committee, a committee and a standing committee for the organization that's made up of board members, staff members, and IRPE community members. And we're just beginning our journey. And we've learned a lot, even in just a short amount of time, that this is a long road. This is not a check box thing, can't just check the box and go, well, equity done. You know, this is something that we're going to grow into as an organization that's been challenging in a way as well, because there's a lot of pressure there, imagined or real, that every time something happens, you have to come out with a statement. Condemning whatever horrific thing just happened and, you know, I I pushed back against that. I didn't want us and working with my board president, we didn't want to just put a statement out because of, I don't know, peer pressure because everybody else was doing it. So, like, if we can't say something about what we're going to about it as an organization, then, what are we really saying? We're saying we're against horrific things. OK, that's great. But every time I know I read one of those statements, I said, but what are you going to do about it? Either internally or externally or something, and that's what I found was missing from a lot of those those statements, and so that's has been a challenge and continues to be one to try to communicate that we're working on this, but that it's not going to happen overnight because we want to do this in a meaningful way, you know, we're trying to change our organization into one that is consistently and clearly equitable and focuses on that.

**AS** [00:32:25] So, as you know, The RP Group listserv, the members, people who sign up for it are not just California people, but from all over the United States, if not the world signed up for it. I remember reading your email and it took a few days, as you said, people were frantic getting out statements, but yours was so thoughtful and you even explained why you had to be thoughtful. It was a really powerful statement. One of the things that I wanted to unpack a little bit in terms of equity are disabled students. To be honest, I'm not particularly fond of that word disabled. I just think they're able differently, not "dis," you know. So the thing these group of students, is that they may be hard to find. They may have had, for example, in their K-12 experience, have been really been able to have parents who were able to push through the system and get them, for example, an IEP. An IEP, an individual education plan, which in the K-12 world, puts them into that category of special education. But a lot of people don't know this, that it's actually really difficult to get one because the district, kind of depending on the district, they fight families because it's expensive. What happens is that community colleges get so many students who are in this category of special education or disabled, but they also get the students who would never got help, never had that designation. And who knows what percentage of those students we have. Given that you've done focus groups with these group of students, can you please share any assumptions that educators might have about them?

**Darla Cooper** [00:34:18] Going back to how doing these different focus groups, such an opportunity for me to learn and to gain insight into the experiences. To show care and concern, so most of what I heard from from these students was positive in terms of the support that they receive from their DSPS or disabled student programs and services offices on their campuses. And they talk about faculty being supportive with making the accommodations that they need to support their learning. And so I want to say that first, because I think the majority of of faculty and classified professionals and administrators are are doing or trying to do right by these students. But unfortunately, I did hear about some experiences that these students shared that even if it's just happening to one student, that's one student too many. And so this is one of those cases where it's not about representation, it's not about how many students is that? It was THAT one. That student experienced it. And that's wrong. And so I heard from students about faculty who didn't understand accommodations and resisted them. Things like, you can't record me. And it's like, but that's my accommodation. I need to record the lecture. I refused to be recorded and then putting the student in a position of having to go back to the office to it's just like. I also on the real far end of the spectrum, had students to share with me that just the incredible insensitivity, forget that some of what they were doing was against the law. There is a law that requires these things, but asking students at the first day of class, who has an accommodation raise your hand. You're just like, whoa, that's not appropriate. I had another student I remember telling me that a faculty member, she gave the faculty her accommodation, paperwork, and he looked at it and he said, well, you look all right to me. What's wrong with you? My instinct, I didn't do it, but my instinct is always I just want to hug them, you know, I just want to, I want to apologize. And I often do apologize on behalf of that person, obviously, I don't know who it was, but just to let that student know you're not wrong. That wasn't the right thing to do. And somebody needed to tell you that. I don't know if anybody had up to this point, but you needed to know. I feel like you need to know someone in some kind of authority position, if I say so myself, to decide to tell them that wasn't right and you shouldn't have gone through that. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry that that you went through that. I had students make suggestions about can we make sure that faculty understand what the law is and and how to be more sensitive and maybe just humane with not trying to embarrass people?

