

Podcast Series on Remedial Education Reform AB 1705

Episode: Guest Tammi Marshall and Host Paul Fain Transcript

Paul Fain: Speaking with Dr. Tammi Marshall. Hello, Tammy.

Tammi Marshall: Hello.

Fain: So you've been working on remedial math reform for a while. It sounds like going way back even beyond your current position. Can you just kind of walk us through the steps for you in your aha moments?

Marshall: I think for me, the steps in my aha moments really go all the way back to the beginning when we did make some of these beginning class changes in statistics with the pre stats class and the data from that. And then you know, that was like an aha in the sense of our students can be successful. And we need to believe in them. And so it was. How do we scale that, though, for other students and for all students? I think when we started doing some further research and what was going on across the country, across the world in general, we came across this idea of requisite support classes. And then there was some research work that the California Acceleration Project had been doing, which I had been, and I continue to be intimately involved in it around what they called high practices. Right. That would get students to be successful pertaining to things like the affective domain just in time remediation and changing placement in general. And so I think it was all of that together was really a huge aha moment for me when I realized that our students can be successful, we need to believe in them. And so we often talk about the growth mindset or the capacity mindset, which I personally like that term a little bit better because it really, I think tells a little bit more about what it is we're saying with regards to our students, right, believing in themselves. But we don't often hear people talk about the capacity mindset faculty have of their students. And this has been a huge endeavor in which we've recognized where the work needs to go, that you can't make transformational changes if you are not going to start believing in the capacity of your students to be successful regardless of their past experiences and histories. And I think that for me was the biggest aha moment. And then just the recognition of seeing the students be successful when we eliminated, you know, most of our pipeline of doom, remedial education that we had, we kept one class intermediate algebra for a long time, I'll be honest, and longer than I would have liked. But we did keep it. Although I went into that class every semester and talk to the students, I would I would literally go in on the first day of class and every single class section. And I would say, who in this class is studying arts and humanities, teacher education, social and behavioral sciences? Right. Who took Algebra two in high school? Who did you know or higher? Right. Who took these classes? Who did this? And students would raise their hand and there would be a class of 40, and I'd have 25 to 30 or more students raise their hand. And I'd say, okay, follow me. And I would literally take them out of the classroom and I would

have a one on one conversation with every single one of those students. And we would hold seats in other classes for those students, and I would put them in the most appropriate class. So we would end up with these classes that had about ten students in them. Right, because the students didn't belong. And even those ten that stayed, I started that was a another aha moment of They don't belong. And so we finally eliminated intermediate algebra and all our students now go into a transfer level class and some students are required to take it with support. With a what we call support, a requisite course is what is known as. But you know, originally we called it a support class because we weren't sure about articulation, right? We were the first college in the state of California to do this. So we didn't know what was going to happen. So we called it a support course, but it came to recognize that that was really what it was. People call it correct. But it's really a support class because the whole point of that course is to support the students to be successful in the many different ways that we can. Since doing that, we have seen just such an increase in student success, particularly historically marginalized students. One of the things that people would say is that this isn't going to work for STEM classes, right? This is fine for all those people that are need to take quantitative reasoning or statistics or something like that. But this isn't going to work for students who need to go through the calculus sequence. And we realized that it absolutely has worked for students that need to go through the calculus sequence. We have seen an almost doubling of the number of sections of our classes in calculus, which has also ended up increasing the number of sections we see in physics, engineering and other classes across the college. And when you look at the student makeup pre-transformation to post-transformation, the majority of the change is students of color because they were not given access and now they have been given that access. And if you believe in them, then they'll be successful. And you know, hopefully we'll start to see an increase in students of color in STEM degrees, in STEM areas, and then we'll have more students seeing themselves. Right. When they come to college, too. That's obviously the overall goal is that students see themselves there.

Fain: When you obviously are ahead of the curve in getting there on this journey, can you tell me where you thought were some of the key moments in getting momentum to make the change?

Marshall: I mean, you know, the evidence, I'm sure, was part, part of it. But, you know, this is not easy to do for people to make that change. And how did you get there? One of the key moments besides the data, like you you said, it was definitely looking at the data and saying, okay, do you see these equity gaps? Right. It was there were two huge things for me. One was when we started seeing just the success of those colleges across the country that were using co-requisites and also kind of having this you know, we started we were talking and talking and there was this back and forth of whether this is going to work. And I realized that a lot of that back and forth was just whether or not you believed in students capacity. I realized that now. I didn't see that then. Right. It was at the end it was that standing back and going, Well, guys, in the end, what we're doing isn't working. It's not working. So we're

