

A Scholarship of Our Own

Tod Treat

To cite this article: Tod Treat (2017) A Scholarship of Our Own, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 41:4-5, 323-325, DOI: [10.1080/10668926.2016.1251361](https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1251361)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1251361>



Published online: 12 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

EXCHANGE

A Scholarship of Our Own

Tod Treat^{a,b}

^aAcademic and Student Affairs, Tacoma Community College, Tacoma, Washington, USA; ^bCollege of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA

ABSTRACT

The Presidential Panel at the 2016 Council for the Study of Community Colleges annual meeting was comprised of a community college president, a CAO, and a policy leader. As a panel, we were asked to have a “courageous conversation about critical issues facing today’s community colleges and how scholars can help advance new knowledge to inform practice and policy” (F. Laanan, personal communication, March 2, 2016). This exchange article provides one perspective from the panel, making the case that scholar-practitioners are needed across settings to advance the community college mission.

The Presidential Panel at the 2016 Council for the Study of Community Colleges annual meeting comprised a community college president (David Hellmich), a Chief Academic Officer (CAO) (Tod Treat), and a policy leader (Chris Mullin). As a panel, we were asked to have a “courageous conversation about critical issues facing today’s community colleges and how scholars can help advance new knowledge to inform practice and policy” (F. Laanan, personal communication, March 2, 2016). The theme of the conference in 2016 was Reimagining, Reconceptualizing, and Redefining Research and Scholarship. One critical issue is the relative disparity of scholarship *on* community colleges by outside researchers and a growing need for scholarship from within community colleges.

One presenter noted in introduction, “I am not really a researcher, I’m masquerading... I was a community college administrator....” As she recounted the complexities of workload as an administrator and trying to publish, she noted that what we need is a *scholarship of us*. The insightful comment affirms the identity conundrum scholars working in the community college often face. Career paths that flow through employment in community colleges, graduate work, research faculty, and policy positions blur lines between scholarship and practice.

The identity conundrum creates meaningful perception challenges for scholar-practitioners in the community college. Practitioners moving into scholarship may be viewed by career researchers as less rigorous and with equal skepticism by their practitioner colleagues who may question their motives. These same concerns arise when researchers’ focus is on individual or institutional transformation rather than more generalizable research interests, methods, and populations.

My proposition is that viewing the scholar-practitioner path with a capacity lens rather than a deficient perspective creates a more inclusive scholarship. Researchers who treat the community college as a subject cannot fully comprehend the dynamic that goes on inside of a college, even if there is strict adherence to recognized educational research methods and protocols. Quantitative methods can do much to help us create models addressing student flow, psychological factors, and factors that correlate to student success. Survey research can give us a picture of attitudes, priorities,

composites, and outliers of statistical significance. Focus groups and interviews can open a window into lived experience; but in all, the environment remains outside of the interviewer by design.

Insight is limited at such distances because every element has been mediated by the subjects. In this respect, education research is akin to armchair anthropology in which researchers publish on cultures they have not themselves experienced. As the field of anthropology evolved, the notion of fieldwork from the ground up has supplanted an outdated view of how inquiry should occur to best describe the cultures of interest. In the anthropological sense, armchair academic inquiry can be as exploitative as the very educational elitism the community college has sought to overcome.

Scholar-practitioners, embedded in the work, can do much to complement the scholarship provided by others. They can provide *in situ* perspectives around student and faculty voice, continuous improvement, response to real time internal and external pressures, and policy guidance. These perspectives are too often lacking as legislators, state boards, researchers, and foundations spur on sector change without reasoned consideration of the impact.

Scholar-practitioners can also do much to utilize their scholarship to inform implementation of innovations. In my own state of Washington, informed policy decisions—such as Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (IBEST), acceleration and contextualization, applied baccalaureates, cocurricular cohort models, and other innovations—only work when implemented properly in policy and practice. Absent the practice perspective, great ideas implemented badly can lead to poor results. The concept of free community college, when viewed from inside the test tube, can take on a very frightening hue. There can be visions of ever-declining FT/PT (full-time/part-time) ratios and insufficient state supports that will lead to institutions as ineffective as some of the “free” technical schools, polytechnics, and community based institutions present in other nations. Such institutions may be free, but they do not advance a public good other than to keep people off the streets. They do not advance a private good either, as they fail to be sufficiently autonomous or resourced as to meet industry standards, workforce needs, or preparation for citizenship. Poor institutional resourcing and performance lead to poor educational quality and even poorer outcomes. A scholarship of practice informs policy-making.

I raise these issues, not to diminish the value of scholarship at research institutions, but to suggest that what we need are anthropologists, methodologists, and capacity minded scholar-practitioners who are as rigorous in their scholarship as those in research settings; but we ply our trade inside the very institutions we aim to serve. And in doing so, we save the vision of the Truman Commission and of the progressive movements that have followed in support of the United States community college.

Finally, scholar-practitioners advance the diversity we espouse as *the people’s college*. Our colleagues each have stories of their own. The academy, consisting of community college scholar-practitioners, must represent the plurality of students we serve and provide *in situ* scholarship that is rigorous, representative, and reflective of the true cultures and contexts in which we serve.

The real action is *in situ*. A career path through and to our community college institutions can be very fulfilling, and this is the path of the scholar-practitioner. With that, I’d like to end with a short list of research questions that I think are ripe for *in situ* inquiry:

- (1) What happens when the public stops funding the people’s college? What happens to the quality of faculty/staff? What is the impact on student success?
- (2) What happens to institutional culture when a college experiences leadership transitions? What is the impact on student success?
- (3) What happens to rural communities when its college languishes?
- (4) How do community colleges maintain autonomy and resist stimulus response in the face of foundations, states, and funding pressures?
- (5) How do initiatives around equity and inclusion vary by the environment in which a community college serves? What works in what contexts?

- (6) What are the real values and principles that constitute the human capital that serve in community colleges?

At Tacoma Community College, our strategic plan priorities have been to Create Learning, Achieve Equity, and Engage Community. In 2014, we added Embrace Discovery. Faculty are engaged, for example, in assessing the impact of innovations on learning. Open pedagogies that elevate student voice in the classroom; writing, reading, and research across the curriculum (WRRAC); interdisciplinary learning communities; focus cohorts; and other innovations all contribute to student success and are fertile opportunities to advance a scholarship of teaching and learning. Similarly, partnership development—with corrections education and nonprofits, or with local municipalities—in developing vouchers and wrap-around support for the homeless begins to address noncognitive factors that impact student persistence and create opportunities for systematic inquiry. Our dream is to produce outcomes and knowledge that will serve our students and our sister institutions, including mechanisms to incorporate faculty scholarship. In doing so, we advance the success of our students, create capacity in faculty and staff, and advance the field. Our hope is that the same will be true about applied research in all community colleges.

The CSCC community in many ways reflects on this vision in which the scholar-practitioners work collaboratively whether we reside in research institutions, community colleges, policy-making bodies, or nonprofit organizations. The thoughtful and committed work we do together can create a much richer tapestry that advances both research and practice. We need to own and use our scholarship, wherever and whenever we can. As one participant stated so well at the conference, “It’s not either or, it’s both, it’s *all*... .”