

On Becoming a Community College Professor–Activist

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ABSTRACT

This article traces my intellectual and professional transformation from community college professor to professor-activist that began with my doctoral studies. Divided into four sections, it begins with an overview of the community college mission and the essential role of faculty in advancing the academic and social success of a diverse student population. The second section explores my intellectual development within the University of South Carolina's EdD program, highlighting how coursework on equity, social justice, and action research deepened my understanding of positionality and reflective inquiry. The third section, *becoming*, articulates my rationale for an action research dissertation addressing community college faculty burnout and situates my scholarly growth within my evolving activist identity. The final section, *beyond*, envisions how I will continue leveraging my positionality as a tenured professor to advocate for policies and practices that uplift contingent and early-career colleagues, fostering a more equitable and sustainable academic community.

KEYWORDS

EdD activism, reflective inquiry, community college, equity, faculty burnout

As Malcolm X (1973) stated,

People are always speculating—why am I as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient. (p. 173)

I first read his autobiography in the summer of 1992, after the Los Angeles riots erupted in response to the acquittal of four police officers charged with beating Rodney King. While video recordings are ubiquitous today, watching the news footage of Rodney King's brutal assault and later footage of the riots shocked me as a young, White college student who had grown up in an economically, racially, and ethnically diverse community across the country. New York City was a short train ride away. Los Angeles seemed like a world away. At the time, I could not stop trying to make sense of what had happened in Los Angeles. There was no internet for me to search. My understanding of race in the United States was limited to brief history lessons about slavery and then later the civil rights movement. I had no frame of reference to understand what was happening until a friend shared *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

I reread Malcolm X's autobiography several times along with volumes of his speeches in my last year as an undergraduate at a predominantly White institution where his life became the focus of my senior thesis. Years later, I required students to read Malcolm X's autobiography when I taught college reading classes. A decade has passed since I last taught his book, yet as I began to reflect on my journey toward becoming a community college professor-activist, Malcolm X's words came to me once again because he continues to stand as an example of what it means to be transformed through life experience and education and what it means to take action in the face of injustice. To be clear at the outset, I am no Malcolm X. I am a New Jersey community college professor trying to do what I can in my little corner of the world.

When did my journey of becoming a community college professor-activist begin? Was it when I was 4 years old, and my mother, as a low-income single parent, enrolled me in the kindergarten program offered at the daycare center of the New Jersey community college where she was attending as a student? Was it when I was 16 years old and dropped out of high school at the beginning of my senior year to attend a Pennsylvania community college for a year before transferring to a 4-year university? Was it when I was 27 years old and began teaching English as a Second Language as an adjunct instructor at the community college where I attended kindergarten? Was it when I was 29 years old and started a tenure-track position in the English Department at my current New Jersey community college, where I have worked ever since? Or was it when I was 49 years old and began the Education Doctoral (EdD) program in Curriculum Studies at the University of South Carolina (USC)? Perhaps all these experiences have led me to this point of becoming a community college professor-activist.

To make sense of my journey and understand where I am today, I had to reflect on my past. I have told people that community college is in my blood, but I have come to understand my belief that community colleges represent the key democratic ideals that are foundational to a fair and equitable society. As a tenured community college professor in my final year in the doctoral program at USC, I can see how my personal, professional, and academic experiences have been part of the transformative journey of becoming a community college professor-activist. This essay, which in some ways feels like a love letter to community colleges and a thank-you letter to the Curriculum Studies faculty at USC, begins with an overview of the community college mission and the role of faculty in supporting the mission. It then traces my intellectual journey in the doctoral program, followed by a discussion of my rationale for proposing an action research dissertation project focusing on faculty burnout and an outline of my vision for future advocacy work.



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THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSION

Community colleges are clearly special to me. However, aside from my personal and professional experiences, community colleges play an important role in the higher education landscape. While community college mission statements are institution-specific, most prioritize providing affordable, quality education to a diverse student population. Increasingly, many community colleges, including my institution, are centering the value of equity, too. With an additional emphasis on equity, community colleges provide opportunities and resources that enable students to succeed no matter their starting point.