going to try something else. So anything we do is not going to be worse than what we're doing now. That's kind of rare in higher ed, though, I think. I mean, I don't mean to be glib about it, but it is true. It is rare to make people feel the urgency to try something new, even though you have doubts about what it is is still quite the leap. You're absolutely right. It is. There is definitely this culture within higher education of it's got to be the same way it was or it has been for hundreds of years. And I kind of think we need to move away from this. And I'll just use this this Eurocentric mindset of education has to be done this way. Well, you know why? Who said that? Why can't we change it up? And why is it that students can't be successful if we just give them some support or if we contextualize the material, or if we teach classes in a more appropriate way so that it's not just you're learning a whole bunch, you're frontloading a whole bunch of material, right? But what if I teach something when they need it rather than frontloading it two years prior and then saying, do you remember when you did this two years ago? Nobody does. I'm sorry. There's very few number of people that ever do it. And so that really has made a difference. And and I also want to go back because I think it's really important to recognize that for us, one of the huge pivotal moments when you ask that question was the first. One of the first things that came into my mind was our teamwork with our counselors and social and student services in general, because you can not do this work alone. And so I am particularly proud of the relationship we have with our student services professionals, whether they're faculty, classified professionals and administrators. We have a very close knit relationship with them because we went them at the beginning, because we recognize they they are the ones that see the students at the very beginning asking them, what is it that they need? What are they going to do? What are their what are their scariest moments like? What are they afraid of? Right. All of these kinds of things. We needed to go to them and we needed to ask them about their experiences and we needed to have them on board, because if they weren't on board, none of this was going to work. They have been some of our biggest advocates in the end because they they see what it means to students in different ways. And that way to a student, you can be successful. What do you mean? You can? You can be. No, you don't need that class. You don't need that class. And they can talk about the research because when we have when we get research, we share it with them. We say, hey, here is our recent research. Look at how much you've helped us. Our students succeed. Are your peers at other campuses trying them? If you imagine, unfortunately, that maybe not everyone has done this, you're absolutely right. And some people don't do it at the beginning, which is really what you need to do. And then when you try to get them on board, after all the changes have been made, you almost have to. It's almost like starting over because they have to come. They have to change their mindset, right. And they have to recognize their own unconscious biases. And that's work that we have been doing with our student services professionals alongside them rather than separate from them. If you do that, work alongside and with them, that makes a huge difference because we're all we all start to recognize our unconscious biases and that we have them and how that might be affecting the work that we're doing know. Yeah, you're right. There's a lot of colleges that are trying this work and not necessarily working with their student services professionals, in particular counselors and advisors. And if you don't work

with those professionals, it's almost doomed to fail in some ways, or you're doomed to have roadblocks that you wouldn't otherwise have.

Fain: Yeah, I mean, to speak broadly, obviously, the pandemic brought home the need for support services for students, and the pressures there are still not the norm across far more than remedial ed reform. I know well as a campus. So that is so far ahead of the curve. Have you heard from peers who who have that resistance? Like if we try this, it's just not going to work, like math is going to collapse, you know? And I wonder, just like in terms of momentum right now, things are moving. Is in your evidence of that you see things picking up a bit?

Marshall: I do. I see things picking up a bit. I also see them going backwards a bit in some ways, right? With AB 1705 in California, there's a lot of people opposed to it. But I think it's really important legislation because sometimes, you know, in order to do what's right, you have to put legislation to work in order to get people to make change. Like sometimes they're just not going to make change. And I think that's where we were when AB 705 was signed in in 2017, is we were at that place where, you know, you would hit up, we'd hit a plateau, and we needed to see this work continue. And so we've we have we've seen it continue. We've seen it succeed. But we also have heard from many places around, you know, there's no way this is going to work. I talk to math departments all over the country. I have people contact me. And a lot of times that's exactly what they're saying is, okay, I know this, but I need to convince my faculty. How am I going to do that? We we spend a lot of time talking about that. But a lot of times it is a leap of faith.

Fain: Yeah, well, big changes are that. And you mentioned, you know, obviously the key of it being belief that students can do this. Is there a way to describe how you would stress that to someone who wasn't on board?

Marshall: Unfortunately, there really isn't. Yeah. Yeah, it is. Recognizing yourself as a teacher and what you do and the power you have. That's part of it. It also, you know, I'll say I don't know if you've heard of Mary Murphy, but Mary Murphy has done a lot of research around exactly this topic. But but faculty mindset. And we actually were involved in a research study where she was she's looking at faculty mindset and and equity in particular. Right. And how it how it approaches that. I've read a lot of what she does. She's done workshops and we've participated in those to help us. And so when it comes to really kind of talking with other faculty and conveying that message, it really is about saying it. But sometimes you just have to say it over and over and over again until they maybe start to tear down their walls. One of the things you have to recognize in this work and in all of this work is that faculty are not out to harm students. That's not their intention. So you have to honor that, right? Like I have to say, listen, I understand. I did this. I this was me. I didn't believe in my students. Right? It was me. This is who I was. Until I recognized where my biases were, I could not make that change and then recognize the capacity of my students. You have to break down these walls. And

you also have to say to the two faculty, I know that you want what's best for your students. However, what you're doing is actually harming them. Not intentionally. You're not intentionally harming anybody, but what you're doing is harming them. And that's hard to hear. So people put up defenses, right? And so you have to tear down tear down walls. One of the things that we've started doing, and this is kind of within the last few years, a lot of you hear a lot more of this is having faculty actually look at their own disaggregated data. So you get a private report. That is all your data in your classes disaggregated by gender, ethnicity. You can disaggregate it however you want, right? DSPS status, Veteran status and you'll see where your biases lie. It's right there. You have to turn the mirror around. And instead of forcing facing that mirror at the students and saying, Nope, see, you're not ready, you can't do this. You need to turn that mirror around and look at yourself and say, How am I making it so that my students can't do this? And how can I change what happens so that my students can be successful?

Fain: You know, it's really well said, and I feel like that self-reflection piece comes through a lot when you drill down on this issue. And, you know, that's the hardest work of all for all of us.

Marshall: It really is. It absolutely is. You're right. It is the hardest work of all. It's hard to reflect. I've done it. I had to literally go through a period of mourning where I mourned 20 years worth of students that I harmed unintentionally. Because I created placement tests. I wrote and taught the basic math class, which was the fourth level below transfer level. Right. Of course, I'm also proud to say I dismantled that class. I had to mourn that. I had to mourn it. I had to go through a process once I was on the other side of that is when I really could start to see transformational change. Well, Tammi, we'll leave it there. I know we barely scratched the surface, but this has been really helpful. I appreciate you really expanding this to everyone. Right. And letting everybody know that they can be successful. If you've been out of school for 30 years and you've always wanted to get that degree, or if math is the only class has ever held you back. It's time to start over. It's time to try it because you can be successful.