Launching an Ed.D. in Community College Leadership with Activism in Mind

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Abstract

**Purpose.** The purpose of this article is to share an example of how an activism framework was used to design and launch a new doctoral program in community college leadership.

**Program design and launch.** Capper et al.’s (2006) framework for preparing leaders for social justice along with CPED’s guiding principles and the American Association of Community College’s (2018) competencies for community college leaders guided program design and implementation. Marketing and recruiting efforts aimed at identifying a talented, diverse cohort and on-boarding strategies focused on creating a safe learning environment and a sense of urgency related to social justice and equity are shared. Examples of how activism is being emphasized through coursework and plans to nurture activism through experiential learning and the dissertation are also discussed.

**Implications for practice.** Doctoral programs seeking to promote activism will discover an effective framework and practical examples for this work.

Keywords: Activism, community college leadership, social justice, equity, program design

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Access, equity, and opportunity are central to the mission of community colleges. These same values were drivers in the development of the doctoral program in Community College Leadership that was launched by Author’s University in 2019. Developing community college leaders who are prepared to engage in activism to promote social justice and equity requires intentional program design and implementation. In 2015, Author’s University began the design and development of a doctorate in Community College Leadership. The program reflects the University’s commitment to empower diverse, underserved and underrepresented individuals to become change agents, close achievement gaps, and respond to ever-changing, global, 21st Century opportunities and challenges. In a short period of time during the 2019 spring semester, faculty modified the program goals and design to align with the principles shared by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), emphasizing the social justice and scholarly practitioner framework. As Peterson (2017) notes, a tight timeline creates a sense of urgency that often leads to desired program changes. The goals of the Ed.D. in Community College Leadership program are to develop community college leaders who:

* Use an evidence-based approach to decision making and leadership, with a focus on the goal of increased rates of student completion and success
* Promote culturally responsive pedagogical and supportive practices that are grounded in theory and research.
* Engage in partnerships to champion the mission of the community college and lead various reform efforts aimed at reducing equity gaps.
* Effectively engage in strategic planning and assessment and clearly communicate vision and data to various stakeholders.

 These goals served as the guidepost in the recruitment, design and implementation stages of the program. Strategic, intentional actions to attract a diverse cohort of doctoral students committed to social justice were employed. The program goals were also used to drive the design and implementation of the program, including determining on-boarding processes, designing the summer institute, planning and implementing a Community College Showcase conference, developing curriculum, determining experiential learning opportunities, and defining the dissertation. All elements of the program were designed with the intention to develop scholarly practitioners who have an activist agenda. Activism within the community college sector is particularly important given the diverse population served.

**Marketing and Recruitment**

From the outset, as described in the original doctoral proposal, the program was designed to serve doctoral students from diverse career backgrounds, including full-time and adjunct faculty, mid-level managers, and other education professionals aspiring for community college leadership opportunities. The program was also focused on recruiting and supporting doctoral candidates from underrepresented groups who had an activist orientation and an expressed commitment to addressing social justice and equity issues within the community college sector. As articulated by Allen et. al. (2018) there is a high demand for transformational leaders and our program hoped to contribute to identifying and developing these activist-oriented individuals.

To find this target audience, a communication marketing plan was developed. This plan included a variety of outreach activities including email, traditional mail, webinar information sessions, limited social media use, and community college campus information sessions. Faculty also leveraged professional networks to identify diverse community college experts and leaders to serve on an advisory board. To increase the likelihood of attracting diverse doctoral students, special efforts were made to conduct information sessions at community colleges in urban settings as these colleges had a more diverse faculty and staff. The advisory board played a critical role in this process as members assisted with setting up information sessions and helped spread the word about the new program.