**Darla Cooper** [00:37:59] And then the other thing that, and this is I'm kind of embarrassed to admit, but it hadn't occurred to me because we in focus groups, we heard from African-American students and Native American students about how they didn't see themselves represented on campus. They didn't have a teacher who looked like them. They didn't see each other. There weren't a lot of other students who look like them, things like that. And so we've heard a lot about that. Until a group of disabled, differently abled students said this to me, I hadn't thought about it, that they they don't have role models on our campuses either. They don't see faculty who, quote unquote, look like them or who have gone through or are currently experiencing what what they are. And in one particular case, I remember it was a blind student who was sharing, I need role models. I need to know that what's possible for me, I need to have role models that I can admire and follow. It was one of those things where if that's not been your experience, you don't often think of it. But that's why we need to listen. We need to open up and talk to all different kinds of students with all different kinds of situations and backgrounds and experiences and cultures and all of these things to broaden our understanding, and to see things from other students perspectives. These focus groups, they just they've just done so much for me as a person and as a professional. I've learned so much from students. So much.

**AS** [00:39:50] Wow. That's that's powerful. You know, it's interesting that what I find sometimes, I give so many people grace. I write a lot about how important kindness is. And sometimes we're in meetings and people are behaving in a particular way or they misinterpret something, misunderstand something, and we can get so impatient. And we don't know how many of these people went to college, they survived it. They've never had an IEP, but they've had some kind of way that they just learn differently, take in information and process it differently. And sometimes it takes patience for us when we're working with our own peers that we may need to scaffold information a bit better, sequence a little bit better. I encourage everyone, when you go to meetings, please provide visuals. We're highly visual creatures. When we verbalize things, many people have their own mental models about it. But if we're all seeing the same thing, and obviously, if there are people who cannot see, you need to do an even better job scaffolding and sequencing what you're saying, because we don't know what people are dealing with. They've survived it. They've survived college, they got a job. And so it takes that extra bit of kindness.

**Darla Cooper** [00:41:19] I did have one other thing. Again, talking to the differently abled students. Sometimes I've been able to witness wonderful interactions between the students in these focus groups from some student talking about a particular teacher and another student saying, hey, wait, what teachers? What was that name? Can I get your phone number afterwards? I've seen this wonderful thing where they're helping each other. And if we can, I've heard that's another thing I've heard from so many students is like why I'm shy and I don't I don't make friends easily. If the college could put me in situations where I can meet students, maybe have similar goals, you know, things, things like that. Well, one of the things that when this, again, going back to the differently abled students, was this group where there were the students who were, I guess you could say, physically disabled and visibly disabled. They were in a wheelchair. They were blind, something that we could more easily see that this person was disabled. And then you had the other group with invisible disabilities like learning disabilities or traumatic brain injury or psychological disabilities. And this interesting conversation started happening between those two groups, the visible and the invisible. I got out of the way. That's the other thing, sometimes in these focus groups, I have to know when to get out of the way and let them give them some space, give them some time, even if they're not answering my question. But I try to make sure that it's the focus group is not just about me and the data I need for my study. But if I can impart information that's helpful or I can allow students to connect and give each other information that's helpful, I want to do that. But again, the students, they talked about the advantages and disadvantages of having your disability be visible or invisible. And so, for example, the students with visible disabilities didn't have to prove they were disabled. Right. But the invisible disability students felt like they had to prove it. And then the visible disability students thought they talked about how they can't hide. It's out there. They can't, everyone knows. Whereas they looked at the invisible, the students with invisible disabilities and said no one knows just by looking at that you have this disability. But they know by looking at me. And you just saw the empathy. I create between these two groups to where it's like, oh, I hadn't thought of it that way. Oh, I see the advantages and disadvantages that I have that you have. And so it was just this actually kind of beautiful thing to witness and to see them supporting each other in that way. And again, I think if we can find ways to bring students together, and another thing that came out of this is for student groups, that may be students, faculty or classified professionals don't understand, give those students an opportunity to get in front of those groups and share their experience. I mean, that's how I learned it. It wasn't in that setting. But I'm learning through these focus groups the experiences of different kinds of students. I've heard of examples of international student panels, for example. A lot of people don't understand what it's like to be an international student, all the rules and regulations and all of these things that they have to go through to get here and and how, what you do in the classroom affects them as or as a counselor or whatever it is. And so they would have students share their experiences, you know, like maybe at some kind of assembly or convocation to help just to, again, to create a little bit more empathy for our students that was so powerful.

