

AACC CATALOG OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH SPRING 2026

Highlighting Research from Doctoral Program Graduates



A Note from the Editor

In late 2025, staff at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reached out to directors of community college leadership doctoral programs at colleges and universities across the country with a request: Send us the best research from the latest class of doctoral students.

The goal is to give readers a glimpse into the research that rising community college leaders have conducted to better understand and advance the sector. AACC staff collected abstracts from different programs to highlight in this publication, with links to the full dissertations. This publication is meant to act as a “catalog” – to give readers a taste of what’s out there and an ability to learn more.

Links are provided at the end of each abstract so you can read the full dissertation. You also can find all the dissertations on AACC’s website: www.aacc.nche.edu/coar

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Policies and Best Practices in Addressing Digital Equity Gaps: A Multisite Case Study of Leaders Within a Community College System

**by Vicki Bowman Calfa, Ed.D.
Kansas State University**

Community colleges play a crucial role in the economy, workforce training, and the preparation of students to transfer to 4-year institutions. The primary goal of the community college is to serve students, including those from underprivileged backgrounds and first-generation college students. However, these students often face significant challenges due to the digital divide, which refers to the gap in access to internet connectivity, up-to-date devices, and digital skills. In 2020, many low-income households in the United States lacked reliable internet access, and a significant portion of the population reported limited or no digital skills.

The digital divide affects various demographic areas, including gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Efforts toward achieving digital equity aim to bridge these gaps by ensuring all students have access to technology and necessary training. The COVID-19 global pandemic further highlighted these challenges because students had to shift to online formats for education and other essential services. As technology becomes increasingly integral in education, addressing these digital divides is crucial.

Although ample literature exists on the digital divide, specifically the gap between students with access to technology and those without, the policies and best practices for community college leaders to identify and address digital inequity are not well known. The purpose of this study was to understand the policies and best practices used by community colleges to address the digital equity gap. This study was designed to uncover common themes and patterns in selected community colleges in addressing the digital divide or related to achieving digital equity.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Vicki Calfa, Ed.D., is the Nursing Coordinator at Ranger College where she supports both student and faculty needs. Dr. Calfa is a certified nurse educator and a certified progressive care nurse with over 25 years of nursing experience in the acute care setting including an extensive experience in acute cardiac care and progressive care. Academically, she began her nursing education through the Ranger College Vocational Nursing Program and experienced a full circle moment by joining the nursing faculty in 2017. Dr. Calfa holds an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing from Angelo State University, BSN and MSN degrees from the University of Texas at Arlington and a Bachelor of Science from Texas A&M in Animal Science and Agricultural Development. In 2025, Dr. Calfa completed a Doctorate in Education with an Emphasis in Community College Leadership from Kansas State University.

Dr. Calfa is passionate about rural health, evidence-based educational practices, and supporting student success. She currently serves on the Big Country Area Health Education Advisory Board, the Texas Rural Health Advocacy Action Alliance, and the Texas Organization for Associate Degree Nursing Board. Dr. Calfa's doctoral work highlighted asset-based thinking and focused on policies and best practices for addressing digital equity gaps.

Structural Empowerment and Employee-Driven Innovation in a Community College: Faculty and Professional Staff Perspectives on Organizational Conditions for Innovation

**by Samantha Brooke Croft, Ph.D.
University of Maryland Global Campus**

This intrinsic case study examined the structural characteristics that drive employee-driven innovation (EDI) at City Community College, an award-winning institution known for its innovative culture and collaborative governance. Using an integrated theoretical framework combining Kanter's Theory of Structural Empowerment and the Lidderi Model, the study investigated how organizational systems either enable or constrain frontline employee innovation.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with 12 participants (three administrators, three faculty, and six staff members) selected through purposeful snowball sampling, along with document analysis of institutional policies and structures. Thematic analysis through a two-step coding process identified patterns in how employees experience structural empowerment conditions.

The findings highlight valuable opportunities to strengthen the connection between the college's substantial investments in innovation infrastructure and employee experiences of empowerment. While the institution has developed comprehensive innovation systems, implementation is inconsistent across organizational levels and employee groups. The study contributes a multidimensional framework introducing a three-level developmental model that illuminates pathways for maximizing the impact of institutional innovation investments while reducing uneven results across employee groups.

The case advances understanding of how community colleges can create structures, policies, and practices to more fully empower all employees to innovate, with implications for community college leaders seeking to harness front-line innovative potential.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Samantha Croft, Ph.D., is Tri-Chair and Portfolio Manager for Theory of Change Strategic Plan Design and Implementation at Austin Community College. A scholar-practitioner, she holds a Ph.D. in Microbiology and a Doctorate of Management in Community College Policy and Administration, and brings extensive college-wide leadership experience to her strategic work. Her research examines structural empowerment and employee-driven innovation in community colleges, with particular focus on the organizational conditions that enable faculty and staff to lead change. Dr. Croft draws on her long tenure as a Professor of Biology and her work as a Student Information System Process Analyst to apply a data-driven lens to institutional policy and operational improvement.

Black Community College Students with Nonapparent Disabilities: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study Exploring Self-Advocacy

**by Vanessa Hall Powell, Ed.D.
Morgan State University**

The problem addressed by this research study is that community college students with disabilities, as part of the postsecondary institutional environment, bear the legal burden of self-advocating for student disability support and must generally successfully navigate disability laws or institutional policy requirements to become eligible to obtain disability support from their postsecondary institution's student disability support services.

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design was used to interview Black community college students with nonapparent disabilities. This study explored the lived experiences of 10 enrolled, or recently enrolled for credit, Black community college students with non-apparent disabilities in the Mid-Atlantic and Southwest regions of the United States. The study's participants self-advocated for disability support, in part by obtaining and providing documentation of their disabilities and seeking adequate academic adjustments or reasonable modifications (reasonable accommodations).

