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Social movements and activism: Reexamining scholarship to center the urban community college

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Abstract
In this article, the authors focus on the intersection of the study of activism and the urban community college. Leveraging the Actors, Contexts, Tactics, and Strategies (ACTS) Framework, the authors (re)examine activism scholarship that illuminates similarities and differences between 2- and 4-year institutions. Ultimately, the article concludes with implications for practice and future research that can deepen and sustain the position of community colleges as contributors to the rich legacy of urban activism.

INTRODUCTION

Within the larger context of community college activism, there is a misnomer that community college students do not engage in activism to the same degree as individuals at 4-year residential colleges. Part of the issue is definitional, so for the purposes of this article, we understand activism as the constellation of (in)direct practices that seek to bring about (or resist) social or political change at various levels (i.e., interpersonal, community, state, national, global). To some degree, the larger context of community colleges, with their mission and audience of who attends (Bahr & Gross, 2016), corroborates this assumption about who engages in activism. Community college students often juggle multiple commitments related to employment, income, family, and to their larger community that contest for their time (Angeli Newell, 2014). Further, literature on community college faculty and adjuncts similarly describes their challenges, concerns, and overextension in labor that challenge the ability to engage in activism (Twombly & Townsend, 2008).

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Yet, at the same time, community colleges do very much engage in campus activism. Within what is often described as the Golden Age of student activism in the 1960s, community colleges robustly engaged in collective action on campus, especially related to the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and Third World activism (see Cruthird & Williams, 2011; Ferreira, 2014). For example, the efforts of Black students at Malcolm X College and Kennedy-King College resulted in the hiring of the first Black president at each university, the curricular creation of what would become their Black studies programs, and what are now their current institutional name changes (Cruthird & Williams, 2011).

An examination of the existing higher education scholarship to date reveals a reality that is also an indictment of the broader campus activism literature—and that is the tension that the community college context, situated in urban cities or otherwise, is rarely brought forth as an animating research consideration (Cabrera et al., 2017; Museus & Sifuentez, 2021; Quaye et al., 2021). The scholarship that does exist on community college activism (e.g., Cruthird & Williams, 2011; E. A. Smith, 2019) also asserts this tension of activism being an under-researched focus area. These projects, with their exploratory emphasis, often conclude with repeated calls for more attention to place community colleges not at the periphery but at the center of examination.

In an effort to resolve a potential schism between how campus-based activism is conceptualized and the role of the community college in this conceptualization, we offer up the Actors, Contexts, Tactics, and Strategies (ACTS) framework (Davis et al., 2023). We contend, based in part on the fact that we arrive to this chapter as colleagues who have written together and separately around the topic of campus activism (Cho, 2018; Davis et al., 2023; Morgan & Davis, 2019), that the ACTS Farmwork can both help to identify where the student activism literature situated in the 4-year context might be ported into the community college context—and where there is a need for new scholarship and a focus on practices that support community college activism. In particular, understanding the overlapping and divergent realities (e.g., student engagement or institutional resources) for 2- and 4-year institutions informs how community college activism exists based on location and context. A synthesis of the core themes from the literature provides implications for future research and practice. The question that guided our analysis was: What considerations are necessary when leveraging activism scholarship that predominately focuses on 4-year institutions and applying it to the context of the urban community college to further scholarship and practice?

OVERVIEW OF A.C.T.S. FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Davis et al. (2023) introduced the "A.C.T.S. Framework of Social Movements" to provide a new vantage point to explore activism as it intersects with postsecondary education and students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community. The rationale for offering up a framework was rooted in the realities that the study of social movements is decidedly contested (Cabrera et al., 2017), interdisciplinary (Morris, 2000; Museus & Sifuentez, 2021), and historically informed (Broadhurst, 2014), which manifests as studies that are not always in conversation with each. This produces unintentional gaps and prevents opportunities for knowledge building around the critical nature of campus activism. Hence, we assert that by offering scholars an organizing framework, we can both look back and find commonalities in existing work and look ahead to filling in areas less well understood or explored connected to the topic of campus activism.