**AS** [00:45:21] What you mention about the conversations between the invisible and visibly disabled, and that's what I was talking about earlier, was more on that invisible right, even for our own colleagues. So thank you for sharing that. What I wanted to move into next is that RP does research and planning, but a big part of it, of what the organization does is professional development. Can you explain more of the kind of opportunities that you've done, that you have going on, and what's in store for the future?

**Darla Cooper** [00:46:03] Absolutely. We have kind of three signature events that happen annually. The first being are what we call our RP Conference in research and planning. And that is primarily for the researchers and planners, the IRPE professionals at the college to come and perhaps geek out a little bit on research and planning. But what we've noticed in recent years is that it, the conference is attracting, for lack of a better word, non-researchers, people where that's not their title. But what that is a sign of is how much research is permeating the entire institution. Everyone needs to be looking at data in their work, different data, but everyone needs to be looking at it, making decisions based on information and based on data, based on research. And so it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful that we have all different kinds of people coming to that conference.

**Darla Cooper** [00:47:12] Another event that we do in the summer is geared much more specifically to those IRPE professionals. And that's our Summer Institute. And it's a sometimes, had obviously had to take a different shape this past summer because of needing to be in a virtual environment. But it's trying to focus on giving researchers a dedicated time and space and where they can focus on improving their craft, on learning of how to become a better researcher. And in the past, we've done like two different tracks, one for newcomers. I just got here or I haven't been here very long. What do I need to know if some of this is just very basic information about research in the California college system? Because they're researchers, but they might have been somewhere else. And there's a lot of nuance and a lot of information about that. And then we've had a veterans track where we're past the basics, but it's probably focuses as a little bit more on leadership as a researcher and how that shows up in your work. You know, a lot of these positions are at the president's cabinet level. A lot of researchers report directly to the president. And so what is it like to to operate on that level and do so successfully? And then the third signature event is our larger conference, which is our most is totally inclusive. It's probably one of the most inclusive events in the state. And we get people from out of state. But it's admittedly California focus. But that is our Strengthening Student Success Conference. And we get a lot of faculty that come to that. We get a lot of administrators, both instruction and student services. We get classified professionals. Researchers are there again. It's such a wide spectrum. A lot of what we have in terms of professional development here in California and in the California community college system is by position. So the CEOs have their professional development. The chief instructional officers have theirs and the student services officers theirs. So there's all this kind of thing that happens. And what we try to do with our conference, to say everyone is welcome, everyone can get something out of this. But this conference is focused on student success and we try to to invite presenters who are going to share data. So it's not a research conference, but it's more about tell me about your practice. Tell me about what you did. But how do you know it worked? So hopefully you have some data. It doesn't always have to be. When I say data, data includes quantitative and qualitative. So those are three really big three big kind of signature event.

