

## DemCo 2.8.24 Lisa Neeley final.mp3

**Steve Phillips** [00:00:12] Welcome to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips, a color conscious podcast about politics. I'm your host, Steve Phillips, and it's Black History Month, also known as the shortest month of the year. Surely a coincidence that this is the month we've decided to allocate to thinking about black people? But what is more pressing and pertinent is that we are less than three years removed from the brief racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd. And yet much of America's financial, corporate, philanthropic and educational elite is backtracking and backpedaling, and the commitments to address the legacy of 400 years of systemic racism in this country. Foundations are failing to follow through on their commitments to move hundreds of millions of dollars to address racism. Corporations are so afraid of the attacks on DEI diversity, equity and inclusion that they are eliminating diversity departments, laying off staff, and even rearranging the letters so that the D of DEI is not the first letter. And wealthy white billionaires more recently, such as Bill Ackman and Elon Musk, are waging an all out assault on remedies for his historic racism and yet completely failing to address the racism itself. So that is a bleak picture. But on this podcast, we look for signs of hope. And in today's discussion, we will lift up and dive into just one sign of hope in California and its leadership, which is keeping the faith and continuing to fight the fight to intentionally focus on and try to address long standing systemic inequality and racism in general, and the legacy and situation of African Americans in particular. For that conversation, we we're joined by a longtime friend of mine. She and I were DEI OGs who led protests and marches in the 1980s to get California's institutions of higher education to devote more resources to people of color. And I remember one protest, at Stanford was 1989, with the chant of the students was, what do we want? An Asian-American history professor, one just one Asian-American history professor, which we actually did actually get our guest today continues to blaze trails and lead the way in terms of how higher education can play a proactive role in fostering educational equity and overcoming historic, systemic racism. And for this conversation, I'm joined, as usual with my co-host Sharline Chiang. Hi Sharline, how are you? And are you enjoying our annual acknowledgments of people of color? And do you want to introduce our guest?

**Sharline Chiang** [00:02:36] Hey Steve, I'm doing great. And you know, over the years, you and I have come to an understanding that we have different feelings about Black History Month. I know how you feel about it and totally understand that the total annoyance that it's the shortest month and that it. Why do we even have this thing last week?

**Steve Phillips** [00:02:54] By the way, originally it was Black History Week.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:02:56] That right. Oh my gosh, Carter G.

**Steve Phillips** [00:02:58] Woodson advance black history week in the early 20th century. Wow.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:03:05] Yeah. And I always say okay, first and foremost, where we do agree is that Black History Month is every day. Black history is American history, period. But I still have appreciation for the fact that there is a month to extra lift up, you know, historical figures, historical accomplishments, people today, African-Americans who are doing amazing things today. And I also have I really enjoy how a lot of I call Black Twitter just has a lot of fun with it. So there's a lot of humor and there's a lot of actual educating people and lifting up that I appreciate because I learn more and more, you know, every year. And I'm still down for it being its own month. And I also really love how it's not every

year, but many years it overlaps with Lunar New Year. I tend to want to call it Chinese New Year, but it's a it's the Lunar New Year celebrated by a lot of cultures, a lot of Asian American cultures. And so it gives this opportunity to feel this synergistic, synergistic, intersectional. And it's like Black History Month, significant Asian cultural month, and it's the year the Dragon. I think it's great February I love February's it feels like the beginning of spring ish. We get longer days. The weather, aside from the recent storm, gets a little nicer, maybe a little nicer, and I just I really like it.