One of strengths of the community college is its ability to adapt quickly to the local community's needs. For example, my institution in central New Jersey recently expanded its academic certificate and transfer programs, such as interface design and web development, supply chain management, digital video production, and social media studies. Moreover, community colleges often provide specialized training in fields vital to the local economy. In this respect and through some business and community partnerships, my institution has expanded its vocational and technical programs, including aseptic manufacturing, advanced manufacturing, and automotive technology, to support the calls for specialized workforce training. Offering a variety of academic and workforce programs aligns closely with the mission of the community college to support the diverse goals of our students.

Teaching faculty are at the forefront of advancing the college's mission, and full-time and part-time faculty are more than just classroom instructors. We are mentors, advisors, and advocates for our students. We play a critical role in supporting both the academic and social needs of our students. As primarily student-centered and open-access institutions, community colleges are often quick to embrace pedagogical shifts and innovations, and the pandemic forced significant instructional adjustment. However, as Cavanagh (2024) captured, such changes to address students' growing and diverse learning needs left many faculty feeling depleted.

For several years, my colleagues and I have been engaging in discussions and working purposefully to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for our diverse student population, which inspired my decision to search for a doctoral program that would allow for a more focused study on inclusive teaching strategies. Specifically, while my colleagues and I are committed to meeting students' needs, we continue to be challenged by trying to balance heavy teaching loads, professional development, and college and community service. There does not seem to be much room left on our plates.

Despite these challenges, I see opportunity for growth and innovation. As many of my colleagues continue to become more equity-focused, we have collaborated on pedagogical strategies and have engaged in interdisciplinary discussions about better ways to support our students. In the spring of 2022, I participated with a cohort of my colleagues to complete a 10-week microcredential in Inclusive Teaching for Equitable Learning offered through The Association of College and University Educators. The course increased my knowledge of managing the impact of biases, reducing microaggressions in learning environments, addressing impostor syndrome and stereotype threat, and designing equity-centered courses. However, one can only learn and apply so much in 10 weeks.

As I began to consider how to work more meaningfully with students, I applied for and was awarded a faculty research grant for the 2022–2023 academic year, supporting my collaboration with students to create and curate open educational resources to support equitable learning in composition classes. My research project synthesized several questions I had pondered over the years: How do I design my classes so all students can succeed? How can I identify materials and create assignments that are engaging to students? These questions align with the two questions Hogan and Sathy (2022) suggested are essential for an inclusive teaching mindset: "Who might be left behind as a result of my practice?" and "How can I invite those students in?" (p. 11).

MY DOCTORAL JOURNEY

As I grappled with what being an inclusive teacher means, by the end of the Spring 2022 semester, I found myself solidly mid-career, hungry to learn how to become a more equity-focused professor. I decided to explore returning to school for a doctoral degree. In my first 20 years of teaching, I watched as the entire world shifted and witnessed significant changes to the entire landscape of higher education, not to mention how the pandemic flipped everything upside down. My decision to pursue an EdD in Curriculum Studies at USC came after soul-searching reflection and careful consideration. As much as I wanted to return to school, finding a program that would fulfill my specific and focused academic interests without requiring me to leave or reduce my current teaching position was essential. I am a teacher at heart. Teaching and learning are the most basic human experience, so I wanted a pedagogy-based program. I specifically wanted a program that emphasized practical applications of scholarly research. In education, the concept of pedagogy is formalized. Still, in its most applicable sense, the scholarship around teaching and learning is meant to inform our practice and give us the tools to teach our students in ways that maximize their success. My interest in a program that focused on developing equity in education was rooted in the desire to engage with my colleagues in ways that help us to experience the best possible versions of our teaching selves and to see our work reflected in student learning. In short, I wanted a program that would allow me to directly address the real-world equity problems that I was facing at my institution.

