

Next Practices Inside Look at the 2024 Student Success Impact Report with Sarah Demeo

Katy Oliveira ([00:07](#)):

Welcome to Next Practices Data-informed strategies to shape the future of higher ed. In each episode, you'll hear from transformational higher ed leaders on how they're tackling today's most pressing challenges to make a difference for their students and institutions. I'm your host, Katy Oliveira.

Sarah DeMeo ([00:28](#)):

Initiative Analysis really allows opportunity to pinpoint which initiatives are making the greatest impact to potentially pivot or adjust focus areas based off of student populations, and also optimize resources and how those resources are being invested and advocate potentially for more resources. And having those data driven insights to be able to showcase the why can be so critical in that experience.

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Today on the show, I'm talking with Sarah DeMeo about this year's Civitas Learning Student Success Impact Report. Sarah and I work together to develop this report each year to share trends on what's working for student success across our partner institutions. Sarah is a data analyst here at Civitas Learning dedicated to supporting higher education institutions to use a data-driven insight to drive student success. Prior to joining Civitas Learning, Sarah worked for 10 years in higher education in both academic and student affairs roles. In this episode, we share how the analysis is conducted and which data we include in that analysis, what findings made it in this year's report and why, and how leaders might use this information to drive student success at their institutions. We also share how doing regular Initiative Analysis at your institution provides opportunities to improve retention and graduation rates in ways that are financially sustainable. But before we dive in, take a moment to subscribe to this show to stay up to date on the latest and data informed approaches student success.

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Sarah, welcome to Next Practices. I'm so happy you're here today. Thanks, Katy for having me. Really excited to be here. So as I shared in our intro, you're here to talk about the 2024 Student Impact Report, but before we dive into that, can you just share with our audience a little bit about who you are and your role at Civitas Learning? Yeah, of course. So my name's Sarah DeMeo. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I serve as the data analyst for our customer development team. So a lot of what that looks like is really helping to surface and showcase value to our partner institutions, helping them dive more into their data, get a better understanding of what their data is telling them, and how to be able to think about using those data insights in their own institutional context. And as part of that work, you and I have the privilege of working really closely together to develop the impact report, which we release each summer, to share broadly what we're seeing across all of our partner institutions in a given year as far as the work that they're doing.

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So do you mind sharing for those in our audience who have never seen an impact report in their life, what the Impact Report is? And then we'll go from there. So this report is really a compilation of initiatives that our partner institutions have been running and that's using our Civitas Learning Initiative Analysis tool. And this tool really allows our partners to be able to see the initiative efficacy on students. And so being able to understand how these different initiatives are impacting student persistence. And so the report itself really provides a overarching opportunity to understand what initiatives are being run across our partner institutions, what's successful, maybe what's not successful, and being able to see directionally what could be happening on our other partners institutions and what they can also potentially measure as well. Yeah, I think that term directionally is really important for those who are reviewing the impact report.

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It's meant to not tell what is successful in student success. As you might see in the research report that's exploring best practices in student success, it's meant to reflect directional trends that our partners are seeing at their institution, what's helping to move the needle on persistence at their institution for different students across different years. And so from year to year it shifts because partners are looking at a different combination of institutional resources, different partners are looking at different institutional resources. So when we're looking at the data, when we're talking about the data, just for you guys to know, it's not that last year advising was super impactful and this year advising is not impactful. It can be that advising is always impactful, but how it's being measured, who's measuring it may change over time. And also it can give indicators or signals of where we can maybe invest or allocate our resources or what resources we can best connect our students to ensure that they're getting that individualized support and kind of reading the tea leaves to see what might work for a certain student when instead of giving us an opportunity to not mass market all the students success programs to all the students, but to market strategically in precise ways to those students who could really benefit from the resources.

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Yeah, exactly. Katy. And I think what's really great, and I love the fact that we do this report, we're doing this report again because I do think it's really important that we continue that assessment. I think to your point, our students are constantly changing. The landscape of higher education is constantly changing, and so our institutions are constantly measuring different initiative efficacy for their students and in every institution is different. And so the report really provides those directional insights, I think, to be thoughtful around what could be measured on our campuses and our other partner campuses across the board and continue to be thought partners in that. Yeah. Well, the number one question that I got last year around the report where the inquiring minds want to know is how this analysis is conducted and what findings or information do we include to generate the final report.