**Darla Cooper** [00:50:10] We do other professional development. We have something we do now call PIER to PIER, which came out of covid and trying to create a space. Since we weren't going to be able to get together as a community, we wanted to create a space. And at the beginning of covid we were doing it every week. That was a lot to pull this together every week. And now we do it monthly. But it's a very informal space where we have a topic and sometimes we have a presenter that just kind of gets us started by sharing their thoughts or some work that they've done. And then we try to have a conversation and encourage everyone to share. What are your thoughts, what are your questions, what have you found works, what have you had trouble with? But again, creating that space and it's not restricted to IRPE professions, but a lot of the topics may be more attractive, let's say, to that group. And it's another place where you and I talked a little bit about how equity has shown up in our research for many years. But it's also been in our professional development. And this year in particular, we are are making sure, for example, our theme for the RP conference this year is and I'm going to read it to you to make sure I get it right, strengthening the role of IRPE in support of diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism. So that's a message. We are sending a message with that theme to say this. This is what we're about as an organization, and that's what we're going to focus on this year. And not in a way, I'm hoping people don't think like, oh, we're going to focus on equity this year and the next year, it's back to whatever, we're not supposed we use the word normal at this point, but back to something, and I don't so I think I look at this as the start that we're showing our commitment to equity in our professional development and that it will be there at the next event and the next event and the next event.

**AS** [00:52:26] Because I began my career in K-12, I went to so many conferences in that world and then in higher ed. And to be honest, I just had conference fatigue and part, I just got so tired of kind of self described thought leaders who go up and kind of brand their organization. Look at us, we've got going on. This is, look at us. And one of the few conferences that I, I can begin to tell you how much I want to go back to the RP conferences is because they've got to come with data. And I think one of the things, the other aspects, I like about the RP conferences is that there's as much learning going on in the hallways when people leave the sessions as there is in the sessions. So there's a lot of learning there that we can't replicate when we're virtual. So I just want to say I can't wait to get back in person and go to the RP conferences.

**AS** [00:53:30] I'll mention really quickly, because you mentioned veterans. When I did a focus group on veterans at a veterans center, it was really interesting. They had a board and then the board had the title up on the top of the board. It said, "friendlies." And it had a list of names on the board and the list of names where faculty, and when I asked them, well, I'm a veteran, I know what friendlies are, but when asked them they're like they're faculty who we consider to be friendly to us because what of some of the different abilities, if you will, that they have. Some of them are very visible, but for the most part, they're invisible, post-traumatic stress, all sorts of brain injuries. So even in that community, you can see that they have these discussions. But they made it very real for everybody to see that these were our friendlies. So I thought I'd share that.

**Darla Cooper** [00:54:27] Wow, That's impressive to me that they went that far with being transparent within their community, because I think that happens within these kind of student communities, but it's not written on a board and very visible. But you remind me that Veterans is another group that I was fortunate enough to meet within these focus groups. And it's another group that I'm not personally familiar with. I don't come from a family of veterans. I mean, I obviously know people who have served, but not, I don't have that kind of intimate knowledge. Either one degree separation or directly. And it's another group that I learned so much about and have so much more empathy for and just just things that didn't even occur to me of what it's like just listening to their stories about transitioning from the military life to education and how the lack of structure, which some people would actually dispute that we have in education compared to the military. It's just all loosey goosey. And there's too much, it's like there's too much control in the students hands, and they're not used to that. They're used to having being told what to do and where and how and when. And now it's like whatever you want to do. And they're like, I don't know how to deal with that. I also heard stories from students about how they were treated by faculty, by other students. And I guess the way I understood it was it was like people were confusing veterans with the military. Veterans are the people who served in the military. But they're people. They're individuals, they're humans. The military is this entity. But what they describe to me is people who had issues with the military taking it out on the veterans. And getting in their face and shouting at them and just really broke my heart, you know, I mean, these people serve to put their lives on the line. And a lot of the students I met, they literally served on the line, the front line in Iraq or Afghanistan. And they come back and to be treated this way. And again, I don't think it wasn't that they were expecting everyone to thank you for your service, for your service. It was just like, can I just be respected? And a lot of them there's a big overlay with the differently abled population and the veteran population. And there were students who would talk about because of my injuries, you know, sometimes I just need to get up. I can't sit here. I can't sit for a long period of time. But but the teacher is telling me to sit down, sit down. And it's like I try to explain, you know, I've got a back problem. I cannot sit. I need to move around. Sometimes it's, and I'm not trying to be disrespectful. This is me and it doesn't have anything to do with you, this kind of thing. And so I it just opened my eyes and more importantly, what that group and me with all these other groups in my heart. And I think that if I can't stress that enough about how we need to open again both our minds and our hearts to these students and listen to them, understand them. And again, I'm never going to fully understand what it's like to be a, but I feel like I have some understanding enough to care about their experience and what they're going through and if I can find a way to be helpful.