**Steve Phillips** [00:04:24] But you say, aside from the atmospheric rivers, we just.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:04:26] Aside from that, we just, February in general I like as a month overall. So I am excited that it's here. And I'm really looking forward to talking to our guests today. But before I introduce her, I wanted to do a quick plug to our listeners that every Friday you can chat with Steve and ask him questions in the comments section on Facebook. So we have what we call Fridays with Steve. And so that's every Friday, 9 a.m. Pacific and noon eastern. And so if you're listening to this episode today on Thursdays, when our episodes first come out and you're like, oh, I really want to ask Steve about this, I have some questions. You can tune in tomorrow, Friday, 9 a.m. Pacific, noon eastern, and we will put in our show notes, a link to that Facebook. Book live page. And so mark your calendars. You can chat with Steve every Friday. So okay with that, our guest today is Lisa Neely. And Lisa is the vice president of student services at Solano Community College in Fairfield, California. Solano is part of the California Community College System, and it has 1.9 million students. Yeah, that's a lot of students at 116 colleges. The California Community Colleges is the largest system of higher education in the country. I think it's just something that many people don't know. I think people think of the university systems, but it's this this particular community college system in California is the biggest, by the way, small trivia. I when I was a young journalist, I covered this specific community, California Community College system for years for a newspaper called the L.A. Daily News. So it's dear to my heart because the incredible work that it does. During her time at Solano, Lisa has worked to create anti-racist learning communities, programs and innovative spaces for students to realize their potential. Prior to working at Solano. Lisa served as the Dean of Student Affairs and postgraduate programs at Metro Film School in London. Welcome, Lisa.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:06:30] Thanks for having me. Of course, it's a huge honor. I'm a big fan of the podcast, and Steve and I go way back, so it's really a pleasure to be here today. Thank you.

**Steve Phillips** [00:06:37] Yeah, thanks for joining us. And that's we want to maybe just start with a quick, brief popular culture diversion. As we were talking today and our staff meeting about the new show True Detective, Jodie Foster and I was recollecting that, didn't you work with Jodie Foster back in the 80s and what was it like now? You are you watching True Detective?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:06:58] Yeah. No. Listen, I love all of the streaming services and all the great drama that's happening. Yeah, I was in it was when I was in film school getting my master's degree. I was an intern at her then production company called Egg Pictures. Which was truly, you know, a privilege to be able to have, you know, kind of a little insight into the business. And she was an incredible mentor. The brief period of time that I was there was able to even get sort of by osmosis, you know, some influence from somebody who's just a sort of, you know, iconic figure in the industry, smart and very clever about story and storytelling. So, yeah, fun fact.

**Steve Phillips** [00:07:31] Three years later, are you watching True Detective?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:07:33] Yeah. Yes. I love True Detective. Yeah. I'm addicted. I love, love, love TV ever since I was young love TV. So I watch it all, try to watch it all.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:07:41] I know we're here to talk about politics and, you know, the ongoing civil war in this country, but I cannot. I'm such a fan fangirling over, you know, Jodie Foster, long time fan and and your, you know, having gotten to work with her. But I'm also fascinated when I was learning about your bio about this, not as traditional background in somebody who does your work now and that you have a master's in film. So really quickly, because I love film and I love TV, too. I'm just kind of curious, what was your journey at that point, going to film school and, how did you go from there to education?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:08:21] It's, you know, I've tried to make sense of it over the years, and I feel like now it's all synchronous, right? It's all part of the path I was meant to be on. But at the time it was interesting. I think it was really trying to scratch a creative itch. And a bunch of us, you know, Steve and other folks, we all kind of came up through those struggles and those movements, and some got into politics in different ways. And then a bunch of us decided maybe we better go back and get a post-graduate education and figure out what the next steps were. So I was actually headed to law school. And a friend of mine at the time who was getting his PhD in critical film studies at UCLA, he said, you know, you seem to love film. You talk about it all the time. Why don't you go to film school? I thought, I'm heading to law school. I'm going to be a civil rights lawyer. What are you talking about? And interestingly, I sort of that sat with me and I decided, you know what? Let's go for it, because I do. I loved film, I loved the power of film in terms of storytelling, right. And helping us make sense of the world around us. So just on a whim, I applied to a couple of film schools. I deferred law school for a year, thinking in case film school didn't work out. I had my backup plan, and it worked out and I never looked back. So I went and worked in the film industry for a few years. I loved it, I loved finding stories and thinking about sort of that human kernel that makes us all who we are, and trying to lift up voices that didn't always get an opportunity for voices to be, for stories to be shared. So I love that piece of it. But I think ultimately, storytelling actually is the path, right, of giving voice to folks who haven't always had a voice. So to me, there's a kind of seamless synchronicity between that and moving into higher ed. And actually, one of my earliest jobs was at UCLA in student affairs. So in some ways, I kind of came full circle, having worked in the industry and then really being called to, I did teaching and then from teaching into educational administration, in higher ed administration with my love song, My Love, my love.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:10:07] That's what we're we're definitely going to get into and talk about that. Thanks for giving us some of that background. I wanted to ask you that since becoming the vice president of Salado Community College, you've been really intentional about prioritizing African American students experiences on campus. What does that look like for you in that role? And tell us a little bit about that.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:10:27] So my role is quite a diverse portfolio. So Vice President Students Services, for those who may not be as familiar with cabinet level position, really I'm responsible for student support. All of the teams and programs that really provide, direct support to our students in a lot of key areas that you might be familiar with everything from admissions and records, financial aid, academic counseling, wellness and mental health and basic needs services, our accessibility services outreach. We have a very vibrant

