

Transcript: Candid Conversations with CCA President Yolanda Watson Spiva, Ph.D. & NACADA Executive Director Charlie Nutt, Ed.D.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Hi, my name is Yolanda Watson Spiva and I serve as the President of Complete College America. Welcome to CCA Live. Joining me today is Dr. Charlie Nutt, Executive Director of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. Charlie welcome. And thank you for joining me today.

Charlie Nutt: Thank you so much. It's such a great honor to be here. And as you know, our partnership with CCA is, is growing, has been long term and something that NACADA and the association is very—we are very excited about and feel like it's done great work for both of us. So, this is an opportunity to partner. So, thank you.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Absolutely. I appreciate it. And I think, you know, we've been having a conversation, a very candid one about the role of advising. And I just wonder, in terms of looking at advising both with respect to the college completion agenda, have you seen anything significant happen in terms of, positive or negative ways that advising has really been a part of that completion agenda?

Charlie Nutt: You know, I think in many ways advising has always been a part of the college completion agenda. I've been in the business, which is 42 years now. But I do think this partnership with CCA has really been able to really connect advising to the whole 15 to Finish process; to really show the value of advisors, having those conversations with students about what it really means to plan to graduate from the moment you enter. Many students always say “I'm going to major in” and “Graduate in,” but they have no idea what that really means and what they need to do every single semester.

And so I think the work with 15 to Finish that we've partnered on, has been in the advancement of plate opportunities for advisors, particularly community colleges to have that little candid conversation with students about, college may not be your number one priority because of everything else. But this is what it's going to mean for you in terms of graduation, because you are able to take 15 each semester. Because a lot of students still don't understand what that means long term for them.

And it's helping them to understand that. And then just, I think that the career first work that y'all have done, and we worked with you on, the more we can connect it in advice, the whole conversation about career and future plans, the more positive students within that. So, I feel like the work that we've done, particularly with CCA has really led advising and at least institutions. And the part that I am the most excited about is whole states or whole systems talk about advising as a whole and not just individual institutions, which I think is so important, especially today.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Absolutely. And speaking of that, you know, I know you all do a number of institutes and academies where you train that plan. Can you talk to me about how we kind of scale those up? I know we around what that really looks like to get that training and information in the hands of more faculty. How do we scale this beyond those individual campuses? And can you talk about how our partnership will facilitate that?

Charlie Nutt: Absolutely. I think one of the pieces is, is one of the words you just used a moment ago, a lot of these is how to get this in the hands of faculty. Many people think of advising as the primary role of advisors and forget that in reality, the majority of advising and is still being done by faculty. How do we get this in front of them? The work that we've been doing with CCA? Yeah, but the NACADA, as a whole, has been looking at how we can use those institutes and our conference to really talk about what you're doing as a system or what you're doing as a state, to work together.

The opportunity that we've had to go into base, city systems and do a system-wide approach. As you know, we did some work together with the Montana system and I still hear from those schools. I still hear from those advisors, from those institutions, particularly during this time of year. Okay, "What do we do next?" type of thing.

And I think it's just recognized that just as advising is not just one department or one college or one unit on an inch or a single institution, we've got to look at it as what does it mean for students across our state, across our system. Ultimately, I would love to say across the country. But it's really having that conversation about—more than ever right now—what is that engagement that we have to help students have, right. And what's advising's role in really being that connection for students to the campus and to each other, especially right now when it's not face-to-face. It's just, it's so important. So, I just think the work that, that we could continue doing, ourselves, but then with the partnership with CCA is going to be so, so important the next few years, as we look at districts and systems and States. Because we can't look at things individually anymore, we've got to, we've got to recognize we're all in this together and stop being as competitive and stop being as non-collaborative and recognizing how students succeed. And that's what this is all about. It's not about good numbers. It's not about your individual graduation rates. It's not about whether you make the U S news and world report this year. It's about students and what do we do about students? Because that's why we're here, and how do we do that?