**AS** [00:58:19] Yes. Thank you. You said so much there. The distinction between the military and veterans is so true. You know, veterans are not a monolithic group. But one of the things that I've seen time and time again is that they actually, they might have a veterans status, but they actually don't want to be treated special. They don't want, and many of them feel very uncomfortable when people say, well, thank you for your service. So this group, what a lot of people don't know that go to community college is that they are enlisted. There is a big difference. Take it for me from me, being enlisted and being an officer. Officers, their basic requirement to be an officer is a college degree. And then they can go to officer candidate school and all that, but if you don't have college and you go into the enlisted ranks, those are the the working class, if you will, of the military. And so some of the poorest people in our communities join the military to serve. But there's also practical reasons. I want to learn a trade. I want to be able to help people and have my first experience, and build off on a build on that. There's already a large amount of disproportionately impacted students already, people like there's so many veterans who are students of color, for example. And so they got that to deal with that on top of being a veteran. So so thank you for for mentioning that. So as we wrap up, I just wanted to summarize a little bit so everybody knows your superpower. So that's really important. We talked about student success. I'm sorry, Student Support (Re)define the six factors. You touched on the Through the Gates research, the professional development. I'm really happy that we talked a lot about the differently abled students. So thank you so much for really unpacking that. And we also talked about assumptions that educators make about students. As as we wrap up here, one of the things I'm really excited about I saw your email about it is that there's the RP Group is going to do a study on African-American students.

**Darla Cooper** [01:00:55] Yes. It all started with a finding from the Through the Gate study. And so I mentioned that we disaggregated that initial quantitative data set and we looked at which students were more likely to either be what we called at the gate or near the gate. And again, that's a description of the students who had completed all or most of their transfer requirements and how many of those students transferred. So that's pretty much what we were looking at. And we disaggregated that. And what we found was that, again, when we looked at ethnicity in particular, we found that African-American students were the most the most likely to transfer among that group. But if you broaden the you know, the typical measure of a transfer rate is you're looking at students from freshman, you're looking at first time and college students, how many of them have transferred four years, six years, whatever the timeframe is. And in most cases, you find that African-American students are near the bottom of. They have among the lowest transfer rates. So that that makes you kind of go, wait a minute. How like, how is that possible? Right, that's kind of what it is, that's just not possible. But how does that happen? How how does a group of students who, when they start, probably have the lowest chance of transferring? Just looking at at the numbers to having the highest transfer rate. Something is happening in that time period. We started to ask that question and I said there's got to be some kind of tipping point in here. At some point, you go from being the least likely to the most likely. So what is that? What does that look like? Where is that happening? And how do we get more students to that tipping point? That's really where we're going with this is what let's figure out what it is and then let's figure out how to get more students to that. So that's what this new study is looking at, where we're going to follow a similar pattern that we did with Through the Gate, which is start with the quantitative data. Learn as much as we can from that. And then we're going to go talk to the students. We're going to find African-American black students at different points along the tipping point. The ones who haven't made it, they're the ones who have the ones who stopped out, the ones who transfer and want to look at kind of that that whole continuum and find out more from the students in terms of what is helping you. That's really what we want to focus on. But but part of that is also going to naturally include what is stopping. What is it about what colleges are doing that's not working for your benefit? So what we want to do with this study is identify what is this tipping point? What what what is happening? What what is supporting students, you know, to get to that point and maybe what's standing in some student ways, why they're not getting to that point. And again, what we want to do with that information is try to figure out how do we get more students to that point. That seems like a pretty obvious thing is like if we know if they get this far, their chances of success go up quite a bit. How do we get more students to that point? So we're going to we're just getting started with this study. We're going to follow a similar pattern that we did with Through the Gate, where we're going to look at the quantitative data and try to learn as much as we can that and then once we've kind of exhausted that, then we're going to go find these students and then we're going to talk to them. We're going to find students who are along this continuum. Students who haven't made it to the tipping point yet, students who have students who have transferred and those students who stopped out who didn't make it to the fair, stopped out before they made it to the tipping point, took again to learn as much as we can about how do we get more African-American students to transfer.