veterans resource center and program. So a whole range of things that really are all of the support, supporting structures that help students get into and stay in the classroom. So in that role, it's really thinking always about how to be intentional, how to have a focus on what is that we need to do to move the needle, particularly when it comes to the issue of student equity, which I think in really is the biggest challenge in terms of how do we actually make meaningful change and address disrupt and really start to reduce the equity gaps that exist, particularly when you disaggregate a lot of the student data, by race and ethnicity. So in that sense, the role is always interesting. It's never boring, and it's really thinking about how to leverage, you know, everything from human resources to technology to funds, you know, both in terms of things that we know are part of the statewide, mandate and mission to support equity efforts. And also just being innovative, the things that I've learned along the way in terms of how to meet students where they are and really provide that wraparound support. So it's been it's been a really interesting journey. I've been in this role a year and a half. I love it because it affords me the opportunity to, build teams and work with teams that help disrupt a lot of those barriers to access for so many of our students.

**Steve Phillips** [00:12:15] So I'm, remembering here as we sit here that, you know, we met and came of age back in the day around pushing for trying to make higher education more responsive to students of color, trying to be more, reflective and multiracial in it. And we met with significant backlash and opposition and response at that time, including from people who've gone on to great fame, such as Peter Teal. And they created the they have these like campus reviews, not Stanford Review, Dartmouth Review. They got started when we were actually in college, and a lot of that was in the backlash to what we were trying to do to make education more multiracial. So I'm very curious, what's it been like for you in terms of trying to lift up and push forward, these initiatives that you're talking about in general and then in particularly in the context of this past few years and Supreme Court backtracking, affirmative action, the, you know, dissipation of, support after the murder of George Floyd, etc.. So how has that been trying to have this kind of focus, in your work there?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:13:24] It's been a really challenging piece, but I think also with great challenge comes great opportunity. And so I think the opportunity to have both conversations that we need to have, the things that we need to put on the table, the things we need to be intentional about and direct about and clear eyed about. Even in the wake, as you said, of, you know, the backlash and some of the efforts to sort of to, to, to divide and conquer our communities in terms of acting as if, you know, there's only a certain amount of resources. And I think those things are as important is also an agenda for change. So we have done things on our campus, for example, in terms of being able to address things, like the pushback against Dei. So we've actually as a college, we've leaned in further to di work on our campus. So we have a range of different initiatives. We have a, an advisory council to our superintendent, president on Dei. Faculty have initiated a few years ago a program called teaching for equity, which is working directly with other faculty about how to equities, curriculum to equities to experience in the classroom. We have also put a lot of the funding that we received from the state towards some of these initiatives, and I think part of it is a combination of education but also action. Because I know I believe and certainly coming from my storytelling background, that words really matter. However, those words have to be accompanied by meaningful agenda for change and really trying to move at the pace of what our students need, which I think is also always gives me a sense of urgency, because every day that we look at the data and it tells us a story and it tells us a really stark story, I feel like we have to double down on our efforts to do better and to be better. So it's been about education for sure. One of the

things we've done this. Yea, and I think it's always important to recognize sometimes we have these conversations ourselves. Sometimes it's important to recognize when we need to bring in, outside expertise to help us be participants and not have to always facilitate. So this last, year, I've brought in, external practitioners around anti-racism work and have they've done a series of workshops in every single department in my division, which really looked at equity as a customer service initiative. Right. In terms of how do we serve our students? How do we serve them equitably? How do we make sure that students have what they need? And how does anti-racism as a, as a principal, and an urgent principle really, underline and highlight that. So that's some of the things that we've done. In addition of trying to sort of spread the word and bring more folks along. But at the same time, to think very specifically about how can we leverage all of the tools and resources that we have for meaningful change for our students?