Emphasizing the scholarly practitioner model and the importance of developing leaders at all levels was a particularly important message during the recruitment phase. During online and in-person information sessions, faculty highlighted how this program was designed to develop leaders who would act as change agents and move the needle on student success outcomes and close equity gaps. Because many faculty and staff may not necessarily think of themselves as leaders or activists, examples of activism in many different leadership roles and positions were shared. In addition, prospective candidates were informed of opportunities to develop activist skills through coursework and experiential learning opportunities and the commitment of the faculty to support students throughout all aspects of the program. Department faculty engaged and followed-up with interested prospects via phone calls, text messages, emails, video conferencing, and face-to-face meetings. During these follow-up conversations, faculty emphasized how earning this degree and developing essential leadership skills would position students to positively impact student success in significant ways.

Recruitment efforts were successful. The first cohort consisted of 23 diverse and talented doctoral students. It is important to note that the size of the cohort exceeded expectations outlined in a demand study. The cohort size was almost three times the initial enrollment projections. Table 1 shows the program’s success in recruiting a diverse cohort. Diversity in aspiring leaders is an important component of a program focused on activism and social justice.

Table 1: Cohort 1 Demographic Profile

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| Female | 17 | 74% |
| Male | 6 | 26% |
|  |  |  |
| **Professional Role** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| Faculty/ Adjunct | 13 | 57% |
| Administration/ Staff | 8 | 35% |
| K-12 | 2 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| **Ethnicity/ Race** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| Asian | 1 | 4% |
| Black | 11 | 48% |
| Hispanic | 3 | 13% |
| White | 8 | 35% |

**Program Design and Implementation**

Capper et al.’s (2006) framework for preparing leaders for social justice, the American Association of Community College’s [AACC] (2018) competencies for community college leaders, and the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED]’s (n.d.) guiding principles and design concepts served as a guide for program design and implementation. Capper et al.’s (2006) framework describe the qualities, knowledge, and abilities needed by educational leaders in order to effect change and the strategies that leadership programs can employ to prepare students to be change agents. Although this framework was initially designed for K-12 leaders, it can easily be adapted for higher education. George (2017) provides an example of how this framework can be used for the purpose of program evaluation in a higher education doctoral program.

The framework has six key components across two dimensions (Capper et al., 2006). The horizontal dimension focuses on the knowledge, beliefs, and actions of school leaders and includes critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills. Critical consciousness refers to educator leaders developing an awareness and understanding of the role that power and privilege play in education and society and being empowered to be a change agent to address inequities. Knowledge and skills refer to possessing the necessary background information and abilities to be an effective leader. Capper et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of creating an emotionally safe place for students to explore issues of social justice and equity. As this program focuses on developing community college leaders, the leadership competencies developed by the AACC (2018) served as the benchmarks for knowledge and skill development.

The vertical dimension of Capper et al.’s (2006) framework focuses on what leader preparation programs need to do to help students develop critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills. Curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are the components of the vertical dimension. CPED’s guiding principles and design concepts served as a guide during program development and implementation (The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, n.d.). For example, assisting students with developing questions aimed at discovering practitioner solutions related to equity, ethics, and social justice issues became an overarching focus for the program. Starting with pre-admission processes, prospective students heard empowering messages about how their actions as a leader would make a difference in the lives of community college students. The signature pedagogies and scholarly practitioner design-concepts played an especially important role in designing and implementing a doctoral program that strongly emphasizes activism.

**Developing a Safe Atmosphere to Explore Social Justice Issues**

A key feature of the framework for preparing educational leaders for social justice is developing an atmosphere where students feel safe to explore complex and uncomfortable topics related to equity and social justice. Capper et al. (2006) note “for prospective leaders to fully engage with the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, professors must intentionally create a classroom and program environment and conditions, where students experience a sense of emotional safety that will help them take risks toward social justice, ends” (p.212). This was and continues to be particularly important because of the diversity of the student population. Recognizing that students may come from backgrounds where their voices may not have been heard and safety was not a given, several actions were taken to develop a sense of safety and community.

