From the Guest Editors: Practice Briefs for Bridging Research and Practice in Community
Colleges

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Hatch-Tocaimaza, D. K., & Hu, X. (2019). From the guest editors: Practice briefs for bridging research and practice in community colleges. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 26(2), iii–v.

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The organizational re-invention of United States community colleges today is occurring at an accelerated pace, due to broad scale societal pressures and funded initiatives promoting the adoption of data-informed and high-impact practices, all at a time of public disinvestment in higher education, an evolving economic and workforce landscape, and demographic changes coupled with a broadening understanding of educational inequities. Arguably never has there been a greater need for empirical evidence that can inform the day to day challenges facing community college practitioners. Yet prevalent academic publishing models in educational research remain static, reinforcing the traditional chasm between research and practice.

This special issue of the *Journal of Applied Research in Community Colleges* (JARCC) represents what we contend is an important departure from prevalent models of community college scholarship. It makes a case for and showcases the *practice brief*—a succinct peer-reviewed article that provides empirically based, theoretically grounded, yet concrete recommendations to practitioners in plain language—as a unique genre of academic writing sorely needed in the higher education field today. The response to our call for proposals far exceeded our expectations. In numerical terms, we received 53 proposals, 29 of which were approved for development. Of 22 papers received, 12 were ultimately accepted for publication. Such a response speaks to something beyond ourselves as guest editors. Rather, the idea and arguments we offered through this effort clearly tapped into an unmet need for scholarship that spoke to a vision shared by many others of what academic writing can be.

In the service of that vision, herein are 12 exemplary papers that embody the distinctive promise that practice briefs hold to bridge research and practice, each in relation to pressing

challenges in the contemporary community college. It is important to point out that the recommendations are not offered as best practices, per se, but as empirically-informed guidance for reflective leadership in particular institutional contexts.

This first five papers focus, appropriately, on serving students and pursuing equity in community colleges. The first is entitled *Applying Guiding Principles to Resist Erasure of Immigrant Community College Students in an Everchanging Climate through a Critical Theory of Love* by Witenstein and Niese. This practice brief makes the case for adopting a critical theory of love in order to support immigrant students through defining/refining spaces and services, institutional agents' roles, and professional development. The second article, *Promoting STEM Identity Development in Community Colleges & Across the Transfer Process* by Rodriguez, Hensen, and Espino, addresses how community colleges can diversify the STEM pipeline and workforce and promote educational and labor equity. This piece is followed by *Research- and Praxis-Based Strategies: An Asset-Based Approach for Senior- and Middle-Level Administrators Addressing Latino Male Students' Education Gap* by Burmicky, Palomín, Sáenz, Sánchez, and Ryu. Focusing on the attainment gaps between Latino male students and their female counterparts, and drawing on a broad range of K-20 educational institutions in Texas, this inspiring piece underscores the role of the community college in advancing the educational outcomes of Latino male students throughout interconnected institutional contexts.

Next in this area is a practice brief emphasizing educational equity for undocumented students entitled *Strategies for Socializing Undocumented Students into Campus Life* by French and Covington. This piece invites practitioners at all levels how to support undocumented students to achieve their academic goals through participating in professional development, and marshaling their own resources to create grant-funded position with expertise, and financial

support opportunities to undocumented students. Last in this section is the paper *Finding Where I Belong: How Community Colleges Can Transform Their Institutional Environments to Facilitate Student's Sense of Belonging on Campus* by Carales and Hooker. It details strategies for community college staff, faculty, and administrators to facilitate students' connection to campus.

The next four papers make a case for improving how colleges operate by, ultimately, disrupting the unjust structures that undergird how colleges work. This argument is perhaps best exemplified by Vasquez and Zerquera's description of *The Latinx Community College-to-For-Profit Pipeline* and recommendations on how to reshape student services in light of structured inequities within Latinxs' community college experiences that often leads to enrollment in problematic for-profit institutions. In a similar fashion, Rose, Neri, and Rios-Aguilar argue that in light of current broadscale movements to restructure two-year institutions, there is a need for *(Re)Contextualizing Guided Pathways to Provide Equitable Supports for Community College Students*. Next, Franke and Bricknell's paper *(Incentivized) Summer Enrollment: Effects and Implementation in Community Colleges* show readers how to reimagine academic calendars and tuition to disrupt the vicious cycle of falling enrollments. Last in this section is Klein and Lester's article on *Learning Analytics in Community Colleges: Guidance for Leaders*, which underscores the salience of the ethical, holistic use of data to stay true to and enact community colleges' missions.

The next two papers look at issues of teaching and learning practices, an area that continues to receive relatively little attention in the community college literature despite the challenges instructors face in this uniquely teaching-focused institution. The first, Tocaimaza-Hatch's *Addressing the Challenges of Service-Learning in Broad Access Institutions of Higher Education*, goes beyond the idealized premises of service learning, and provides real-world

guidance to overcoming structural barriers to its implementation. Freas and Limón Guzman, in their paper *Blindspotting: Resisting Academic Norms by Using Hip-Hop Sensibilities to Develop Educator Praxis for the People*, provide a guiding framework and examples of how to re-imagine pedagogical practices that are responsive to the contemporary values and experiences of many community college students, too often overlooked in traditional norms of instruction.

To wrap up this issue, Smith, Fox, and Harbour's piece on *Integrating AACCC's Competencies for Community College Leaders into Community College Leadership Graduate Programs* underscores the principle that there are many stakeholders whose practice in their own circle of influence has consequences for community college practice broadly speaking.

In addition to the content of these practice briefs, their form and process of creation stand as valuable instances of needed scholarly forms of praxis. Chief among these is the meaningful partnerships that emerged among academics and practioner-scholars. Not only were the briefs written by and for the people doing the work, but peer reviewers too were as often practitioners as academics. This kind of collaboration throughout was essential for practice briefs to stay true to their purpose. In the process, many good ideas had to be turned down due to authors encountering challenges in breaking away from traditional empirical reporting of studies, and the lack of detailed and truly actionable recommendations. This pointed to the need for academics to think more broadly about what evidence supports change and so to draw on literature outside of the immediate topical area of an issue. Indeed, practice briefs offer an opportunity to identify gaps in the literature in ways empirical studies do not. Several papers in this collection, particularly those that are ostensibly about student services, exemplify how practice briefs not only provide actionable recommendations, but they most effectively do so when grounded in a critical appraisal of the underlying structures that enables and constrains educational praxis. Our

contention is that we need more scholarship like this, where inquiry arises from the people and participants, and practice briefs offer a way toward that goal in ways currently unrealized.

We offer our sincere thanks to the JARCC editorial team of Bill Piland, Marissa Vasquez, and Stephanie Estrada, for sharing our vision and providing a platform for this endeavor.

Importantly, JARCC had laid the foundation well before this by being among the only higher education research journals to specifically call for practice briefs. We invite academics and practitioner-scholars to submit more practice briefs to this journal and to ask other journals and associations they care about to start calling for and publishing them too, as an additional means of bridging research and practice built around their mutual incentives and interests.

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