**Steve Phillips** [00:16:04] What's the composition of the racial composition of the student population there?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:16:08] So actually, it's very diverse. You know, in Solano County. So we're nestled between Sacramento and San Francisco. We have about we serve about 12,000 students. And the population breakdown is, right now it's about black students, about 12%, white students, about 24% Hispanic Latinx students, 34% Asian Pacific Islanders and Alaska Native, about 17%. And our native population is less than 1% our indigenous population, but very diverse. The county's pretty diverse. I think at one point, Vallejo, which is in our our district area, was like the most diverse post code, our post zip code. So yeah, that's my British-ism coming through. Forget that at one point, Vallejo, I think, had one of the most diverse zip codes in the country. So we're in a very diverse area, and we're really blessed that our student population is is equally diverse.

**Steve Phillips** [00:16:57] This was leaving out that she spent 20 years in England.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:17:01] 19 now I was wondering what you meant by the British slip.

**Steve Phillips** [00:17:05] As I came back, it was not just a bunch of British words, but a British accent. And that's was really crazy for people who had known her back in college. And what, that.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:17:16] Sorry about that.

**Steve Phillips** [00:17:17] We reverted back to more of a, Solano. Yes.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:17:21] Now, every once in awhile I have a few things sneak through, and it's even surprises me. So apologies.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:17:28] You know, it just warms my heart. The community college system, really nationwide is, has special place in my heart because I covered it for so long, and I feel that I got to understand the amount of work it does and the value it gives, the role it serves in our society, and how that story doesn't get told enough. It just is sort of this underdog that many people just either don't appreciate or we just don't go around thinking about it. And so just getting some insight, even just from your experience and the people like you doing the behind, you know, behind the scenes work to support the students and, promote equity is just incredible. And so, it gives me so much hope. I wanted to ask you about, this program, it's the student equity and achievement program. I understand it was founded in 2018, and it was established within the California Community College System

to close its achievement gaps for students with traditionally unrepresented populations. So can you share a little bit more about the program, how it came into existence, how it's doing now?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:18:30] Sure. Yeah, absolutely. So the Student Equity and Achievement program is a really fantastic opportunity to center a lot of the work that we all talk about and believe in that is so important to be able to shift things and to transform the lives of our students and not just our students, actually their families and their communities. So it was established formally in 2018, as you mentioned. It was really kind of aggregating at that point, a couple of different programs that were all focusing on different aspects of support for students, and the idea was to synchronize it into a single program that really centered equity at the heart of it. So that's been very fortunate. And I think there's been a, a statewide commitment, of course, from the funding standpoint, to ensure that colleges had what they needed to implement these plans and to kind of think through, in a methodical way, how do we actually start to address this equity question? So it essentially comes down to a three year plan. So our college just submitted ours last year and is a three year plan. Essentially, how are we going to address and reduce the equity gaps on our campus for the most disproportionately impacted student populations across five key metrics, which are pretty straightforward enrollment, math and English completion in the first year, persistence in terms of from one semester to the next, transfer, of course, because a lot of our students transfer into the CSU, the UC, HBCU, other private colleges, and of course, completion, some sort of an attainment of a certificate or a degree. And so the program exists for each college to kind of figure out a local level, what that looks like. So we looked at our data and we had a lot of wide consultation across our campus, different constituencies, as well as key, key stakeholders in the community and our, our data told us, you know, the story that. We kind of knew, but it was an opportunity to really double down in terms of what to do about it. So looking at our data, our black students were the most proportionally impacted population in four of those five metrics. And we took the decision at the time, which seemed quite straightforward. But I'm finding out is turning out to be a bit unusual and unique to focus the entirety of our three year student equity plan, on lifting up our black students and finding the ways that we could address both the equity gaps, but also the experience of black students on our campus, creating a welcoming, inclusive environment, and being able to wrap our arms around students in a way that would help increase both them coming to the college, seeing college as an option for them, seeing Solano perhaps as their first choice in the area, but making sure once they're enrolled that they stay, and that we retain them and that we provide the support they need to really partner with them all the way through, whatever it is their educational goals might, might include. And so we did that and then looked at simultaneously what were the institutional lifts that we could make in order to support this plan? One of the things that I think can often happen with equity work is you end up with a lot of different well intentioned, sort of one off activities and events, things that you find, you know, on a lot of campuses that bring people together. But how do we actually institutionalize those things? So we took a really hard look and decided that we were going to focus intentionally on black students and unapologetically, by the way, and then also to look at what we could do at a wider institutional level to examine our policies, practices and procedures. And so when we did, we did that. We came up with a couple of kind of key highlights that we're still in the process because this is a three year plan. And I wanted to share those with you, because I think what's been so exciting is partnering with folks to be able to do this work and to kind of think through creatively too, right, how are the ways that we can do things maybe a little bit differently, particularly in a system that just reinforces inequity decade after decade? So the cornerstone of our equity plan is what we're calling the Black Falcon Success Program. The Falcon is our mascot. And so we've created a dedicated program