***Admission process***

Applicants participated in either an in-person or video conference interview with a committee comprised of three Educational Leadership faculty who reflected the diversity of the interviewees. From a traditional perspective, the development of an interview protocol that supports the selection of students who can articulate their preparation and motivation for doctoral study is a critical element in the admissions process. However, broadening the interview to include a discussion on current issues facing community colleges and asking candidates for suggestions on innovative approaches in meeting the challenge reinforced the activist expectation of the program. Research has found that students who arrive with a commitment to and prior experiences with activism are more likely to engage in activism in the future (Dodd & Mizrahi, 2017). This opportunity also served as a safe space for conversations about equity and social justice. The committee members validated applicant experiences and ideas and provided encouragement and support related to their goals and actions. On a survey question that asked “How satisfied were you with the Ed.D. in Community College interview process?”, 19 of the 20 respondents indicated extremely satisfied and one indicated somewhat satisfied.

***On-boarding process***

Students admitted to the program received an acceptance letter that communicated the faculty’s belief in their ability to be a change agent. For example, the following was included in the letter: “We are confident that you will add significant value to the learning experience for the entire cohort and have no doubt that you will engage in leadership activities aimed at increasing student success outcomes for community college students.” Messages of belief and encouragement continued to be shared with students throughout the program.

Students were invited to an in-person welcome reception and an online orientation program. Both activities were designed to begin the doctoral student socialization process and develop a community of learning where students felt safe to take risks and engage in courageous conversations about equity and social justice. During these events, faculty introduced students highlighting their strengths and diverse backgrounds. Students also had opportunities to share preliminary research interests as well as to describe their professional goals and career aspiration. The efficacy of these programs was affirmed by student survey responses (see Table 2).

Table 2: On-Boarding Survey Responses

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| How useful was the program? | In-Person Welcome Reception (n = 18) | Online Orientation (n = 20) |
| Extremely useful | 78% | 70% |
| Very useful | 17% | 25% |
| Moderately useful | 6% | 5% |
| Slightly useful | 0% | 0% |
| Not at all useful | 0% | 0% |

***Summer institute***

This doctoral program is entirely online except for a 4-day institute each summer. One of the primary goals of the first summer institute was to build a sense of community and create a warm, supportive learning environment where students would be willing to get uncomfortable and take risks. Toward this end, doctoral students participated in several activities intentionally designed to help students get to know one another and begin conversations about problems of practice, especially problems related to equity and social justice. In addition to traditional icebreakers, students also had numerous opportunities to discuss issues facing community college students, identify the root causes of problems through fishbone diagram activities, and brainstorm possible solutions. Fishbone diagrams are visual tools that groups can use to determine potential causes of behavior. Research has shown that this tool can be helpful in identifying solutions aimed to improve school quality (Salemeto, 2016).

Students were also asked to do a Pecha Kucha presentation on a problem of practice and discuss the potential social justice impact. Pecha Kucha’s are fast-paced, fun, structured presentations where the presenter’s 20 slides auto-advance every 20 seconds. Slides should only consist of an image and perhaps a few words. Research has shown that the Pecha Kucha presentation is connected to improved academic performance and confidence as compared to traditional presentations (Oliver & Kowalczyk, 2013). Faculty modeled this practice on the first day of the institute and students presented on the final day of the institute.

Another key element of the summer institute was to ensure that students felt supported as they embarked on this educational journey. In addition to faculty support, students also learned about how other professionals such as tutors and librarians could support their learning. At the conclusion of the summer institute, students completed a survey about their experience. Results indicated that 100% of Cohort 1 students strongly agreed with the following statement: “The faculty members established a welcoming and inclusive learning environment.”

**Developing Critical Consciousness, Knowledge, and Skills through Signature Pedagogies**

To develop critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills, faculty relied on four key learning activities: the Community College Showcase, coursework, experiential learning, and the dissertation in practice. The Community College Showcase is a conference that is held during summer institutes. The coursework provides students with deep knowledge of community college leadership theories and scholarly practices. A year-long experiential learning component of the program enables students to learn leadership skills while providing a service to a community college. Finally, following CPED’s guiding principles, the dissertation in practice is focused on providing solutions to problems of practice related to social justice and equity.