While I do not consider myself a paragon of pedagogy, I know that what I do in the classroom matters, and what works in one class or with one student might not work with another. Just as I can help students on their individual journeys, I can also set them back, so I take my work very seriously. As Freire (1998) encouraged, "With responsibility, scientific preparation, and a taste for teaching, with seriousness and a testimony to the struggle against injustice, we can also contribute to the gradual transformation of learners into strong *presences* in the world" (p. 33). Whether I am thinking about my individual classes or collaborating with colleagues on larger projects, teaching and learning have always been at the heart of what I do at my community college. In that way, I have tried to weave together theory and practice as I navigate complex educational landscapes, advocate for change, and implement research-based and contextually grounded solutions.

Enrolling in the EdD program directly supported my professional goals in two significant ways. First, it has allowed me to deepen my knowledge of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Second, completing the degree will allow me to develop as a "teacher's teacher." Aside from



teaching my composition courses, I have found working on faculty development presentations for my colleagues incredibly fulfilling and would like to continue to strengthen my knowledge about inclusive teaching and learning so I might serve as a more informed resource to my colleagues.

I began the doctoral program in the fall of 2022 with a course that served as an introduction to diversity and the curriculum. With a focus on multicultural education, my cohort mates and I engaged in discussions about how cultural identity influences who we are as educators and students and the importance of recognizing diverse perspectives. In this first class, we dove into thinking about professional development as it relates to implicit bias and becoming more culturally-informed educators, which is essential for creating inclusive, equitable learning environments where all students feel valued and supported.

Supporting the program's mission, the final essay required us to write about becoming a diversity-conscious and equity-minded educator. My paper, "When Inclusion is *THE* Goal," suggested that understanding diversity and equity from a theoretical perspective can move the needle toward full inclusion, which, for me as an educator, is *the* goal that I work toward in the classroom. Equity pedagogy "exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from racial, cultural, gender, and social-class groups" (Banks, 2020, p. 18). Developing equity-mindedness is a moral imperative supported by the research that "demonstrates that teachers' sense of responsibility and efficacy, that is, their sense of their own responsibility for and effectiveness at promoting student learning, profoundly impacts student achievement" (Dover, 2009, p. 512). In other words, the research is clear: Becoming diversity-conscious and equity-minded is not an accident; rather, it results from purpose and intention.

The first course helped me to articulate three specific pedagogical strategies. First, teachers, including me, need to practice intentional course design by valuing and building upon students' identities. Careful attention to design includes the kinds of structured protocols for including all students in classroom discussions (Hammond, 2020). Second, in the design of our courses, we should be mindful of creating assessment and grading practices that are as bias-resistant as possible to mitigate against discrimination or implicit bias (Taylor & Nolen, 2020). Third, we need to model high expectations for all students and support them to achieve the course outcomes (Dover, 2009; Muñiz, 2020).

The introductory course primed me for other diversity-focused courses that followed. I was excited to return to works that were influential early in my career, specifically *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2018) and *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994). In addition to revisiting these critical texts, I explored culturally relevant teaching by reading *The Dream-Keepers* (Ladson-Billings, 2022), as well as foundational texts in critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997) and teaching for social justice (Picower, 2011). I was challenged to consider the concept of gatekeeping in educational contexts, which I continue to mull. In addition, a class on gender and the curriculum profoundly reshaped my thinking because all of the readings introduced new perspectives.

In addition to the courses that focused on aspects of diversity, I benefited from classes that examined curriculum construction. As a college professor, I thankfully do not have to write and submit detailed lesson plans for review and approval, but I do teach from a structure meant to scaffold learning. Of course, with rapidly changing

technology that impacts education, having the opportunity to consider the connections between technology and accessibility by using e-learning theory to examine the implications and applications for information literacy instruction had practical value for my composition classes that require research papers.