Yolanda Watson Spiva: And I appreciate your statement about students. And I also appreciated something you mentioned about recognizing NACADA's speech. Because NACADA is global and CCA, of course, our first focus is America. But I think one of the things that has brought our global connectivity more closely and sharper into focus has been the global pandemic that we're experiencing right now.

And as you know, I'm sure you're hearing this from your members. So as you mentioned, faculty serve as advisors, but also there tend to be professional advisors who serve on campuses, as college leaders in campuses and, and as advisors as well, that the place where folks are looking for, budgetary resources is to cut the number of advisors on campuses. And my hypothesis is that this is going to have a negative impact on how students are able to graduate, whether they're traditional age or adult students. But I wanted to hear from you

because this is your area of expertise. What are you hearing, Charlie, from your members? What types of suggestions would you make to a campus in terms of how they can retain those individuals, as well as keep the faculty motivated so that they don't get more on their plate because professional advisors are being laid off.

Charlie Nutt: I'm hearing, Yolanda, two extremes. Okay. I'm hearing from a few campuses and excitedly, some of our large land grant institutions, where presidents and provosts have set up funds. As we're talking about furloughs and as we're talking about layoffs, advisors and advising is off the deck and off the table is a part of this conversation. Because they're the ones making the contacts with the students.

I'm hearing the other theme, advising contracts were being where they used to be a continual contract, but at least they had the option of knowing they had some type of AOT of a job down the road. The contracts would change, so they would totally lose a year. Which made it easier to furlough them or to let them go.

So, I'm hearing both of those extremes. But I am insistent, as I call the campuses and, in many ways, I think they're surprised because they hadn't thought about it this way. But every campus I talked to says that the type of interaction with those students, the number of interactions they have with students and the level of conversations with students, virtually, has been such a blessing compared to what it was face-to-face. Some of them were saying they were seeing students that they would have to beg them to come in, where now, these students will make an appointment. These students will do it virtually.

So, I think campuses are recognizing that. We have to really—just like we do in the classroom—we have to get away from the concept that if it's not good enough, if it's not face-to-face and recognize that what we're talking about is how do we connect students to the institution. And I'm doing all this coursework by myself and I have no contact day-to-day with other students, and that is my link to that campus.

And the students are recognizing that. And I think that's a good thing. So, the next part of the question is, I'm encouraging advising directors and deans, whatever that they really need to be communicating that up the line. Yeah, they've got some real data, hard data, to show the imp visits. The level of that conversation, the more engaged students are, that they've got that hard data through the technology system. Now, they needed to be communicating that up the line on a regular basis. It's the whole concept of, no one's gonna talk good about you, but yourself many times. And so, if they don't communicate that, then you're going to have those voices who say, we just need them here at registration time. So, let's hold them 'till census date. And then when census is over, we can let them—they need to prepare now for that type of thing. Um, and recognize that if you don't have a champion, as in a vice provost for undergraduate studies or provost for trustees advising, you need to find a champion and you connect with that champion.

I think there's, there's so much good that can come out of this. Can I say, the executive office at NACADA don't waste a good, "Hey, listen, let's see what we can do to improve what we're doing." I think this is a great time for advising the advising community to really demonstrate that this virtual connection with students is so powerful and if they're not having it with

anyone, they're not having involvement with anyone—if they don't have it with anyone, it's easy to just—it's easier to walk away, than ever, for students. They used to get in a car and drive off, now all they need to do is turn off their computers. And so, we've got to have that connection. So, I think, I think the wider, they took it to two extremes, but I probably believe the community takes this opportunity to communicate to those in power and those who are making those financial decisions exactly what's happening is playing with all of those contacts and all of those connections. Then, the students are going to be better off and better served because we won't see a huge number of advisors being laid off or being furloughed. I don't ever want to get the position of saying, “Yeah, lay off those other people.” Because we're all in this together. But looking at it from a student standpoint, if we don't have someone that the students know that they can connect with and be energized again, or be really connected and enthusiastic about the course and the campus—if they don't have that person, then they're going to walk away. And the advisors are those people. And how do we keep that? And how do we communicate that?