The framework is relatively straightforward and plays on the Latin root of activism—'actus' which means action or deed and which we shorten to "A.C.T.S." Accordingly, the

'A' refers to Actors, which is "inclusive of an array of individuals and collectives engaged in building political power to challenge the status quo and transform postsecondary institutions as well as society" (Davis et al., 2023, p. 208). 'C' is for Contexts and draws our attention to "university structure, organizational culture, campus climate politics, geographical location, temporality, and different contexts translate into rethinking the boundaries, spaces, and even institutions themselves when studying higher education activism" (Davis et al., 2023, p. 215). Finally, the 'T' and the 'S' reflect Tactics and Strategies through which "campus-based movements achieve their goals" (Davis et al., 2023, p. 219).

The components of this framework contextualize considerations for the study of activism connected to the community college. Although the framework is meant to help disentangle and nuance considerations of activism—each concept in the framework necessarily overlaps with the others. To highlight the utility of the framework, we investigate (1) how the context of urban community college activism shapes campus concerns and (2) how tactics and strategies that are unique to new media (e.g., social media, blogs, podcasts, etc.) interface with the community college. In doing so, we conclude this chapter with considerations in how to move forward in centering urban community college activism within scholarship and practice.

HOW CONTEXT IMPACTS ACTORS: THE UNIQUENESS OF URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The institutional context in which urban community colleges reside deeply impacts the livelihood of campus actors (i.e., students, faculty, staff, and community members), which in turn influences and shapes the focus and ability to engage in activism. For example, within the broad literature regarding the everyday challenges that students must navigate—time, resources, and inconsistent support structures (Ayers, 2005; Hernandez & Hernández, 2014; Price & Tovar, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2019) and the uniqueness of supporting community college student activists (E. A. Smith, 2019; Kisker et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2019) are prevalent.

Looking across this landscape of community college activism, one finds that many of the activism-related issues are tied to what Ahmed (2021) described as institutional mechanics, or the process to navigate institutional bureaucracy. For example, Kezar's (2010) study highlighted how in an effort to support community college student activism, faculty focused on "empowerment" or "how the system works, how to navigate power structures, which were often assumed knowledge within other campus" (p. 467). This means thatactivism in the community college context tends to engage contextually bound topics such as curricula or financial aid (Gonzales, 2008). This approach to activism illuminates an underlying critique of the *context*—or how things were done that impact different actors on a campus. Furthermore, activism-centric scholars have long pointed to how campus concerns discussed the role of labor that responding to campus-based issues entails (Linder et al., 2019; Linder et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2020). In considering intersectional solidarity dilemmas (Linder, 2018; Marine & Trebisacci, 2018; Pasque & Vargas, 2014), institutional considerations (Baker & Blissett, 2018; Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Gowen et al., 2019), and concerns connected to the perception of the ineffectiveness of activism (Broadhurst, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2017; Cho, 2018, 2022)—the interplay between actors and context when considered from the vantage point of the community college intensifies.

For example, in 2012, Santa Monica Community College community college students protested against what the college unveiled as a tiered payment system where students

could access classes that were closed or filled if they paid more (Rivera, 2012). The activism at St. Louis Community College centered against the proposed layoffs of more than 100 staff and instructors, which challenges the fiscal priorities of the university (A. A. Smith, 2017).

As such, it is not surprising that predominant examples of campus activism in urban community college settings are not limited to students as the primary actors and instead heavily involve faculty, especially contingent faculty, as well as staff and community members. In Hotchkins et al. (2022) study with Black community college presidents, one of the central theses in their recommendations and advancement regarding anti-racism efforts was the necessity of looking within and training their community to advance their campus' diversity agenda, given the willingness that already existed. Moreover, Hotchkins et al. (2022) described the necessity to engage beyond the campus setting in anti-racism efforts. As seen within Davis et al. (2023), campuses are nested in neighborhoods, towns, and cities, which are nested and impacted by state and federal policies. The broader context of how the urban community college is embedded in the community expands the boundaries of the community college context and also the involved actors: who is and who is not part of the campus. We expand on this in the T. and S. section of the A.C.T.S. Framework.