***The Community College Showcase: Promoting Equity and Student Success***

To model and promote activism, faculty coordinators planned and implemented a conference entitled Community College Showcase: Promoting Equity and Student Success. This conference was purposefully called a showcase as the intent was for community college practitioners and leaders to share actions taken to reduce equity gaps and improve student success outcomes. Presenters were encouraged to share data illustrating the impact of these actions. The Community College Showcase was a signature pedagogical learning experience that was held on the second day of the summer institute. It was a free conference for professionals committed to the community college mission of access and success.

The level of activism taking place daily on community college campuses was immediately apparent. Over 70 high-quality proposals were received, an remarkable number for a first conference. The final program consisted of an impressive array of 23 breakout sessions and seven lunch discussions. The two plenary presentations were designed to inspire practitioners and leaders to take action. In the morning plenary, Michael Collins, vice president at Jobs for the Future, encouraged all participants to lead, regardless of their position. In the closing plenary, Paula Pando, president of Reynolds Community College emphasized the need for action to promote equity. See Table 3 for a sample of conference topics.

Table 3: Community College Showcase Sample Sessions

|  |
| --- |
| Keynote Presentations |
| Next Generation Equity: Leading from Where You Are |
| Taking Action to Promote Equity |
| Featured and Breakout Sessions |
| (Un)Stable Identities: Diversity and Inclusion in the Community College Classroom |
| A Conversation with Community College Leaders |
| LGBTQI+ Programming in Urban Higher Education: Identifying & Confronting Community Tensions |
| Surveying Inclusion & Equity Climate: BMCC’s Use of Charrettes – Findings from Year One |
| The Impact of Financial Aid on Student Success & Promoting Equity in the College Experience |
| The Road to Equity in Education is Paved with Collaboration and Connection |
| Strategies for Implementing Inclusion and Equity in the Community College Classroom |
| First-Generation Community College Students: Casting a Social Safety Net to Ensure Success |
| Open the Gate: Accelerated Learning for Underserved Nontraditional Learners |
| Underrepresented STEM Majors |

 The Community College Showcase provided doctoral students with an overview of the challenges facing community college students today, especially students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, and provided numerous models of how leaders are engaging in activism to reduce equity gaps and improve success outcomes. Doctoral students served as session moderators and had a special lunch session with the plenary speakers. After the conference, students were responsible for following up with participants to thank them for their participation and contributions. Students also completed a reflective writing assignment that required them to consider how they plan to take action to promote equity and success.

The Community College Showcase also served professionals within the community college sector. Community college practitioners and leaders often have very limited funds for professional development and there are few conferences focused exclusively on how to better serve community college students. This free conference enabled over 200 hundred faculty, staff, and administrators from numerous states to learn from and collaborate with national and local leaders.

Results from the conference survey indicated that the conference participants found the conference valuable. Based on survey responses from 80 participants, 70% were extremely satisfied and 26% were somewhat satisfied. Ninety-eight percent indicated that they would recommend the conference to a colleague. Open-ended comments revealed that participants left inspired to act. The following are examples of how this conference promoted activism:

* It was a great conference. It has kickstarted some radical thinking on our campus.
* This was a great opportunity to hear about the status of equity in the community college setting. The workshops provided some good inspiration for ideas and programs to bring back to our home institutions.
* There were a number of diverse sessions that appealed to all community college stakeholders (from academic affairs, faculty, and student affairs). I always enjoy it when I am able to meet colleagues from other schools to share ideas and learn from one another. It is always great to hear about the successes and the failures that have occurred which serve as a catalyst to interesting conversations. Furthermore, it allows us as professionals to reboot ourselves or get refreshed and get excited (again) on why we do what we do.
* The conference allowed me to self-reflect on the work that we are doing in my own college and see how we can better our efforts. It was definitely a call to arms to continue along the path we have decided to approach and continue to advocate for our students and community. I was inspired.