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Well, and I think to your point around data: one, if those students do walk away, we need to educate the leadership to understand that it is actually more costly to recruit a new student than it is to retain students. Meaning, that student in the pipeline is going to be important and it has revenue implications. That's one. Number two, I love your point about the fact that we're now—we now have tangible data, but I want to say to those folks who may say, “Well, we don't have a technology that collects those data...” well, we don't want to use data as an excuse not to collect the data.

So, even if you have to collect it manually, make the case for keeping advisors, mention why this engagement is important. You can show information about student outcomes in terms of the grade that they earned, that their persistence from spring to summer to fall. Although it's information that can be actionable and used by the administration to make good decisions.

Charlie Nutt: [00:12:31]

I've always said that the one button on every advisory director's phone should be to the institutional research effectiveness office, this even more important now, because they've got access to every campus that has that data here. You and I both know that, but we need to access it easily and utilize it has always been, it's been an issue. And so, particularly right now, you know, they need to be best friends with those people who, whatever office it is that has that data and you could get to it. It really comes down to we're all talking about the same thing which is student success, student enrollment, and student retention and persistence. And to go back to something you said earlier, I think even more than ever, it's going to be more costly to recruit new students right now. When no matter what we've said, everyone is still not sure what fall is going to look like. And so, if you lose students who were already there, it's going to be very hard to replace them.

I think that, you know, the old days of saying no matter how many go out the back door, bring them in the front door, that front door stuff will not be as easy as it has been. So, let's not let them out the back, which means advising Scott to be a part of those connections with students.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:14:32]

Um, Charlie, I know that you connect with advisors of all stripes, backgrounds, institutions of all types, your role is a much broader role. People think is just about coordinating schedules and talking about classes and scheduling, but we know that they also serve as an anchor and a support, and you mentioned that the feedback you're hearing is that students are more engaged with these individuals probably than ever before, right? So as you think about the role of advisors today, but going into the future because what I also hope is that the value of advising and it was lifted up in this moment, right.

So how do you and your members see the potential future for the field of advising, for professional advising, but also faculty advisors and what that will look like in the future, not just related to COVID, but also as we've looked at the outcomes associated with, or the fallout associated with the social unrest that has been going on and now folks are being very vocal and agitating on all sides, agitating for more engagement, more clarity, more transparency, and more outcomes that are anti-racist and lead to equitable outcomes for students. What role, if any, do you see advisors playing in that?

Charlie Nutt: [00:15:50]

I think advisors are some of the most important folks in this role. If a student is feeling unsafe, if a student is feeling that..., whatever it is, if they don't know someone they can contact and open dialogue about how they're feeling, and not like they're being questioned or judged or whatever, because they have those fears, are going to remain enrolled. Which means, first and foremost, we've got to more than ever provide quality professional development to the advising profession, particularly around the area of social justice and diversity in ways we've never done it before. Because, just to be honest Yolanda, we've got to have those difficult conversations. And we've got to be open and brave enough to have those conversations, because if we don't have them, it's the students who's going to get hurt, it's going to be uncomfortable for some advisers, it will be uncomfortable with some faculty. My response to that is, many of our students have lived this uncomfortable existence, their entire lives. If we have to live it for a little while, until we really understand what that means, so we can connect with students, then that's what we should do, because it is so important.

You know, that I've been working with, just personally Yolanda, I do think, I'm not going to brag, I do think I'm a pretty open person, and I do think our members know that if they have a problem call me, text me, email me, I say that all the time. I can say that, but if someone doesn't believe it because of their own background, or their own society they've been raised in, or whatever the case may be. That's not on them, that's on me to figure out how to communicate that. That's a new way of looking at this because we've always looked at how do we get the students to be more X, Y, Z. This is a different thing. How do I, myself communicate to our membership that just saying, call me, text me, email me is not a tagline.

It's a real thing, and even if what you're calling me about is uncomfortable, you might even worry about it being dangerous to you.... And how do we do that? And I think that's what we... And that is so important because if we're going to track learning outcomes, students have to be safe learn and they have to feel good about the institution to learn. How do we build that which is so important.