In addition to the courses that allowed me to explore issues related to diversity and the curriculum, much of my transformation toward becoming a professor-activist is grounded in methodology courses. Specifically, action research courses introduced me to the collaborative and transformative potential of an equity and social justice-informed action research dissertation. In the first action research course, taken in the second part of my first semester, my cohort mates became *critical friends*, a concept that I have embraced ever since. Within an action research framework, Herr and Anderson (2015) described critical friends as being independent sounding boards who are "willing to debrief with the researcher, collaboratively make meaning, as well as pose questions" (p. 98). My cohort currently consists of about 20 students, and no matter which class I am taking, I can count on robust discussions and questions that push my thinking.

The first action research course also introduced me to the concept of *positionality*, which has become another central concept in my intellectual and professional journey toward becoming a professor-activist. Positionality requires rigorous self-reflection as it means interrogating the question, "Who am I in relation to my participants and my setting?" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 37). I have learned that posing and answering that question is not neutral, nor is there a single, static way to define one's positionality. Rather, "each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances within our research sites" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 55). I cannot think about positionality without thinking about questions of hierarchy and power, and those questions continue to guide me as I work to advocate for my students and faculty colleagues.

BECOMING: FRAMING FACULTY BURNOUT AS AN EQUITY ISSUE

In the first action research course, I started drafting a prospectus. I can still hear the reverberations of the gasp I let out when I first read the syllabus. Multiple problems of practice swirled around in my head, and I ultimately decided on the topic of faculty burnout and demoralization after applying the "wondering litmus test" by asking myself, "Is your wondering something you are passionate about exploring?" (Dana, 2013, p. 17). While I could answer affirmatively, I initially struggled to connect faculty burnout to an equity-focused curriculum studies project.

After a short panic that I chose the wrong program, I began to understand faculty burnout as an equity issue. By chance, a librarian colleague who is also concerned about burnout noted that two books we were reading at the same time, *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom* (Hogan & Sathy, 2022) as part of a college-wide inclusive teaching reading group and *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal* (Pope-Ruark, 2022) as part of faculty interest group were in near opposition to each other. To promote equity in the classroom, the first text encourages faculty to be more involved and engaged in creating high-structure and flexible learning activities and to be more available for students, while the other text encourages faculty to

consider boundaries that protect time. These two perspectives gave rise to an important question: How do faculty committed to doing the important and intensive work of building inclusive learning structures manage the potentially increased workload if they already feel like they are burning out or becoming demoralized? Even though I understood faculty burnout to be a larger systemic problem, this conversation with my colleague and later conversations with my dissertation advisor helped me to put the pieces together, clarifying that I care about faculty burnout because I care about both students and faculty.

Community college faculty who are burned out or are burning out will not be able to or willing to access the reserves needed to continue to advocate for greater equity. In that way, faculty burnout is a social justice issue. We need to maintain our reserves if only to hold on to hope that things will be better. Freire (2021) stated that “when it comes to a program, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world” (p. 2). As teaching faculty in English, I am reminded that English professors, in particular, should “deliberately frame our professional identity, in part, as activists—accepting and embracing the revolutionary and inescapably political nature of our work” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 327). The work of teaching is inherently political because it shapes social values. Faculty make decisions about curriculum, classroom dynamics, and assessment, all of which influence whose voices, perspectives, and experiences are centered or marginalized. If faculty are burning out, then how can we teach and act in deliberate ways to prepare our students not just for careers or the workforce but for participation in civic life?

Through my lived experiences on a daily basis, I can affirm that community college faculty work within complex systems that shape their professional behavior, including governance and labor-management systems (Kisker et al., 2023), and that workload is one of several significant factors linked to faculty burnout (Griffith & Altinay, 2020). At my unionized institution, a full-time faculty member’s workload is outlined according to the contractual categories of teaching, service, and professional development. A full-time faculty member’s standard teaching load is 15 credits per semester with 4 required student office hours per week during the semester. While adjunct faculty, who comprise roughly two-thirds of all faculty on my campus, are not required to do anything other than teach their classes, they still must deal with the compounding challenges facing our students.

