

Interrogating College of Education Mandates from the Margins

Realizations from a Shift in Perspective

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Abstract

My first year as a tenure-track professor has been nothing short of a jaw-dropping experience. From navigating the social and political environment with colleagues and administrators, to building meaningful relationships with pre-service teachers, the Covid-19 pandemic and all its attendant challenges prompted me to examine common institutional practices more closely. The result of this examination was a recognition of a shift in my perspective from “are we doing enough?” to “we are doing all we can.” A subsequent interrogation of the isolating structures that create barriers to the development and growth of both emerging scholars and pre-service teachers revealed spaces in which teacher education as a discipline and a profession can develop. I suggest that the use of mindful scaffolding to transform evaluation and retention expectations and field experience requirements, whether in face-to-face or remote settings, can yield benefits for both faculty and pre-service teachers, alike.

Introduction

This summer, amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic, I celebrated the completion of my first year as an assistant professor. While there were

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Volume 29, Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 2020

certainly many overwhelming experiences, I remained grateful for all that came with my new role, and I have continued to invest creative energy to not only survive, but also thrive. As I learn to navigate a career in academia during this unique period in history, it is my intent to reproduce healthy and innovative practices alongside my colleagues, in both my research and instruction. Ultimately, I hope this will have a positive impact on my students, most of whom are en route to becoming K-12 teachers. With a very hopeful heart, I reflect below on the shift in my perspective from a position in which I constantly question if I am doing enough as a teacher educator, to a position that embraces the fact that I am doing as much as I can as I move forward. This shift has provided the space to make broader connections among the different parts of my work, and to interrogate the structures within my institution that perpetuate an unequal system of labor.

It is important to note that I was hired for a tenure-track position at the same institution where I was employed as a lecturer for nine years. This is also the same institution from which I received all of my degrees. Clearly, I am invested in growing within this institution. When I accepted this position, I was aware of both the benefits and challenges associated with my lengthy, multi-faceted history. Yet, even as I experienced many doubts during my first year as a tenure-track faculty member, I feel certain that the benefits far outweigh the challenges and I welcome the opportunity to be an agent of change. Moreover, as one of the few women of color in the field of mathematics education, I am conscious of and have pushed against exclusionary schooling practices and I have worked diligently over the years to create nurturing spaces for our pre-service teachers.

I am also fully aware, however, that my positionality as an insider may make it difficult for me to recognize cultural practices within my college in which I participate that perpetuate inequality within our educational system. Hence, throughout this reflection I engage in the well-known instructional practice of distinguishing the things that are working from those that are not, as well as those that need to be changed—otherwise known in mathematical terms as the plusses, minuses, and deltas. As a result, I identify two specific areas I am interested in transforming in order to begin to dismantle systems of inequities: (1) the retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) process; and (2) field experience requirements in our credential programs.

Although these two areas are distinct practically and procedurally, they share similarities in the way they are structured and the underlying principles that guide their implementation. Neither is focused on scaffolding or a developmental approach. In the case of the RTP

process, the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the California State University (CSU) system and the California Faculty Association provides detailed guidelines for retention, tenure, and promotion, but it leaves the particulars of implementation to each of the 23 campuses. Correspondingly, when it comes to field experience requirements, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) provides standards that include the minimum number of hours and general guidelines for appropriate activities, but each teacher preparation program decides how those standards are met (e.g., observation hours, directed teaching, community involvement, etc.). This article is not a critique of either the CSU system or the CTC, rather its intent is to shed light on the ways that these bodies shape my working conditions as a teacher educator and to identify opportunities to advocate for those occupying more vulnerable positions.

Disquisition

Life as a new tenure-track professor before the Covid-19 pandemic was already chaotic and overwhelming. Even with all of my experience as a lecturer at the same institution, I still found myself in a roiling sea of new responsibilities with little of the cultural and social capital necessary to navigate the institution effectively. In fact, next to meeting the demands of teacher education in the ever-changing shift to online instruction due to Covid-19, actively searching for the mechanisms to build such social and cultural capital has been the most significant challenge of the last few months. One of most difficult barriers has been the significant disagreement among my colleagues, which creates a lot of confusion in my everyday work. I have found the disagreement to be so widely and deeply spread within the college culture that it can be seen in one of the most mundane of tasks: email correspondence.

The lack of any clear direction on email correspondence serves to illustrate how the absence of formal protocols creates ambiguity and leads me to question whether I belong in my college. I have been using email since it first became a popular form of communication in the workplace in the late 1990s and I have always felt proficient in its use. Email correspondence, with all of the benefits of expediting communication, has however, become a time-consuming and anxiety-inducing activity because I often feel I cannot figure out the social script within the cultural context of my college. For example, I am still not sure how to interact when either my chair or dean sends a message to make sure faculty meet a deadline or participate in a meeting. Do I reply to let them know I received the message? Do I “reply to all,” or only to the sender? What if the message

doesn't apply to me? Should I read anything from the tone in which it appears to be written? By the time I work my way through all these questions, I am actually more confused, and I end up wondering if I should reach out to ask for clarification—but if so, to whom?