I think that professional development and focus on learning is going to be really important as we look at the next few years with student success.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:19:02]

Absolutely, and I know that last time that we were together just before the pandemic hit, was in New Orleans, I believe for the HBCU advising summit. And so, I know this is a group that was very, very active, I felt like they were highly engaged and I had the opportunity...

Can you talk a little bit about why this group was identified as a specific population to focus on. I think I know, but just for those who may be watching to understand why it's important for us to discuss advising, particularly in the HBCU context.

Charlie Nutt: [00:19:34]

Yeah, I think there's a couple of reasons...I believe, it's just been a few months ago that we were there, but with all happened, it's like, what was that? From a personal standpoint, I grew up in South Georgia, I've worked in South Georgia, my entire life. So, I've worked with HBCUs, I've worked with campuses that are primarily African American my entire life. So that's always been a focus and interest of mine. We, as an association have always attempted to look at the issues dealing with diverse students and diversity issues, but we've been very fortunate to have an extremely active advising commission or advising community for HBCUs that has really brought light to those institutions – and not just in the South. You know, people think that only that they only exist in the South, but you know, they're all over the country. The advising community has really been able to bring some real attention to them and being able to partner with that advising community, being able to partner with our, engagement and inclusion, quite frankly, being able to partner with y'all, Yolanda, what y'all brought to the table, CCA was just the piece we needed.

Be it the annual focus on equity, and social justice, I think it was all of those things that made it kind of a perfect storm. You know, we had 70 people I'd love to have had 570... those 70 we're very engaged. It will be focused, and I've talked to several of the institutions that sent teams. I've continued to communicate with them all through this pandemic within that, and I know they'll continue communicate with themselves. You know, I think the big question for us, and when I say us I mean CCA and NACADA, is what do we do next? Because, I don't think we want to make that a one-time thing, but with what's occurred with the pandemic it's not gonna be quite as easy this time to do, but I know between our associations, Yolanda, we've got some folks who will come up with some ways to do that, because it's so important that we focus on those options. You know, I'm hearing two extremes. I'm hearing from some of the institutions, some of the state HBCUs, that their enrollment numbers are

up for some involved, but then I'm here for some of the private ones, that already have financial difficulty that they continue to decline.

And so, in a cost effective, very efficient way continue to focus and bring that group together to have these even more so these honest conversations, with what's happened with the social unrest, in the country, in the world. You know, I get a little irritated when folks say this is just an American issue.

Well, no, have you not watched the news, you know, but in the world it's even more important that we bring that group together and talk about those issues. Because of the environment for many of our African American students. So, how do we, how do we bring them together, so, we're just kind of a perfect storm that brought us there, I want us to continue to work on how we connect with that.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:22:56]

We will. And I think there are a lot of lessons that we can glean and pull together from that group that could actually be extrapolated across all institutions, and many folks have learned around proactive and intrusive advising. So, I would love to continue to partner with you on that.

Charlie Nutt: [00:23:09]

Absolutely. And I think that's one the things, that is so important, particularly now, is we've got to look at every single advising approach as we talk about virtual. Because intrusive-proactive is going to work with one person. One person may literally need that very prescriptive initially until they know you really care, then their able to talk about those holistic issues.

But through a virtual experience, advisors have got to have even a stronger on the different approaches on what works with what students within that. So, it's very important, whether you go to HBCU or community college or a land grant institution, those issues.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:23:49]

And that's where that training piece is going to come back in.

Charlie Nutt, executive director of NACADA, the global community for academic advising. Thank you so much for your time today. We appreciate it, hearing your voice during these difficult times, since it's important to make sure we lift up the role of advisors and the role of advising in the college completion agenda.

Thank you.

Charlie Nutt: [00:24:09]

Thank you so much in Atlanta. Thank you to your team. It's always an honor to be with y'all and, so that NACADA is here to work in any way with the CCA as we look at all students and what their success is. So, it's been an honor to be here. Thank you.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:23:49]

Same here. This collaboration will go onward and upward. So, thank you.