The rationale for addressing faculty burnout and framing it as an equity and social justice issue grows from my experiences as a faculty member working on the front lines to advance and support the college’s mission, including the evolving mission that centers equity as a core value. As our student populations become increasingly diverse, community colleges “continue to serve as a critical access point for historically underserved, underrepresented, and marginalized groups” (Gonzales & Ayers, 2018, p. 458), and community college faculty are students’ “most critical connection to college” (p. 459). If faculty hope to be able to respond to the needs of a diverse student population by fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment, protecting and supporting their well-being is critical.

Faculty most committed to working with students increasingly take on additional emotional labor to support students navigating any number of systemic barriers in the higher education system. Our capacity to advocate for our students is greatly diminished when

faculty members are burned out. Unfortunately, research also shows that burnout disproportionately impacts women and faculty of color (Hellon, 2023). From my perspective, community colleges such as my own, need to recognize that diversity efforts require additional support, such as time and space for focused work on equity issues.

My intellectual journey as a doctoral student has been nothing short of transformational. Along with critically reflecting on my positionality, I have come to a new understanding of my role as a faculty member and my responsibilities toward my campus community. Throughout my coursework, I have been deeply influenced by theories of critical pedagogy, specifically the works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks and culturally responsive teaching, which emphasize the importance of challenging systemic inequities and fostering inclusive practices. Becoming a professor–activist means challenging the status quo and working collaboratively with colleagues to identify and address faculty burnout and demoralization issues. It also means advocating for policies and practices that promote faculty well-being. This shift in perspective has profoundly influenced my approach to my dissertation research, and I see with clarity the value of adopting an action-oriented methodology that aligns with my values and commitment to social justice.

In this last year of my doctoral journey, I am working to analyze and present the data that I have collected as I continue to draft my dissertation. While this process is messy, I am truly energized by the iterative and collaborative nature of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). At this stage, I am hopeful that the recommendations will illuminate a path toward improving campus culture in ways that support and sustain faculty well-being.

Tackling the problem of faculty burnout presents many challenges because it is a complex workplace problem experienced at the individual level; however, a systems approach may provide valuable insights for addressing faculty burnout because it brings together individuals and groups to uncover assumptions and values (Evans, 2001; Senge et al., 2012). By situating my sphere of influence as a senior tenured faculty member within a larger cultural context, I suggest that the stakeholders at my college need to work together and center discussions to address faculty burnout and morale.

It is safe to say that I have fewer years left in my career than I have put in. That said, I do not want to coast through my last years, however many there may be. As I am still a doctoral student, I cannot claim to be an EdD-activist (Currin et al., 2023), but I am an EdD-activist in training. As I have continued to transform into a community college professor–activist, I see a future in which I live out a commitment to social justice and equity. Throughout my career, I have leveraged my positionality to advocate for change, and as I go forward, I want to continue taking ethical and courageous actions. Again, I can think about Malcolm X and his response to opposition and significant criticism.

My sphere of influence at my college is grounded in my role as a tenured full professor who is also serving as the Special Topics Fellow in my institution’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship. The change that I hope to see requires open dialogue built on trust between faculty and administration to address the problem of faculty burnout. If faculty working conditions are students’ learning conditions, then supporting faculty should naturally extend to increased student support. With that said, I am fully cognizant of the perennial problems of increasing demands and decreasing



resources. However, moving the needle, even slightly, toward faculty well-being would result in positive change.

BEYOND: RECOGNIZING MY PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

For over 2 decades, I have had the privilege of being an active part of a vibrant academic community, and my vision for the future is to use my current positionality as a senior faculty member to continue to advocate for policies and resources that support my students as well as my junior and part-time faculty colleagues. I believe that my current focus on faculty burnout will help all faculty and ultimately lead to better support for our students. If we are to continue to innovate in a time of rapid change and if we are to continue to reframe our teaching so that it centers student success and closes achievement gaps, we need to build the structure that will support each other. I acknowledge the fast-changing higher education landscape where colleges and universities are being challenged on their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. To date, my college environment is not one I would say is characterized by “fear, compliance, and pressure to conform” (Picower, 2011, p. 1112). However, my institution will likely engage in discussions in response to current political agendas that seek to dismantle programs that specifically support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, especially if funding is at risk. Though I cannot predict how these discussions will unfold, experience tells me they will contribute to the stress many faculty, particularly early-career and contingent faculty, are already experiencing.