Indeed, I have learned that I am not the only one scrambling to try and discern the meaning of messages sent over email by our administrators. During my first year as a tenure-track faculty member, I have had several “hallway” conversations with colleagues in which we speculate on the meaning of a message, try to determine if it applied to all the recipients, and if it required a response. I have also participated in “side” discussions where we try to understand why some colleagues reply to all, while others seldom reply at all. For example, when our university decided to move to remote learning because of the Covid-19 pandemic, a colleague sent a message to all faculty in the college that prompted two responses. In the initial message, the colleague shared an article about the challenges faced by untenured academics because of the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. The two responses came from tenured colleagues expressing their support for untenured faculty members and committing to unite voices while calling for the college to prioritize support for those in more vulnerable positions at the beginning stages of their careers. At first, I saw this interaction as an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with my peers, but when the exchange stopped at two tenured faculty members, I questioned whether it would be a good place to invest my energy, given the uncertainty.

In the same manner that I struggle to navigate college email exchanges, I struggle to understand how the RTP process works. My first introduction to the process as an assistant professor was during our New Faculty Orientation. I distinctly recall the Vice President of Academic Affairs explaining that what made our RTP process “good” was also what created its difficulties: its vagueness. As a lecturer, the RTP process emphasized teaching performance. But as a tenure-track assistant professor, the expectations are much higher across three categories: teaching, research, and service, with a particular focus on research and publications. Understanding this, I created mechanisms to help me stay connected to all areas of my work (e.g., drafting a five-year research activity plan, joining writing groups, reaching out to colleagues with similar research interests, etc.). These strategies have only taken me so far, however, as the vagueness of the RTP process obfuscates and stymies my understanding rather than edifying or clarifying it, while simultaneously exacerbating concerns about implicit biases and worries associated with being an emerging scholar of color (Martinez, Chang & Welton, 2016).

This purposeful ambiguity in the RTP process is exemplified by the lack of specific information in the guidelines provided by my college. The basic organization of an RTP file at my university includes three categories (teaching, scholarship, and service) and four levels of evaluation in each category (“unsatisfactory,” “satisfactory,” “commendable,” and “outstanding”). Currently, we have guidelines that provide examples of the type of activities that count towards each category but we do not have any specific way to measure the particulars of the distinct ratings; there is no checklist or rubric associated with any of the discrete parts of our work. For example, in service, there is no information that I can follow that shows what amount or type of work (e.g., committee participation) merits a “satisfactory,” “commendable” or “outstanding” rating. When I have asked for specifics, I have been advised to “trust the process” and to “document everything” I do and include it in my narrative as “evidence.” I have also been told several times to not worry about the process, as long I am working towards my goals. All of these seemingly conflicting directions makes building a strong foundation for the scholarship and service areas of my work difficult, because no meaningful direction is provided.

This ambiguity-filled approach is also present in how required field experience hours are assigned to different courses, as well as in the type of activities deemed “acceptable” field experience. Some of the field experience requirements have been assigned to introductory and methods courses, but most are completed during directed teaching. During my first year, I joined two teams that analyzed the field experience assignments in order to learn more about the types of approaches used in different courses. I learned that although there is a general agreement about what constitutes acceptable field experience, there is a need to align the specific field experience assignments among the various methods courses and throughout the different levels of the credential program. For example, there are no specific guidelines for scaffolding field experience assignments for the different parts of the program in order to gradually prepare pre-service teachers for directed teaching (the final level). To rectify this lack of alignment, the teams organized several meetings to ground field experiences in the ideas presented by Hollins (2015), particularly learning to teach through the approximation of practice. Re-envisioning field experiences was well received by everyone, but we were not able to reach consensus about moving forward because of the great epistemological differences among the team members regarding the purpose(s) of such activity when preparing pre-service teachers. For example, some colleagues felt that pre-service teachers benefit most from conducting direct observation of “good classroom instruction” while others felt it was more important to have a more hands-on approach such

as participating in after-school reading programs. Whatever consensus our wobbly teamwork efforts might have resulted in were cut short due to the shift to remote teaching because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I continued to think, however, about how our inability to reach consensus to move forward with our field experience practices appeared to be a symptom of our disarticulated college and how this paralleled what I experienced in the RTP process. The fact that faculty members in my college struggle to find common ground regarding even small curricular matters makes me question the likelihood of their coming to consensus when evaluating RTP files. As a female faculty of color operating under divisive structures that promote a purposefully-ambiguous evaluation process, and aware of the differences in my colleagues' perspectives on women of color in the academy, I worry about the very real threat of implicit biases infecting the review of RTP files (see Croom, 2017; Eaton, Saunders, Jacobson, & West, 2019).

Dispatch

I was struggling to figure out how to voice my concerns about the RTP process and the field experience requirements through official channels (e.g., meetings with my Dean and Chair and committee work) when we were forced to make the shift to remote instruction due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since that shift, there has not been an aspect of my work left untouched by a sense of doing what I can to get through the day, the week, the semester—without interrupting my progress. I have had to both learn and innovate to be able to carry out all of the tasks required to teach well and remain in good standing. Innovation has paid off in the form of opportunities for re-thinking and re-imagining with like-minded colleagues, which has brought me to the following ideas for improving the way we do our work in colleges of education.