for incoming and newly joining, black students to have a support system that focuses intentionally on their academic success, their wellness, and making sure that there's kind of a culturally sensitive and relevant experience for them as black students on our campus. So that's in its infancy stages. We've launched it in the fall last year to success. We're going to see how it goes. And the idea is to learn the lessons and be able to apply them and scale them to larger groups of students. So that's one of the things that we've tried to do from an institutional perspective. You know, we've also done things like we're bringing back our our summer bridge program so that there's a really strong onboarding experience for students before they start a semester with us. We've expanded our outreach team to include an outreach specialist who will focus specifically on black student recruitment. We are also opening during Black History Month, a black student cultural center at the campus, which is great opportunity to create literally a safe space for black students and allies to be and to be affirmed and to be their authentic selves. So there's a lot of things that we're looking at in terms of this plan, but we really tried to focus two things. One is, let's be unapologetic about the students who need us the most right now. And let's also look at how do we leverage bigger infrastructure at the college. We're also looking at technology, other ways that we can provide services and provide support to students, and also some new ways. Right. Because we have these conversations every three, 4 or 5 years. We look at the data, tells us the same story. How do we ensure that in five years from now, we're not telling the same exact story? The data is telling us something different?

**Steve Phillips** [00:23:53] Yeah, I just want to dive in that a little bit. Because, you know, as we were contextualizing this, right, there's all this uproar, you know, about DEI, we shouldn't be doing this. We should be backing away. We shouldn't be doing anything but left out of this conversation. What should we be doing and what does work? And so I wanted to kind of, illuminate a little bit the kind of specific things that you guys are trying to do. So on this, this Black Falcon piece. What are you guys thinking about in terms of, like, you're trying to make it a welcoming place for new black students. So what does that mean in terms of when they show up? What are they? What are you guys going to be providing them or connecting them with, etc..

**Lisa Neeley** [00:24:29] So there's a few things I think in first place, we're examining even things like, you know, how do we enroll students? Well, actually, let me take a step back from there. We've done some, research recently through, some colleagues, UC Davis's wheelhouse, institution and really looked at kind of determining and understanding what is the opportunity in the first place. Because even though our enrollment is increasing and we're really excited about that because pandemic has, you know, certainly done a number on a lot of colleges and enrollments been down. We're very fortunate at Solano that our enrollment is, been rising and is almost at pre-pandemic levels. So that's a good thing. However, who else is out there that we should be attracting? And so we did a research project that looked at particularly Black and Latinx, high school graduates in our county. And what influence their decision to go to college or not? And sadly, we discovered that about 48% of Latinx males and about 52% of black male students graduated from high school in our county, and we don't know where they go. They're not coming to college. So I think there's a huge opportunity to do a better job of outreach, thinking about the ways to work with community agencies, organizations, churches, whatever it might be, to make sure that we can go where students are to make the case for why they should consider us, and they can consider us in terms of, you know, job training, in terms of educational attainment. Maybe they have ambitions to transfer whatever it might be. I think that's the first piece. And then once they're here, how do we onboard them? What's the onramp we provide that is that is a meaningful experience that will give them all of the information they