Cohort 1 doctoral students also left inspired. The following are sample comments from a

survey conducted at the end of the summer institute:

* So far, I am engaged and inspired to reach heights that I have never thought of before.
* The CC Showcase was an excellent learning experience that has energized me and transformed my thinking and overall goals.
* The CC Showcase was a wonderful experience that opened my eyes to the executive level of community college leadership that I had not even known existed. It was informative and allowed for networking with high-level leaders. I would have normally never had an opportunity like this.

***Coursework***

Identifying courses that promoted activism was an important part of the program design and development. The CPED (n.d.) guiding principles and design concepts served as a useful guide during this process. See Table 4 for a list of courses in the Ed.D. in Community College Leadership.

Table 4. Ed.D. in Community College Leadership Program Course Requirements

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Core Courses** | **Experiential Learning** | **Research and Dissertation** |
| Community Colleges: Past, Present, and Future | Community College Leadership Institute | The Scholarly Practitioner |
| Leadership Theory and Change Management | Mentoring I | Educational Research I |
| Promoting Equity: Teaching and Supporting Diverse Adult Learners | Experiential Learning I | Educational Research II |
| Innovative Teaching Practices and Modalities | Experiential Learning II | Dissertation in Practice I |
| Strategic Human Resource Management | Mentoring II | Dissertation in Practice II |
| Curricular and Instructional Leadership |  | Dissertation in Practice III |
| Strategic Planning, Assessment, and Innovation |  |  |
| Student Services Leadership |  |  |
| Community College Finance |  |  |
| Critical Role of Partnerships in Community College Leadership |  |  |
| Legal Issues, Policies, and Ethical Practices in the Community College |  |  |

Dodd and Mizrahi (2017) note that activism can be reinforced through class activities. Several assignments and learning tasks were carefully designed to foster critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills. Exposing practitioners to broader policy issues can increase empathy which can, in turn, lead to increased activism (Bicower, 2012). Toward this end, faculty invited national leaders and community college experts to communicate the sense of urgency for action and the challenges facing community colleges today through numerous synchronous meetings with doctoral students. In addition, faculty provided thought-provoking readings on community college topics that were discussed in small and large group online forums.

In the first course entitled Community Colleges: Past, Present, and Future, students were asked to write a paper from the historical lens of an underserved population. Bicower (2012) argues that it is important for students to “develop a political analysis of oppression” in order to become an activist (p.573). This assignment provided students with the opportunity to explore how well community colleges have been fulfilling their access and success mission from the perspective of people of color, females, students with disabilities and other underrepresented groups. After students completed this assignment, they then participated in an online discussion where they read the papers submitted by classmates and discussed the history of community colleges through these varied perspectives.

Another example of activism in coursework is in the Leadership Theory and Change Management course. Students worked collaboratively with their peers to respond to case studies that highlighted the challenges encountered by students of color. In the Scholarly Practitioner class, students conducted four empathy interviews with students and professionals in the field to better understand problems of practices from various perspectives. Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) emphasize the importance of gaining the perspective of those experiencing problems or challenges. These assignment examples, along with regular reflection activities, illustrate how this program is helping students develop critical consciousness as described by Capper et al. (2006).

 To help students develop essential knowledge and skills to be an effective community college leader, several pedagogical practices have been used. For example, during the first summer course, all students were required to review the historical perspectives paper with a professional tutor prior to submitting the assignment. At the community college level, there is a national push to require students to participate in highly effective practices such as advising and tutoring because the students who need the services the most are often the ones who are least likely to use the services. Embedded tutoring has been shown to increase student success rates at the undergraduate level (The Community College League of California, 2017).