The larger emphasis on context cannot only be limited to the conditions but also the processes in which activism takes place, particularly related to how institutions of higher education respond. Specifically, with the earlier example of Santa Monica Community College, while students critiqued how this decision was not only against issues of equity and the mission of the college, they also protested against the format of the Board of Trustees meeting where the space was heavily limited so that individuals could not attend to voice their concerns (Tata & Kovicik, 2012). After some students were pepper sprayed by the police (Tata & Kovicik, 2012), these protests evolved into multi-layered concerns regarding the institution's response to oppositional activism. Likewise, the activism at St. Louis Community College against the proposed layoffs of more than 100 staff and instructors evolved another layer of concern after a faculty member was tackled by the police during an open meeting (A. A. Smith, 2017). Thus, while the activism-oriented concerns of these two examples were centered on the bureaucracy of tuition and layoffs, the responses from Santa Monica Community College and St. Louis Community Colleges with pepper spray and tackling, respectively, signal additional concerns regarding the use of policing as a means of safety. These concerns are further compounded when considering the intersections of race, gender, and class and the continued violence and brutality of policing. We would also be remissnot to mention the unique dynamics of urban community colleges that tend to rely on municipal police forces over campus police forces, adding another tenuous point to this issue (Greenberg, 2005). Moreover, in response to both of these protests, students later received sanctions and warnings regarding their disruptive code of conduct (A. A. Smith, 2017; Tata & Kovicik, 2012). While the use of sanctions and even threats of expulsion are not uncommon to student activism (see Cho, 2022; Morgan & Davis, 2019), the blurring of campus and community boundaries within urban community college settings can and has translated to convoluted responses from campus and local police.

At large, driving the multi-layered context regarding urban community college concerns and activism (including the critique regarding institutional mechanics) is an issue of finance. The chronic underfunding of community colleges and the disparate (arguably racist; see Graves, 2019) financial aid structures translate into community colleges cutting curricula, staff, pay, and programs. While state appropriations for community colleges increased in 2021, partly in response to the pandemic, this funding still does not compensate for chronic underfunding and continued financial reverberations from economic downturns and the pandemic (Barshay, 2022). With these concerns, the most common and recurring pattern of community colleges in their response to student activism seems

to be schisming (Cho, 2018), waiting students out, and using the rationale of this is the way things are.

The reality that community college students are often on campuses for an even shorter duration of time, both day to day and year over year, potentially intensifies schisiming observation. Nevertheless, with the justification that hands are tied and tough decisions need to be made, it makes sense that campus activism remains not only in opposition to issues of campus policy or practices but also in opposition to how community colleges remain positioned within higher education's broader context. This uniqueness of (urban) community colleges then impacts not only the what, why, and who of activism but also the how, when, and where of expressing and communicating these concerns.

REEXAMINING TACTICS AND STRATEGIES: NEW MEDIA AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

For nearly two decades, higher education researchers have investigated the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and social media technologies (SMTs) in college and university contexts. This research has focused on both the use of technologies by students (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009; Junco, 2011; Junco et al., 2011; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010)as well as institutions (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Reuben, 2008; Swartzfager, 2007; Wilburn, 2008), including the use of social media in the community college context (Davis et al., 2015). Since Rhoads' (1998) introductory examination of internet-based activism, a slow but growing focus on the evolving role of new and digital media in the tactical repertoires (i.e., tactics and strategies employed by social movements) of student activists and organizers has emerged from the literature (Biddix, 2010a, 2010b; Biddix & Park, 2008; Davis, 2019; Davis et al., 2015; Gismondi & Osteen, 2017; Linder et al., 2016). However, while attention has been paid to media use by student protestors, most scholarships in this area have undertheorized how new and digital media function in relation to activists and movements achieving their political goals.