need, but also in a supportive environment. So we launched last year, for example, as part of our orientation, a black family barbecue day. And that was really just a welcome, not just for new students, but also for our staff and faculty, and existing students, but also families and community to come see what it is, you know, what's this like? And that was a really successful event that kind of led into a couple of days of summer bridge and orientation and Welcome Day, because for a lot of folks, that's not something that, you know, we talk all the time about programs and acronyms of names and all of the sort of higher ed speak. And we have to make sure that we're speaking to our customers and we're treating them, you know, in that kind of world class experience that they that they deserve. So I think part of it is thinking about some concrete onboarding pieces and then making sure that during their time here they have, touchpoints, right, with counselors, with folks in our basic needs program, with in faculty and with other professionals that will help support them along the way and make sure that if there are issues or challenges or questions, that we're able to quickly get in there to mitigate them. And so I think the cohort model of kind of case management is very much something that a lot of colleges have adopted to really be able to provide that wraparound experience. And by the way, we know that so many of our students, this is not just for black students, but so many students, you know, basic needs is a growing issue across the state and across the nation in terms of basic things like food insecurity, housing insecurity, all of those pieces. We have a robust basic needs program we've built here that really helps us to be able to also address those issues. And it's everything from emergency housing, transitioning folks to more secure forms of housing. Make sure they have the technology they need in terms of being able to access online education. So it's thinking about the cumulative effect of a lot of those different touch points, but knitting it together so that for the students, we're really building an ecosystem around them, rather than students having to go to a million different offices to figure out what it is that they need.

**Steve Phillips** [00:27:55] Yeah. No, I was actually I was in Texas a couple of weeks ago, and I visited the University of Houston Social Work School, which is doing this. Really, impressive. I guess we are a visual medium. They're doing this actually work around political social work and, the center for Racial Justice and their work. And so they're giving this tour, and then they were showing me, like the student lounge where the professors make sure that the student lounge is stocked with food because of this food insecurity reality that people face and whatnot.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:28:25] It's huge. I think the extent to which, and this is not just for the community college, but, you know, right up across the system. I know certainly at our college, we have an active food pantry. We serve several hundred students a week with our food pantry. And basically, we now have a kind of a practice where every office, every center, because we're spread across six different facilities, even though our, our primary campus is in Fairfield, where, you know, the Travis Air Force Base, we're down in Vallejo that every office basically has snacks and food available, our tutoring center, etc. because we know that's a huge issue for students, you know?

**Steve Phillips** [00:28:56] So how long have you been at Solano?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:28:58] About five and a half years.

**Steve Phillips** [00:29:00] So that was was that 20.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:29:02] 2018? Yeah. Fall of 2018.



**Steve Phillips** [00:29:03] That was the year that this legislation was passed. So I wanted to dig into that a little bit too, because it's like to help to illustrate how proclamations from on high get implemented on the ground. And so like when Biden first became president, he, you know, called for this, you know, racial something, equity initiative or whatnot. But then, like, how does that translate particularly in the context of through a bureaucracy? And then things can either be blocked or they can be embraced and people can run with them. So I'm very curious at the college, when this legislation gets passed, when this initiative gets, you know, announced by the state, what did you guys then do on campus in terms of being able to use that to advance these kinds of initiative?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:29:49] I think there's a couple of pieces to that. One certainly is, you know, again, having the support from the statewide proclamation of also the funding that can, you know, flow down to the colleges to be able to think from a local level, what is it that we need, whether it's, resources, whether it's personnel, whether it's, you know, supplies, equipment, whatever it might be, whether it's professional development. So I think at the college, you know, like a lot of the colleges, the first part was to continue to think about the work that we were already doing. But how did this new initiative help us perhaps marshal our forces in more cohesive way? Because so many of these things can often become siloed. And so everybody's doing good work, but in kind of a patchwork effect, and it doesn't ultimately accrue to a larger, kind of, seismic shift in terms of what we're doing. So I think that this plan allowed us to set perhaps a stronger, more centralized framework to even think about the work and to bring all the different pieces together. And I think certainly, so this is the plan we submitted last year was our next three year plan. There's been a prior three year plan. And I think what's been interesting is to learn from that first outing, what are the things that we can do better. So one of the things that Chancellor's office did is they initiated work in concert with USC center for Urban Education. They did sort of a summary of all of the colleges across the system, their first equity plan. So this was sort of 2019 to 2022, and they had some key findings that they found in common across many of the colleges, not all, but many. And that was that. There was a lack, even though these were equity plans focused on addressing equity gaps, there was a lack of race conscious language and race specific language. In terms of which groups are we actually talking about and trying to address? And then secondarily, that there wasn't enough institutional and sort of infrastructure response to what would actually be needed to make change. So again, the idea that there's kind of a collection of maybe disparate activities, again, all, you know, from committed folks trying to do good work, but not necessarily, ending up being able to sort of move the needle in real ways. So we took the opportunity based on that feedback, to redouble our efforts in our conversation as a college this time around. How do we do that and be more responsive to that? How do we make sure that, you know, essentially in three, 4 or 5 years, hopefully we see some real difference and we can point to some of the specific bold choices that we made. And it was interesting, as we made the decision to focus exclusively on black students in this particular plan, as I'm talking to colleagues across the state, I'm finding in the last year that this is a pretty unusual decision. It made sense for us in terms of what we were looking at our own data. But I know it was a bold decision, particularly in the wake of a lot of the backlash around DEI. And, you know, to have to keep talking about equity. And why are we talking about all of these things? So I'm really proud to be at a college and have the support of a board and a super kind of president who is absolutely committed to figuring out how do we continue to push and really kind of be disruptors, because if the system is baked into it, these and, you know, the revolving door of inequities, then in a sense you have to get up every day thinking, how do I disrupt it? What can we do differently? What can we do that's going to materially change the conditions for our students?