In my personal experiences with faculty burnout, which encompasses emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), I struggle most with cynicism on an intellectual level because I know that I operate from a place of profound privilege. While the road to tenure and three promotions was not easy, I was surrounded by family, colleagues, and students who consistently supported me. So, while I sit in meetings and find myself feeling cynical, I remind myself that I am in a privileged position in a privileged career and that many others would trade places with me. At the same time, I acknowledge that my cynicism often comes from a place of genuine care for my institution. I believe in the community college's mission, and I slip into cynicism and frustration when I feel like we are not moving forward.

As a tenured full professor, I recognize that I have a security that affords me the freedom to speak out on important issues. Unlike many faculty colleagues who teach on a contingent basis, my position at the college means I am included in the decision-making process. While I do not have strong thoughts and opinions on every issue, I will share my thoughts or take the lead when I believe it will be helpful. Sometimes, I am conflicted and struggle to know what is fair, even when using an equity framework. For example, I am acutely aware that many of my part-time colleagues work in a constant state of precarity, which can lead to a sense of vulnerability and marginalization within the academic community. Many full-time and part-time faculty have advocated for greater inclusion of part-time faculty on campus at my institution. On one hand, I think it is important that part-time faculty feel supported and that their contributions to the college are recognized, but on the other hand, it seems disingenuous to invite them to do more work without compensation. Also, recognizing that the higher education landscape is increasingly one of budget cuts, I want to continue to advocate for

more full-time faculty. Fortunately, my institution has offered part-time faculty compensation opportunities that are not available at other community colleges. Still, the difference between full-time faculty and part-time faculty salaries is significant. Going forward, using my voice to advocate for policies that support part-time faculty while ensuring a strong presence of full-time faculty will be important.

Becoming a community college professor-activist is a journey with no particular end point because, at its core, being any kind of activist means embracing a commitment to continuous improvement and reflection. I am not the same person I was when I started the EdD program 2 years ago, and I am certain that I will not be the same person when I complete the program. Completing my dissertation will mark a beginning just as much as it will mark an end. The needs and challenges of my college community will continue to evolve over time, and I will evolve with it, carrying forward the principles of equity-mindedness. I feel confident in saying that however I might continue to change, as long as I am a community college professor, I will be a community college professor-activist.

As an advocate for positive change, I must continually reflect on my own practices and beliefs. The EdD program has provided me with a group of critical friends and supportive professors who have given me feedback on my writing and thinking. Going forward, I plan to continually seek feedback from colleagues while I stay informed about current research and best practices. Thankfully, as much as I might on occasion fall into the trap of cynicism, I do remain open to new ideas and approaches. By engaging in reflective practice, I can ensure that my advocacy efforts remain relevant and effective.

Even as I find myself in the second half of my career, I recognize that to advocate effectively, I must stay informed on the issues facing my institution while considering the larger context of the higher education landscape. This dynamic is another reason I feel so strongly about fighting against faculty burnout. We cannot stay informed and engaged if we are wiped out. Most importantly, this is not an individual problem to solve.

If I have learned anything on my journey of becoming a community college professor-activist, it is the importance of building alliances and partnerships with those around us. Positive change will most likely occur when people collaborate and listen to each other. Once again, I am fortunate to work at an institution with a stated commitment to equity and inclusion, and there are many opportunities to get involved. By working together, we can amplify our voices and increase our collective impact. I am also fortunate to be part of doctoral cohort with educators who bring diverse experiences and perspectives.

The EdD program in Curriculum Studies, with its emphasis on cultivating EdD-activists, is preparing me to use my experience, knowledge, and position to positively impact my college community. I look forward to the day when I can count myself among the ranks of an EdD-activists. For now, I am settled into the idea that I am still in training.

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