For this reason, drawing from the critical media studies literature, Lievrouw's (2011) concept of alternative and activist new media has been instructive for deeper theoretical understandings of digital media used for sociopolitical purposes. This depth of perspective has been especially crucial given the global context regarding COVID and responses from higher education institutions to shift to remote working conditions and online learning. In that sense, community colleges have been better equipped compared to 4-year colleges and universities, especially residential campuses, being at the forefront regarding remote, distance, and virtual learning (West, 2022). Thus, much in the ways that activism literature must better contend with the unique context and thereby the involvement of actors within urban community colleges, activism research much better addresses the unique position of these places, particularly in relationship to the digital space and new media. In urban community colleges in particular, this means taking into account the blurred "boundaries" between campuses and the surrounding locations and how activism that may be unrelated on the surface to the institutional context—nonetheless informs how people experience and navigate the urban community college.

Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002, 2006) conceptualize new media as a composite of three related elements: (1) material artifacts and devices that enable and extend the ability to communicate and share meaning (e.g., social media), (2) activities and practices of communication by people as they develop and use devices, and (3) broader social

arrangements and organizational forms that are created by and built around artifacts and practices. Further, Lievrouw (2011) differentiates new media from traditional and mass media in that new media are "hybrid or recombinant technologies" (p. 8) that resist stability and are continuously innovating. In this construction of new media, Lievrouw (2011) explores how participatory journalism projects undertake a public, citizen, or civic approach to provide counternarratives to dominant news coverage and institutional messaging.

However, scholarship and reporting on various digitally mediated campaigns and collectives (e.g., #DREAMers, #itooamharvard, The Black Bruins at UCLA, Black@ Instagram accounts, and The Black Menaces at Brigham Young University, which we also note have a heavy 4-year emphasis) have not necessarily offered an analysis that situates the journalistic nature of storytelling undertaken by many of today's student activists. The community college literature does feature more traditional forms of consciousness raising in response to social injustices (e.g., panels—see Miller & Schwartz, 2016). An exception that bridges digital and in-person actions is the work of Davis (2015, 2019), who has integrated Lievrouw's (2011) framework to examine the tactical repertoires of campus-community activists.

Specifically, Davis' (2019) work explicates the role of social media as micro-mobilization contexts in which organizing digital mobilization campaigns (i.e., mediated mobilization) and leveraging pop-culture references and artifacts for sociopolitical critique (i.e., culture jamming) are part of a dynamic, interactive process of tactics and strategies employed by today's student activists. Ongoing activism related to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) efforts has revealed the partnerships forged between activists at community colleges and 4-year institutions, which in part happened because of their digital networks (Rodriguez et al., 2019). New and digital media enables broader engagement and possibilities for mobilization for students for whom a residential component of higher education is not widely available. In the same ways community college students traverse the social, symbolic, and spatial boundaries between campus and the communities in which they live, digitally mediated activism exists in a borderless space that makes it more accessible to those who desire to participate. We imagine—this consideration will continue to afford actors in the urban community college context opportunities to connect, organize, and exert actions that seek change in ways that evolve with the technological and media landscape.

SYNTHESIS OF INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY

The proposed ACTS framework intends to provide a groundwork for understanding activism in the community college—and given the scope of this *New Directions for Community Colleges* issue—the urban context in particular. In Morgan et al. (2021), we are reminded that gaps remain in the collective understanding of how democratic outcomes, like activism, are related to postsecondary education, and the relationship between activism and higher education is "murky" (p. 19). We are still learning ways students' resistance keeps institutions accountable (Cho, 2018) and still identifying ways activism shows up in higher education scholarship and research (Davis et al., 2019). Present in these authors' scholarship is a need to converge these ideas and address the need to dissolve this murkiness—especially in the context of the urban community college. We emphasize the urban community college, in part, due to the number of students educated at these institutions and their enduring commitments to accessibility and racially and ethnically minoritized segments of society.