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Do you mind, since you do the heavy lifting on the analysis, do you mind sharing a little bit like a peek behind the curtain on how we actually conduct the analysis? Certainly, I love data obviously as a data analyst. And so this is a really exciting kind of opportunity for me to not only have the opportunity to look at our different partners individually, but holistically, what are those kind of trends and what are we seeing being measured across our partners? And so what we do is we actually are able to take each initiative, all of the initiatives that our partner institutions are running throughout the timeframe and look at what that initiative is, what's being measured. And so that data is pulled down, is cleaned, making sure that we have statistical significance, making sure there is value there, and then categorized by different classifications that initiative might fall in.

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So for example, institutions might be running various initiatives centered around academic mentoring or career engagement. And so being able to categorize those allow us to see broader trends on what is impacting directionally across our partner institutions. And so being able to pull that data down, clean the data, and then categorize that data, allows us to then be able to roll up the persistence impact on students and to better understand at a larger scale what directionally is impacting student success across our partner institutions. So in that final report, we're really able to showcase the different directional insights and showcase what has been or maybe hasn't been working for our partner institutions who both can provide significant value to understand how to continue to modify the ways that we provide student support to make sure that we're meeting the students where they need to be met. And I know that not everyone's really familiar with the Initiative Analysis capabilities in the success platform.

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Do you mind sharing a little bit about just for background, how Initiative Analysis is able to measure the impact of an initiative on persistence and then how we're able to take that a level up to sort of a macro view across our partners? Yeah, that's a great question and a great, I think contextual piece to add. So Initiative Analysis is one of our Civitas Learning solutions that really allows partners to quickly analyze the effectiveness of a student program at an institution level. And it's a really easy way, when I was in higher ed, I would've loved to have had a tool like Initiative Analysis to be able to understand the different programs and services that I was providing, what is the actual data that showcases the impact of the work that I'm doing? So Initiative Analysis really is able to provide that, able to provide that color, that context in an objective way.

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Initiative Analysis takes two data pieces when comparing students, so it looks at a propensity score. So propensity score is really looking at the likelihood of a student to engage in an initiative. So let's for example, take student organization participation just so we have some context here. So the likelihood of a student to participate in a student organization is measured and the persistence likelihood of that student to enroll into the next term. So Initiative Analysis is able to take a list of participants in student organizations, so a group of students that participate in student organizations and then take a list of students who did not, but were eligible to and measure them on those two levels on persistence and on propensity. So likelihood to engage in a student organization and likelihood to persist into the next term. And those are used based off of every institution specific historical information on what is most predictive for that institution.

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So it's unique by institution, which is important because all of our institutions are unique and it compares propensity and persistence for each of those students. So the groups that did participate, those that did not participate in a student organization and matches them and then is able to quantify essentially those that participated, what excess persistence lift did they have that those that did not engage in that specific initiative or program. And so it's a really smart way of being able to think about two students who are similar, who have similar likelihood to engage in a student organization, but one did and one did not. And how did their persistence get impacted? So if one student had a 92% persistence rate and one student had a 90%, there's a 2% difference in that student's persistence likelihood. And so that could end up being the persistence lift. So Initiative Analysis is able to then surface what that overall lift would look like, so holistically across that entire participant population, and then also is able to break it down into different student groups, which I think is often sometimes a really powerful component of Initiative Analysis.

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So you're able to see across things like modality, race, ethnicity, gender, different ways in which that specific initiative, so maybe student organizational participation in this instance impacts those different student segments. So it provides you those students that are participating the count of those and the persistence lift for each of those groups. And so there's a lot of really great ways to use that data, cross-functionally collaboratively with other campus partners. And so it really helps to inform smart ways to use data-driven insights to impact student success. And for listeners who maybe you're familiar with the episode with Steve Wilkerson and Dr. Tammy Wyatt from the University of Texas at San Antonio, I'll link that episode in the show notes, but it's also in your podcast app if you haven't had a chance to live in scope. But they talk in pretty specific detail about how their institution uses the tools and how they are using it on a regular cadence, and then how they're able to action on that data.

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And so they might use it. One of the primary examples of how they use it that they gave is that they revealed that they had a student coaching student mentorship program and that most of the students who were raising their hand to utilize it were honor students. And so those coaches and mentors felt really busy because their appointment books were filled. But when they ran Initiative Analysis, they found that helped those students, but the lift was very minimal. But for other student populations who were more at risk categories, the lift was significant. And so they shifted from having the students passive, having students who wanted to use the service coming in to use the service who are more active proactive approach, where they started to use targeted marketing for those student populations that Initiative Analysis revealed would benefit most and saw a pretty significant improvement in academic performance for those students.