**AS** [01:05:14] Well, I can't wait for that study. One of the many things that RP does so well is that when you do complete a study, it's not this very dense kind of research document, it's it's easy to read, it has graphics, it has quotes, and then you disseminate it everywhere. And on top of that, provide webinars or PD to to discuss it so that campuses can take action, be more informed, more data informed when you have these particular findings. So I can't wait for that one.

**AS** [01:05:52] We it's funny. We tend to bump into each other at airports. That's like our our meetings. We both frequently, we travel so much, and it just is so funny to see you and then we would end up at the airport bar. So I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to bumping into you again in the airport. And now that I know about your photography, next time I'm in the area, I'm going to contact you ahead of time and I want to visit and see all your, other way of telling the story. Right. So I just I want to thank you so much for participating in the Student Success podcast. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything you'd like to impart? Any last thing?

**Darla Cooper** [01:06:48] Well, thank you, first of all, it's always great to talk to you and I've missed you in the airport, so glad that we had this opportunity. I appreciate everything that you're doing to to help our students. So I want to again, thank you. Thank you for this opportunity for me to speak, but also just everything that you're doing. And if I could repeat one thing, emphasize one thing that I mentioned today is stop with the assumptions, you know. Stop with the assumptions, especially if they're negative. Let's assume that if you're going to assume anything, assume the best until otherwise proven. Let's assume that our students want to be here. And so many of them are trying so hard to be here, to be in school, to be present, to succeed, to pass, to do all of those things. And so let's give them the benefit of the doubt until they show us that. It's not that they should, that we shouldn't, I guess, I mean, I hate to say not to give anyone the benefit of the doubt, but sometimes we believe we are shown that, OK, maybe the student is not ready for the help that is available for ,not ready to receive what I'm able to offer at this time. But let's assume that our students have good intentions and that they want to be here and they they want to succeed and that we should be doing everything within our power to help them.

**AS** [01:08:32] Beautifully said, and I would say, because, as you know, colleges are going through tremendous change, that we do that for ourselves as college educators, to not make assumptions about one another because change is hard. Changing a culture is very difficult. And if we treat each other with just more kindness, it'll make the work easier, not easy. It's never easy, but a little easier.

**Darla Cooper** [01:08:59] If I could add one of the other things that really came out of Students Support (Re)defined. I will say I learned so much through that study just from going around and sharing it and having people react to it. And one of the things I distinctly remember, someone raising their hand during the Q&A portion and said, you know, you've got me thinking about these factors. And I think they apply to me. I need to be directed. I need to be focused. You know, I need to be nurtured. Of course I need to be valued. But I also need to be engaged and connected and I need to be looking at this. And that just sparked a whole new game for us. And we've even gone out and talked about the factors from the perspective of employees and what what would it look like. And some of the exercise, right, is to figure out, OK, that we did this for students. But what would it mean if you were directed? What would it look like if you were nurtured, if you felt connected, so again, another parting, but for a thing for us to think about is we call them six Success Factors. They're based on college students, but they apply to us as humans. I think, you know, I even did a presentation recently about how they apply to middle school students. So it's ageless to some extent and and its position with I think they can be more into applying to our humanity and whatever we need. And I would even argue in our personal and professional lives. So thank you for reminding me of that. It's something I hope people will consider.