Indeed, not centering the community college or the urban community college in particular as a viable site for activism knowledge to exist has several implications for higher education and activist scholarship. Initially, our reviews highlight the importance of the contextual environment, and activism literature in postsecondary education tends to overly foreground the campus environment relative to the surrounding locality. Given all we know about the assets and challenges of many urban environments in the United States (Hunter et al., 2016), it is clear that more must be done to identify and narrate the synergies and disjunction that mark the contours between activism, urban environments, and the community college. To be sure, from a historical perspective, the narrative of activism and the urban community college exists (e.g., Dixon, 2017). Our contention, especially on this side of the pandemic and January 6, 2021–practice and research must evolve accordingly.

Furthermore, our reviews of existing and parallel activism literatures alert us to the need to consider who gets to resist systems of oppression through activism and what environments have been deemed as worthy to be a part of the discussion (Miller et al., 2019; E. A. Smith, 2019). An overarching theme between the aforementioned studies is also a call for a more intentional focus to understand activism in its various and emerging forms and for scholars to concern themselves with how the research we construct might align with what Davis (2019) calls a counter-hegemonic knowledge construction. Specifically, the urban community college is an integral site for this exploration that helps fill this gap while challenging the notion that it is an often historically ignored institutional context. This type of lack of inclusion aligns with some inconsistencies in the origin stories of community colleges (Beach, 2012).

While the community college has been presented as having various generations and a changing role throughout U.S. history (Kasper, 2002), within this milieu, we have tried to assert lies a more specific relationship with activism and social movements that has been consequential for the institutions themselves and the urban environments they contribute to (Dixon, 2022). Considering the communities who have been provided access to postsecondary education through the community college experience (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; White & Dache, 2020), we make a case to consider activist knowledge and perspectives from the context of the urban community college since the often racially, ethnically, and economically disadvantaged populations who overwhelmingly represent these communities can make visible various actors, contexts, tactics and strategies that overlap and diverge to illuminate campus and community tensions and dynamic—as some have begun to do (E. A. Smith, 2019). Specifically, the need to (re)center conceptions of activism (Adams, 2016) and how this change can occur in higher education research and practice lingers, thus animating the need for the ACTS Framework.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

For scholars who aim to deepen and expand the ways minoritized and activist communities engage educational environments, exploring the nuances the community college presents is essential to this overarching project (Miller et al., 2019). Accordingly, understanding new ways activism may manifest in institutions of higher education requires knowing the surrounding counter-hegemonic knowledge actors occupying the community college space carry with them to and within the college context. This work is a complex task. Leveraging the ACTS framework provides potential to begin this process of understanding.

We know that community colleges enroll the majority of people of color and other minoritized communities (E. A. Smith, 2019). This representation is not only limited to students but also the staff of color (Torrens et al., 2017) and faculty who work at urban

community colleges (White & Dache, 2020). At large, community college representation in the activism scholarship broadens and complicates, through the ACTS framework, notions of what activism is, who engages with activism, and ways activism and social movements impact curricular change in higher education (Arthur, 2016). Likewise, the expansion of activism within the community college setting needs to more closely consider the role of community organizing and arguably care work, or "an orientation for living one's life alongside and in the pursuit of nurturing others" (Na et al., 2022, p. 84). This necessarily includes an expansion of what are activism-oriented activities. Similar to the ways that geographic distance, spatiality, and communities have been redefined within urban community college context (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; Reyes et al., 2018; White & Dache, 2020), the concept of activism must be redefined to be sensitive to the urban community reality(ies).