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And so Initiative Analysis as a signal to kind of say, this is really working for this population of students to help you take action to sort of maybe realign your emphasis or your focus of a particular program to a lot more resources to that program to restructure the program if you need to. There's so many things that folks do to action on the program that can be really helpful to just make the program more effective and make sure the program is connecting with those students that would benefit with most. Yeah, that's a great example of the surface, Katy, because I think it really goes to the quantity versus quality sort of conversation and being able to use Initiative Analysis as a tool to develop that understanding of that signal and then be able to more strategically target resources can be really important. I think we could all speak to the fact that resources are finite, right?

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And higher education, we have growing student needs, but we don't necessarily have growing resources all the time in every facet. And so being able to be more thoughtful and more strategic is critical I think to the work in higher education and Initiative Analysis is a really great tool to be able to have data driven insights to drive how that strategy comes to life. Yeah. Well, last year we had a really robust report that covered all kinds of different topics that report. I'll link in the show notes if you want to look and see what we covered last year. That report had some highlights. We talked about some impact. Things that really stood out were the impact of faculty development on persistence. So if schools had faculty members who were engaging in organized professional development around improving their instructional skills, their student success skills, we saw that that had a very significant impact on student success.

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We saw that traditional academic interventions like advising and tutoring supplement instruction are really influential among many others. But I want to spend some time here diving into this year's report. So both will be in the show notes for download if you're interested. And looking at the full report, we're going to just do a high level here because there's so much goodness in the report. But do you mind sharing a little bit about what's in this year report, how it's a little different than last year's report? Yes, definitely. Anytime you're doing something the second time, there's always opportunities to kind of look at things differently, reengage with the data, and so really excited about what's going to be in this year's impact report. And there are hundreds of initiatives that are included. So ranging from academic support to co-curricular engagement, each of those insights really shows up differently in different ways for different populations as well.

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And so one unique thing that is in this year's report that isn't in last is around aggregated data. So really able to look at a longer longitudinal data spread. So taking the data that was included in last year's report, combining it with this year, so kind of looking at a three year timeframe, trying to look at more

broader trends and longitudinal trends of our different partner institutions and thinking about what has been successful over time is really important. Some things that have surfaced there that have been impactful for student success initiatives for our partner institutions are around student led academic planning. So student engaging in their academic planning experience and being a really big thought partner in that has big impact on persistence, also academic thing. So continuing that trend from last year's report around academic advising also shows up in this year's report. So that trend continues around something that is definitely a signal for impact for students.

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And there's definitely I think, variances in the subpopulations, which I think is where things can really get exciting and interesting around how to be more strategic or intentional around targeting different populations. But those are a couple that are more large attitudinal trends that I think will surface in this report and you'll be able to dive more into it. This year's report in particular. Can I stop you there before we dive into this year's report around the longitudinal? I just want to note, because I am 99.9% sure, people may be wondering, or the question might arise of why we only did the last three years. Do you want to share how we came to that decision? Sure. So with Covid in 2020, really 2021 was kind of really where we felt would make the most sense to start for this longitudinal data. Prior to that, I think there are definitely some outliers that might have surfaced in what was being measured, how institutions might have been adjusting to a pretty challenging time during the pandemic.

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And so wanted to try to isolate as best we can, recognizing of course that Covid was still present in 2021, 2022, even still now, but that there was at least around a year to be able to better understand Covid its impact on higher education and kind of allow for that to not be a confounding factor. So that's a great point to bring out, Katy. I think why those three years is definitely a good contextual piece, but appreciate you bringing that up. Thanks for letting me to interrupt. I just know that people might be wondering that why didn't you go back further? And we just felt like we would love to have gone back further, but we just felt like it would probably drastically view the finding. Yeah.

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Back to this year report. I'll get you back on that train of thought if you remember where you were going. Okay, great. Yes, I do. No, I do. No do. I'm really excited about this year's report, so you can't get me off that train. It's been really great, I think, to see what new initiatives are impacting student persistence this year. And we've seen, I think a broader range of initiative efficacy being measured across our partner institutions and thinking not only I think academically, but thinking outside of the classroom. And so one area that we have seen kind of surface more this year than we did previously in the impact report is around co-curricular engagement. So thinking about how students are engaging in student organizations in recreation in Greek life and different facets that I think add to the holistic experience of a student, but with the academic experience, often being prominent sometimes isn't always measured.

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And so seeing more institutions measuring those initiatives, which has been great and has really aligned with what we've been hearing, I think from some of our partners. Another area is around career

development. So thinking not only about that academic performance and continuing to enhance that component, thinking about that co-curricular, and then thinking about that career development. So career readiness and getting students not only to be successful at degree attainment, but beyond that. And so both co-curricular development and career development have been conversation points that I've also heard from many of our partner institutions. And I think being able to center around this has come up in a variety of ways with a variety of focuses. So continuing that academic performance is being obviously a big component of that student experience, but then more conversations around sense of belonging and how do we measure that? How do we look at different components of a student's experience and measure the impact of those so that we can best support students in how to engage in ways that would help them continue to persist, feel connected and feel a part of a campus community.