**Sharline Chiang** [00:32:58] Yeah, I'm definitely so heartened hearing you talk, Lisa, because I do think following the headlines, you just get this sense that so many institutions are backpedaling and softening and just, you know, like a knee jerk response out of fear. And in some cases, maybe out of this is what they wanted to do anyway. So it's given them an out which can be, you know, just so, that disheartening for those of us who have been fighting or in some way or another for advancement and to see, any kind of regression is, you know, can be really hard to take, but to know that it is absolutely true. And I, I am reading this in the here and there too, that institutions like yours are leaning in and saying, you know, we're doubling down. And so that is really, really great to keep in mind. I having said that, are there other college systems in the country that are following in Solana's footsteps, making similar efforts in equity? Have you? Has your institution found itself as a type of model? What other examples do you know of that? Are, you know, others doing similar work out there?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:34:10] Well, I hope that it's spreading. You know, I think one of the things that does give me hope is there's there's a whole generation of educational leaders who are coming into, their own, as you know, deans, as vice presidents, as presidents, as chancellors who are taking up that sort of unapologetic approach to equity and really centering it in a real way, because, you know, there's a lot of lip service as we know. And of course, even the backlash, even for folks who feel, you know, in, in, in word rather than that they want to commit, are starting to sort of reconsider. I think it's really important and brave to actually say these things. It's an act, you know, it's an offense. It's own that act of defiance. So I'm very and heartened by a lot of my colleagues across the state who are leaning into this work, even when it's difficult, even when there are the naysayers, I think that's really important. One of the and it's interesting, too, with our equity plan, with some of the other pieces, you know, we are becoming, I think, a bit of a beacon, which I think is is again intention. And I think we're proud to be able to share work and partner with folks and be able to say, yeah, let's have these conversations and be a thought partner on how we can do better. One of the examples, we have done recently is working with an organization called A Long Talk, and we're the first community college on the West Coast to I think we're the first college to work with this organization, that basically their plan is to to put an anti-racist at every dinner table in America. So the idea is really how do you have the uncomfortable conversations about race? So I highly recommend and I've told my colleagues, you need to hook up with these folks. They're experts at what they do. They've come in to our college recently to run some workshops. We're going to continue to work with them. So I think part of it is knowing, you know, how do we partner with folks who are helping to do the work and can help bolster our understanding and help, you know, because it's a long distance race, right? It's not a sprint. So I think that's something that, we try to do. So I'm hoping that, you know, as time goes on where more folks are hearing about what we do, we're also sharing and learning from other colleges, doing some really interesting, innovative work. We've had colleges now reaching out to us about our basic needs program, because they're hearing that the way that we have integrated, you know, mental health, wellness, food insecurity and housing insecurity, into kind of a synchronous piece. It's been something that other folks are really looking to learn from. So it's a it's a reciprocal relationship. But yeah, hoping that we are spreading the word, and trying to give a shout out because, you know, precious cargo are these students that we need to make sure that we're supporting.

**Steve Phillips** [00:36:38] So we're getting towards the end. I wanted to kind of wrap up in terms of kind of what we began reflecting on the journey and your journey and the kind of like, what's next? Right? So we came of age in the context of, you know, marching and sitting in around higher education reform. Then you went to films white forgotten about this

law school thing. Do you actually mentioning it actually, by another narrative and being in that whole popular culture communication space, you know, there's the powerful role for culture and narrative in social change. And then now you're in higher education, you're at college doing this important work. What do you see in terms of your own goals and priorities for the next few years around trying to advance the global cause of, you know, equity and justice?

