

Why I Champion Professional Learning, and Why You Should Too!

Dr. Grant Jolliff



In the 2018 Dallas Herring Lecture, Achieving the Dream President Dr. Karen Stout exhorted North Carolina community college leaders to “empower faculty to lead changes in pedagogy, rethink and align course and program student learning outcomes, build coherent and clear course and program sequences, and engage in advising in new ways.” Stout went on to say that “Teaching must be made more dynamic, relevant, culturally responsive, and engage and cultivate students’ ownership of what they learn.” Dr. Stout’s lecture catalyzed the North Carolina Piedmont Teacher and Learning Hubs, which provides all 58 community colleges with professional learning opportunities. Still true today as in 2018, Stout’s words inspire a focus on professional learning among North Carolina community colleges. I encourage all of us to reflect on the ways professional learning impacted our own journeys, and look for ways to strengthen this connection in the future.

My own journey as full-time faculty member at a community college began in the Fall of 2019, approximately a year after Stout’s address and when the North Carolina Teaching and Learning Hubs existed only in a nascent stage. After a standard Fall 2019 semester followed a virus, shutdowns, lockdowns, online learning, and the response to the murder of George Floyd. We lived through a sea change in the way we looked at the world, and our classes were a microcosm of these shifting perspectives. Our classrooms – mostly online or hybrid – felt like ground zero for new ways of reaching our students. Technologies once viewed as supplementary became foundational to our

work. We focused on kindness and compassion while also remaining true to academic standards and rigor. “Culture of care” no longer a buzzword, we all relied on each other – our students relied on us to practice care just as we relied on grace from others.

We all lived through this pandemic we’d love to forget but are too often reminded of, and I mention it now not to be trite. But, in forgetting about the struggles of Covid-19, we run the risk of forgetting what that sea change brought to us in its surf, how we adapted to meet the needs of students, and how these changes align with what Stout exhorted us to in 2018 and with what we must always seek – a “more dynamic, relevant, culturally responsive” and engaging teaching practice. Indeed, these techniques and their champions were located in different places along the horizon, but the pandemic brought with it a unique exigence.

For me, the sea change brought a new way of thinking about sharing pedagogy and practice through a community of professional learning. By listening to colleagues and taking advantage of the professional learning opportunities, my awareness of the connection between instructional design and student success grew. I saw the power of clear yet kind words in a syllabus – students didn’t want policy talk any more than an adult wants to read an auto policy. Student well-being wasn’t just something discussed in a counseling center or health center, because well-being was everyone’s concern. However, these weren’t my ideas, nor did they develop spontaneously in a classroom. The very best

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ideas that resurfaced in the sturm und drang of 2019-2022 years were ideas tested, validated, and disseminated in research long before pandemic. Timely, in-depth, research-based, and practice-oriented professional learning informed my practice most during the pandemic.

The professional learning opportunities continue, and I call on faculty to take full advantage. As faculty, our learning must continue. Educators, more than any other professionals, exemplify lifelong learning and continuous improvement in our subject matters and our pedagogy. More importantly, perhaps, our students and their needs are in constant flux. Our students need us to be examples of professionalism and our teaching practices to respond to their needs – personal, professional, and academic. I call on all community college faculty and their leadership to think about ways they can contribute to the community of professional learning in North Carolina. One way to contribute is to attend professional learning events offered by your college, or the North Carolina Student Success Center, or the North Carolina Teaching and Learning Hubs. Another way to contribute is to communicate about professional learning opportunities you'd like to see offered to your colleagues, your college's Center for Teaching and Learning staff, or North Carolina Teaching and Learning Hub representatives. Lastly, talk about the wonderful work you are doing in your classroom –

share with your fellow faculty, share with your campus leaders, or share with your North Carolina Teaching and Learning Hub representative. Your teaching innovation might be the seed for a presentation! The “homegrown” presentations – those by North Carolina faculty – are often the best received amongst faculty. I look forward to many great conversations with you and your colleagues about professional learning opportunities.

Reference

Stout, K. A. (2018). *The Urgent Case: Focusing the Next Generation of Community College Redesign on Teaching and Learning*. Raleigh; Belk Center, North Carolina State University. <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/128/2022/10/Dallas-Herring-Lecture-2018-M.pdf>

Author's Note

The author has no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Grant Jolliff, Davidson-Davie Community College, PO Box 1287, Lexington, NC 27293
Email: gjolliff8835@davidsondavie.edu