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And then really that readiness for post-graduation so that they not only feel successful within the college environment, but are able to be successful beyond and then return to campus and have that great alumni experience as well. So those are a couple areas that I've surfaced, and I'll leave the specific data points for you all to explore further within the report, but there's some really, I think, interesting insights there and some really good opportunity for our partners to continue to explore these different components that are outside of the academic experience. And I continue to have conversations now with partners about how they can do that and what that might look like and how we can have that cross collaboration. It really for me surfaces one of our partner institution stories, one of our public regional institutions, which has really taken on a tremendous initiative to really understand initiative efficacy across campuses and across a student's journey in their institution.

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So trying to think about not only the advising experience, but their experience with diversity, equity and inclusion experiences, their experience with athletics and trying to really partner with these different departments and teams across the institution to help surface these insights and allow for them to be able to be more thoughtful and strategic around how they provide student support and student success. And so they've seen a really big impact on persistence for their students over the time that they've taken this on. And they continue to collaborate now with variety of different partners on their campuses to really measure different initiatives and then broadly share out what the results are so that folks can make really strategic opportunities and impact to their specific areas of ownership on an institution level. So it always makes you really excited to see that happening, to really see that collaboration because there's so much that can be measured with an Initiative Analysis.

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Yeah, it's really a great tool. And just to reiterate or remind or just make clear, the reason that there are different things surface in each report is because our partners measure different combinations of initiative each year. So for example, there's not really anything about faculty development that emerges in the report. And I know that that was something that folks were really curious about last year. And the reason for that is not that faculty development is not a worthwhile pursuit and it's not impactful. It is probably if we had folks who ran it this year, we probably would see that it has a significant impact this year. No one assessed that. So that's an opportunity for you if you're a customer and have this capability that might be something worthwhile to investigate. Or if you're at your institution and you have other ways of thinking about this, I think that it gives you little clues of things that you can measure that might be impactful at your institution.

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So that's why that isn't showing up this year. It's because this year the report shared different kinds of what folks were looking at and what they're surfacing, what they're curious about this year. But I think

the trends that we surface in 2023 are still relevant and still help to give direction towards things that might be interesting to explore. So with that in mind, Sarah, I know one of the things we talk about a lot is what can folks do with this information? What does the report help leaders do at their own institutions and what opportunities are there when measuring initiative efficacy? So do you mind sharing a little bit about how folks might take this information and use it at their institution? I can definitely do that. Katy, I do have a point around topic development, if you don't mind if I share too. I think you're totally accurate and what you shared around how things surface in our different reports.

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But I will say that faculty development has been a part of conversations that I've had with our institutional partners. And sometimes I think the impact report serves as a lot of inspiration, which I think is where leaders often sometimes use this report as well, which I'll speak to in a moment, but surface inspiration to a variety of our partners. And they're being thoughtful right now of how can they measure that using Initiative Analysis. And sometimes it honestly takes time to even just accumulate the data to be able to measure things through Initiative Analysis. And so I have been talking with a few of our partners around how they could measure faculty development. And so I think it's a really big kudos. I think also to last year's report around sparking that inspiration and conversation as those conversations are continuing to have. So I'm hopeful as we continue to look to the future that that might be an area that folks continue to explore.

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But jumping back to your question around how leaders might use the information in the report, I think inspiration to understand what's happening is a really big component. So we've talked about how Initiative Analysis really provides signals and the report itself really provides directional insights, what is working maybe across different campuses or what's not working across different campuses. And so I think leaders can really use this report to reflect and inspire what could be measured on their campus. And so thinking too as a leader, I might be looking at this report and thinking to myself, do I understand how these different, that maybe more broadly are directionally showing positive lift are impacting my campus? Because every campus is unique. Every institution has a unique student population, a unique makeup, unique student needs. And so it's really important to use the report, I think as a guide, as a directional guide to understand what's impacting institutional partners more broadly and then reflect internally to say, do we know how academic advising, how student organization participation, how career engagement is impacting our students?