**Lisa Neeley** [00:37:26] Woo that's a big question, Steve! I don't even know what I'm having for dinner tonight. But no, you know, it's interesting. I feel like I've found my niche in this particular way as a disruptor. And I think it's no coincidence that I have the skill sets from having worked in the media industry, particularly around the, the question of storytelling. How do we tell our story? And also actually the part around brand identity because, you know, it is all about marketing. We know we're living in a, you know, a tech age where everything is about, you know, quick soundbites. And I think in some ways higher education is no different. And so I've been instrumental here at Solano and helping us build that story, you know, what's the story we're telling to our community? What's the reason in the narrative for choosing us? What does that mean? What does that look like? And how do we make sure that the things that we're doing, the great initiatives and the progress that we're seeing, that we're able to report that out and we're able to, connect that in people's minds with this college because it isn't a coincidence, not that there's not a lot of work to do, of course, but I love the ability to be that disruptor, to kind of think creatively, sometimes at 35,000ft. What would that actually look like? Let's think outside of the box. And I think in some ways, my experience in other industries has helped kind of shape that from the standpoint of what's the what's the interest and therefore what are the different possibilities? What are the different options? Let's not feel like we have to accept things as they are because the status quo is not working. So I was a big proponent out of Covid. I was like, there is no normal, so let's stop calling it new normal because nothing about what has been was particularly helping our students or much of the globe for that matter. So I feel like the ability to always think about what is that story that we want to be able to tell and what are the different people and movements and, and campaigns and what and programs, what have you that help us get there. So higher education absolutely is my home. And what I love is the opportunity to see particularly community college, because that's the people's college, right? This is the open access to to transform your life, to transform what you thought was possible, to help you realize your potential and the potential for your family and your community. So I think the next few years is about continuing to be that disruptor, you know, eating my Wheaties so I can get up every morning and think creatively about how to solve not just the day to day problems, but, you know, three, 4 or 5, ten years from now how to make sure we're in a different space. Yeah, but the data tells a different story right now.

**Sharline Chiang** [00:40:03] Lisa, I'm just, you know, the the heroes are really. There are so many, you know, you're a hero in this space. I just hope that listeners are really perking up and learning about the heroes that work in the community college systems in our country, and this just incredible role that they play. And like you said, all the for all the reasons that you mentioned. And so I just want to thank you for joining us again. And I wanted to ask where can people keep up with you? Speaking of tech.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:40:31] I know keep up with tech. So, certainly always feel free to email me. I'm always, you know, loving the opportunity to network with folks and share ideas, etc.. I did start, I sort of revisited Twitter slash x, and now my handle, I think is @Lisamarieneeley. But it's all focused on higher ed stuff, so I'm lifting up what our colleges doing, what other folks are doing. So I appreciate it if folks want to check me out there

because I'm certainly happy to keep telling our story and, you know, helping to spread the word because I agree with you community college really is, such a precious, wonderful opportunity. And we need to continue to kind of keep, you know, keep the beating heart alive.

**Steve Phillips** [00:41:10] Okay. Yeah. Well, thank you for the work you've been doing. It's been an honor and a pleasure to partner with you over more decades that I will quantify for this podcast. And thanks so much for joining the podcast.

**Lisa Neeley** [00:41:25] It's been absolute privilege and pleasure. You can tell this is a topic I'm passionate about. I'll talk to anybody about it. But particularly in this venue where you're lifting up so many important voices across the country, it is absolutely been an honor. Thank you.

**Steve Phillips** [00:41:37] All right. That's all the time we have for today. Thank you for listening to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips. Please help us get the word out about this podcast by subscribing wherever you get your podcasts, sharing with your friends, tweeting at Democracy Color and @SteveP tweets, and finding us at Democracy in Color on Facebook or Instagram. You can also keep up with all things Demco by subscribing to our newsletter at Democracy in color.com. If you listen to our podcast on iTunes, please leave us a rating and a comment. It helps others find our show. This podcast is a democracy in color production. Our producer is Olivia Parker. Fola Onifade is our staff writer and associate producer. Sharline Chiang is our editor and co-host. Special thanks to April Elkjer for quality check. Recorded virtually with the assistance of the Podcast Studio of San Francisco. Until next time, be a disruptor and Keep the Faith. Thank you.