When scholars consider the ways community colleges engage in activism, inherent exclusionary practices that are pervasive in higher education become evident and highlight how community colleges are indeed viable and significant actors for learning more about activism in urban educational contexts. Thus, scholars seeking to understand activism should consider the curricular and co-curricular experiences of urban community college students and the ways activism-oriented programming and pedagogy could intersect with the conditions and identities of urban community college students (again, see Miller et al., 2019; Morgan & Davis, 2019; Smith, 2019). Aligned with this recommendation is the significant role community college faculty have in the student learning experience (Bose, 2012, p. 817) and how their construction of pedagogy and classroom activities can encourage but also hamper students' connection of activism with the surrounding urban community and institutional mechanics—similar to the specific call-outs Kezar (2010) makes about community colleges faculty evolving how they support student activist in their study.

Moreover, within the ACTS framework, the uniqueness of urban community college faculty cannot be understated. Not including faculty in conversations about student activism in urban community colleges misses opportunities to understand how and where students get to develop their activist identities. This potential issue of overlooking faculty illuminated in the literature suggests an unexplored link between the representation of community college faculty (Twombly & Townsend, 2008), who make up a significant representation of faculty members across the U.S., and even at that, the role of contingent faculty and graduate students from nearby universities who serve as instructors. Significant to the aims of advancing activist scholarship should be considerations of the relationship(s) between students and faculty in the community college. Additionally, if involvement is a site in which activist identity development occurs, it would signify a need to consider how community colleges create space for this type of political development. Dixon (2022) provides a historical example of how students who participated in an Afro-American History Club led to changes within the City Colleges of Chicago system. Overall, these examples illustrate an opportunity to continue to expand our collective understanding of activism and urban community colleges.

Extending and applying the ACTS framework within an urban community college landscape reveals not only the need for further research but resultant changes in teaching, practice, and programming. In terms of teaching, the spatial realities of being located in an urban environment provide optimal instances for urban community college faculty to work alongside students on any number of socio-political issues. The challenge is harnessing the distinction of what makes something activists versus volunteer work or other forms of civic engagement. The ACTS framework enables faculty seeking to leverage the urban environment as a mechanism to alert students inclined towards activism to help them refine and bolster their tactics and strategies or clarify the contexts that they might be interested in the most.

In terms of practices—the ACTS framework encourages community college actors to consider the role and desires of the various constituencies on campuses. For instance, where might there be solidarity between students, faculty, staff, and administration, and where and how do coalitions shift depending on the issue? Seeking first to understand who is involved as actors on any given issue can help overcome miscommunications and seek opportunities to create value for all actors involved. For example, during unionized staff and faculty negotiations—how might students work alongside faculty and staff to improve the overall work culture for everyone who has a campus job? Likewise, how might staff and faculty work to lobby city officials to improve transportation challenges that affect the ability of students to get to their campus? While not exhaustive, the underlying implication is that coalitions potentially exist to help sustain efforts for change when viewed in synergistic and not disconnected or alienating ways.

Finally, when considering programs, we encourage practitioners to bear in mind that a critical component within a tactics and strategies perspective is how communication happens within social movements. Therefore, how campus actors, however narrowly or broadly defined, communicate and organize with one another amid activist moments or movements is essential to grasp. This runs the spectrum of formal institutional responses during events that capture the attention of the nation (i.e., deaths of Breonna Taylor or George Floyd) to the ways campus officials interact with students and acknowledge student concerns week to week. Communication also includes how institutions seek to cultivate and prepare students,particularly, to be activists if they so choose. For example, North Central College in Naperville, IL, has a website dedicated to student activism (Center for Social Impact, n.d.). We encourage administrators and faculty at urban community colleges to consider strategies like this that consolidate resources and position students and other agents of the institution as activists. While we discussed the changing landscape of social media and digital communication and recognize how these areas have rapidly expanded since COVID-19, we encourage further exploration, especially as campuses continue to grapple with changing infrastructures and new media in response. Investigating new questions in areas like the community college provides us an opportunity to advance knowledge in an equitable manner and moves us forward and beyond our current understanding of activism as detailed in the literature.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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