Because writing challenges have been cited by many colleagues at CPED convenings, one required tutoring session was incorporated into the first course. This provided a way to support all students, especially those who most needed the support without sending messages that could be interpreted as a lack of belief in their ability. Instead, it was framed as a supportive intervention for all. Reflection responses to this experience illustrated the value of this activity. Many students commented on the value of this activity. When students see the value in a resource, they are more likely to use it. Faculty also supported students through robust, comprehensive feedback on assignments. Students are given opportunities to revise and resubmit their work. This practice emphasizes that learning is a process that takes time and continued effort.

***Experiential learning***

A year-long experiential learning component will take place in the second year of the program. This is another signature pedagogical learning experience. A service-learning approach will be used. Service-learning is defined as learning tasks, projects or placements that enable students to engage in tasks aligned to the learning outcomes of the course or program while benefitting the community. In other words, students provide a service to a community organization as part of their overall learning experience and learn relevant skills while doing so. Research has shown a connection between student participation in service-learning and civic engagement, suggesting that service-learning is an excellent way to increase activism (Prentice, 2007).

Community college partners will identify areas where assistance is needed and students will be matched to colleges based on their interests and career goals. This year, a pilot is underway where two students are providing consulting services to a local community college that is launching a new Teaching and Learning Center. The doctoral students meet with the director of this newly established center to provide guidance and support. The doctoral students have an external mentor who is providing 10 hours of individualized support. During this experience, it is expected that students will develop change management skills that will positively impact student success and reduce equity gaps. This service also provides a benefit to community college partners who often do not have funding to bring in outside consultants. Having an external perspective often adds significant value to conversations focused on student success and equity.

***Dissertation in practice***

Following the CPED framework, students in this doctoral program will focus on implementing and assessing solutions related to identified problems of practice. Being a part of the CPED consortium from the design stage has been advantageous. Well-established programs can find it difficult to shift long-established expectations related to the dissertation. For example, Peterson (2017) noted that it can be challenging to incorporate practitioner-focused methods such as improvement science into traditional research sequences. As a new program, faculty were able to shift from traditional quantitative and qualitative courses to Educational Research I and Educational Research II. In these courses, students will use program evaluation, action research, and improvement science as the overarching framework. Quantitative and qualitative methods that support these frameworks will then be used. This practice-oriented approach will likely lead to higher levels of activism.

Engaging in research that is grounded in the scholarly practitioner framework enables doctoral students to use research as a form of activism. Data on which practices are most effective at reducing equity gaps and improving student success is an important part of championing change. Community college leaders who are equipped to evaluate existing research and contribute to the field are positioned well to lead and engage in activism.

Although the formal dissertation course sequence does not begin until the spring semester of the second year, students began the dissertation journey at the start of the program. At the first summer institute, students explored the root causes of problems of practice through fishbone diagrams and further explored their problem of practice through empathy interviews and a literature review in the Scholarly Practitioner course. At the end of this course, students are required to submit a dissertation action plan. An essential part of this plan is for students to identify opportunities for activism related to their problem of practice. Opportunities for activism was defined as strategies or interventions that could be implemented to address their identified problem of practice. Students are asked the following questions to guide their research contribution to the field:

* What problem or issue do practitioners in the field need assistance with addressing?
* What are the root causes of this problem?
* What are the opportunities for activism related to this problem?
* What solution-focused interventions are within your sphere of influence?
* What is the potential impact of these interventions in terms of social justice and equity?

Students are encouraged to pursue scholarly research that will improve student success and address equity gaps. Students are also inspired to embrace public scholarship. Kezar et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of scholarly practitioners sharing their findings in accessible formats and platforms for a wide audience in order to have the greatest impact on student success. Throughout the program, students will have numerous opportunities to develop public scholarship documents such as blogs, policy briefs, and infographics. Engaging in public scholarship can also be considered a form of activism. This solution-focused approach to the dissertation combined with the public scholarship emphasis supports the activism mission of the program.

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