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And if the answer is no, which sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't, Initiative Analysis is a great way to be able to dive into some of those conversations and understand what those initiatives are impacting student success and how those initiatives are impacting student success on your campus. Because Initiative Analysis really allows opportunity to pinpoint which initiatives are making the greatest impact to potentially pivot or adjust focus areas based off of student populations. I know we've talked a little bit about that and also optimize resources and how those resources are being invested and advocate potentially for more resources. I think we always would want more resources. I know reflecting on my time in higher education, that was something I was always looking for. And having those data driven insights to be able to showcase the why can be so critical in that experience. And so as a leader, I would really be reflecting on do we have the answers to how these different student success initiatives are impacting our students?

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And if not, Initiative Analysis is a really great way to start because the sky is somewhat the limit with Initiative Analysis. There are so many different things, initiatives that can be run through Initiative

Analysis. I'm a big creative person. Creativity is a big part of how I approach my work. And I really think Initiative Analysis is a great area where creativity and data can kind of come and intersect together. We can really think about ways that initiatives impact students on a high level, did they participate, did they not? But then we can think about how many times did a student participate? Is there a certain frequency of participation? Is there a certain timing of participation? Is there a certain modality of participation? And start to be able to really dive deeper into the strategic nature of how initiatives are rolled out, are marketed, are engaged with across student populations, and start to really understand on my campus, how is this impacting student success and how do I get more students to be successful?

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Anyway, I could talk a long time about issue analysis and the opportunities, but it's really a powerful tool that allows I think leaders to be real thought partners in how student success manifests on their campus. And I think that the report is our way of sharing across our organization. Different folks are running these, and so it's our way to sort of aggregate up that and share these broader trends, which are helpful because they provide a benchmark, so to speak, that kind of gives direction on some opportunities to see how are the programs measuring up? Because there are instances where we have tried and true programs maybe advising where we have run in the past, like pre Covid analysis where there's a significant percentage of advising programs that have no or little impact on persistence. Well, does that mean that advising is not impactful? Well, no.

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We know that advising is incredibly impactful, but we also know that there are different flavors of advising model and different kinds of advising models that are effective in today's world. And so it's not that it's like it is or it isn't effective, it's not meant to be a black and white analysis. What it's meant to be is that our institution isn't having the impact that we would expect. And if it's not, why is there something that we need to do differently in our advising model? Is there something that we need to do differently in our dosage? Is there something we need to do to make sure we all know that students under utilize these wonderful resources? Is the waiting room and advising appointments full of self advocating honors student or high performing students who have a lower likelihood of not retaining and who we all students of course can benefit from the support, but maybe there are students who could benefit more significantly?

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So is there some outreach that we need to do that's more proactive and more tailored? And so those are the kinds of opportunities that this data provides. The report itself is intended to spark, I love the word that you used, inspiration to investigate what's happening at your own institution and then to see what those signals are telling you about your program effectiveness and what leverage you can pull to make sure that the programs are as effective as they can be and that you are understanding what your students need, your particular students at your particular institution. Those are great points, Katy, because I do think, and the point that you made around leveraging the data to then impact your specific students I think is really important because the data is fantastic, right? Being able to surface the impact on persistence of a certain initiative is incredible.

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And I think often a tool that isn't at the hands of every professional in higher education. And so the ability to use Initiative Analysis to serve at that data point is critical, but then using it to actually inform strategy, inform outreach, one area that one of those segments that Initiative Analysis show is around persistence quartile. So where are students falling in terms of their likelihood to persist? And often the bottom quartile has higher persistence lift than maybe the overall population because those are the students that are least likely to persist. And so being able to understand that you can strategically pair

persistent scores with the strategic initiative and outreach and targeted investment, and I think that's such an important piece, is surfacing the data is an incredible powerful component to have as a part of informing that overall strategy and ways of impacting student success at each unique institution's student population.

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So really appreciate you servicing that. Yeah, well, if you are interested in seeing the report, you can download it for free by going to our show notes or going to civitaslearning.com. Sarah, we have covered tons of information here, but I always like to give the last word to guess because I know that there might be something I missed and didn't ask you about. So is there anything else you'd like to add before we sign off? I just encourage folks that have Initiative Analysis tool or don't to think about how and what they could measure. The sky is the limit. It's really important to understand what is impacting students, what is impacting the success of our students, and being able to make smart and informed decisions to make sure that they are successful in their holistic journey. So find ways to use Initiative Analysis. It is a impactful and strong tool that really allows easy ways to measure initiative efficacy. So try it. It's not as overwhelming as it might look like. And we here at Civitas Learning are always here to support anything that you might need. So if you need anything, don't hesitate to reach out to us as well. Great.

Katy Oliveira [\(34:10\)](#):

Thank you so much for coming on to talk

Sarah DeMeo [\(34:12\)](#):

About the Impact Report. Thanks for having me. Hey, this has been a pleasure.

Katy Oliveira [\(34:18\)](#):

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