First, colleges of education must prioritize team-building. I do not mean in a superficial way just to get us to do work together, but in ways that ground our relationships in common discursive practices while building a vision-oriented culture that truly embraces diversity (Knoppers, Claringbould, & Dortants, Marianne, 2013). In order to achieve this, we have to establish ways to acknowledge everyone's values and bring forth the inequities that we create and/or perpetuate because of the ways we do our work. For example, in the case of email communication, we could establish community agreements so that this form of communication can serve as a welcoming space for growing ideas and collaborations. This might include agreeing that senders blind their emails when they do not wish to engage in dialogue, briefly describe the expected response,

and include specific deadlines. We can also be explicit about establishing email boundaries regarding acceptable response periods, the use of “high importance” flags, and recognition of “no email” times (e.g., weekends, holidays, intersessions, and summers) within and across the divisions in the College. These types of boundaries are particularly important for non-tenured faculty who may feel pressured to respond immediately, at any time, any day, as well as those who work while tending to personal and family responsibilities.

Team building can be done through “think tanks” outside of the structures the college has institutionalized in the form of committees. These think tanks can be formed based on people’s research or service interests and allow faculty to self-select into these groups (rather than being voted in by their peers). Different from committee work, think tanks can offer possibilities for developing research interests and thus help faculty members merge different areas of their work, collaborate, provide or seek out alternative mentors, and engage in meaningful creative endeavors. For example, when moving to remote teaching modalities, those of us teaching courses with a field experience requirement were forced to innovate. Together, we formed a think tank to brainstorm equitable ways for students to complete the field experience requirement without compromising the underlying principles. The think tank gained momentum as we continued to meet to debrief our experiences, and we are piloting specific instructional technology for field experience assignments during the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. Next year, we will be collaborating with the two committees responsible for reviewing the curricular requirements of our multiple- and single-subject teaching credential programs and hope to shed light on meaningful ways to design field experience assignments for mathematics, science, and writing methods courses in remote teaching settings.

Finally, we must develop bold advocacy systems to support all members of the college of education while remaining attuned to macrosystemic contexts such as the sociopolitical state of the nation. These advocacy efforts could consist of a series of anti-racist education trainings to identify inequities in our work and workplace, thereby bolstering our capacity to make a greater impact as a higher education institution. Although I have witnessed individual faculty members engaging in advocacy activity, collective advocacy is far less evident. There are, however, some examples of collective action that have pushed our college to act as a united front against potentially harmful decisions of the CSU. For example, in the 2019-2020 academic year, a small group of colleagues and I decided to advocate against the proposal to increase the CSU’s math entrance requirement from three to four years. Instead of writing letters

individually, we went to a college-wide committee to seek approval to submit the statement as a college of education. This type of collective advocacy could serve as a powerful force in the struggle for increasing access to higher education for minoritized groups, especially those attending schools that have been historically underfunded.

Establishing bold advocacy systems can also help us address issues with the RTP process. It is not enough to create support groups for new, untenured faculty members (although this is a good start). We also need channels for transforming the RTP process to one that acknowledges the demands placed on some faculty because of different expectations. For instance, the RTP process does not account for the extra work many women and/or people of color end up doing to support individual students who may not feel safe working with male and/or white professors as a result of traumatic schooling experiences (Thomas, Crosby & Vanderhaar, 2019). With bold advocacy systems, we can create platforms to address these inequities in a collegial manner.

We can also use bold advocacy systems to improve our teacher preparation programs by redefining our relationship with bodies within the larger structure (e.g., our relationship with the CTC). This is not to say that we should stand against the work of the CTC but rather that colleges of education must assure representation from diverse faculty in the decision-making processes. In some instances, institutions have found ways to address the needs of preservice teachers by finding ways around CTC-established requirements (e.g., creating programs to waive standardized test requirements due to low passing rates). While circumventing standardized tests may serve to advance more students through teaching credential programs and into classrooms, it does not address the inequitable power relationship that exist between the CTC and colleges of education. At the very least, in addition to our responsibility to CTC standards, we should be able to develop recommendations for credentialing requirements to address the needs of unique student populations. We might begin by centering the lived experiences of preservice and in-service teachers of color in our analyses of the teaching profession—especially those coming from colleges of education in minority-serving institutions. A deep analysis of these lived experiences will provide insight into the different ways that current standards may prove to be barriers into the profession for students from disenfranchised communities.

As a woman of color and a new faculty member in a college of education, I am able to see the damaging effects of evaluation processes when there is a lack of specific information. Most importantly, I can see how colleagues of color end up accepting spiritually-deplorable conditions

in the name of supporting students. As such, I consider it imperative to do more and better work in both supporting new faculty members and preparing pre-service teachers by opening spaces to interrogate structures and build collective power. If we can model both effective team-building and bold advocacy systems in our colleges of education and teacher education programs, we can begin to transform the evaluation processes (e.g., the RTP and fieldwork processes) through mindful scaffolding and thus create more equitable spaces for teacher educators and pre-service teachers.

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