This study also explored the participants' challenges as self-advocates as marginalized (disability and race) students and interpreted their understanding of self-advocacy pertaining to accessing student disability support in their campus environment. Two frameworks undergird this study: 1) hermeneutic phenomenology and 2) disability critical race studies. This study is significant because it adds to the scholarly literature by addressing self-advocacy in context and illuminating the voices of marginalized (disability and race) Black community college students with non-apparent disabilities.

Read the full dissertation here.

Bio

Vanessa Hall Powell, Esq., Ed.D., earned a doctorate in education in 2005 from Morgan State University's Community College Leadership Program. She also holds a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Maryland School of Law and a Master of Theology degree with a concentration in social justice from the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University. Dr. Hall Powell is an attorney who has practiced law in both the private and public sectors and plans to publish scholarly literature on law, education, and underserved communities.

Exploring Faculty Engagement and Transfer Student Capital in AAS Degree Pathways

**by Erica Harper, Ph.D.
Old Dominion University**

This study contributes to the field of Community College Leadership by advancing an explanation for AAS-to-bachelor's transfer outcomes, demonstrating how faculty engagement functions within Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees that historically are designed for workforce entry. An increasing number of AAS graduates now pursue bachelor's degrees to enhance economic mobility and career advancement. Despite this shift, AAS-to-bachelor's transfer remains structurally constrained by fragmented articulation agreements, inconsistent advising systems, and significant credit loss.

Grounded in Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework and informed by Transfer Student Capital theory (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010), this qualitative phenomenological study examines how faculty engagement influences the vertical transfer experiences of AAS graduates. In-depth narrative interviews were conducted with AAS degree holders to explore how faculty behaviors, instructional practices, and interactions shaped their transfer momentum.

Findings indicate that faculty engagement operates as a mechanism within community college systems. Faculty who proactively discuss transfer pathways, clarify policies, and affirm students' academic aspirations help cultivate Transfer Student Capital by increasing confidence, informational awareness, and institutional navigation capacity. Conversely, disengaged or under-informed faculty reinforce structural friction, contribute to misinformation, and create delays that erode student momentum. These findings demonstrate that transfer outcomes are not solely determined by policy but also by instructors and program-level practices.

This research extends prior scholarship on barriers (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; D'Amico et al., 2024) by identifying faculty engagement as a modifiable institutional factor. The study offers leadership implications for faculty development, collaborative advising structures, and articulation reform designed to reduce credit loss and improve bachelor's degree attainment among workforce-oriented students.

As colleges confront demographic contraction, enrollment pressures, and state attainment mandates, AAS students represent an underleveraged population for bachelor's degree growth. Aligning faculty engagement with policy reform could provide a scalable institutional leadership strategy to promote equity, sustain academic momentum, and strengthen workforce mobility.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Erica S. Harper, Ph.D., is the program director of medical assisting and director of social and human services at Wilkes Community College. She holds a Ph.D. from Old Dominion University and has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and the North Carolina Community College System. Her work focuses on adult learner success, workforce development, healthcare education, and creating flexible pathways that support student achievement and economic mobility.

Assessment as Sensemaking: Community College Faculty Chair Perspectives

**by Andrew Neuendorf, Ed.D.
Iowa State University**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how faculty chairs at a large, Midwestern community college understand and engage with the assessment of student learning outcomes within academic programs. This study was informed by two conceptual paradigms of assessment: accountability and improvement. Sensemaking was used as a theoretical framework to engage faculty in a process of retrospective meaning-making. Six faculty program chairs were asked to consider the purposes and challenges of assessment within their departments and to reflect on the use of a meta-assessment rubric.

The focus of this study was to understand how academic programs engage with assessment and to consider the role of reflection in the process of assessing student learning outcomes. This study found that the assessment of student learning outcomes at community colleges is best understood as a sensemaking process. Faculty chairs confirmed the benefits and limitations of the accountability and improvement paradigms as described in the research literature.

Participants also acknowledged the role that reflection plays in program-level assessment and discussed opportunities and challenges of expanding the use of reflection. Instituting a process of reflective meta-assessment at the site college would help engage faculty in sensemaking and the construction of plausible narratives that would include, yet transcend, the accountability and improvement paradigms. This study contributes to the understanding of how community college faculty chairs engage with assessment, the theoretical and practical applications of sensemaking to assessment, and the role of reflective meta-assessment applied to student learning outcomes within academic programs.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Andrew Neuendorf, Ed.D., is associate academic dean of manufacturing, engineering, trades, and transportation at Des Moines Area Community College in Ankeny, Iowa. He has more than 20 years of higher education experience, with previous roles including professor of English, district chair of humanities, and director of assessment. He earned his Ed.D. from Iowa State University in 2022 and was awarded the Graduate Research Excellence Award for his dissertation *Assessment as Sensemaking: Community College Faculty Chair Perspectives*.

Responding to California Community College Enrollment Decline: A Grounded Theory Model to Add a Chief Enrollment Management Officer

**by Daniel James Predoehl, Ed.D.
San Diego State University**

Set in 2023, this study was deployed at the lowest point of enrollment in the California community college system since 2008 which was the highest point of enrollment in the system's history. The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was two-fold: (1) to understand the phenomenon of California community colleges predominantly lacking the cabinet-level position of a chief enrollment management officer (CEMO); and (2) to develop a theoretical model for California community college presidents to consider if a president was to add a CEMO position to their executive cabinet. This study employed the epistemological framework of pragmatism and the theoretical frameworks of institutional theory, the SEM Administrative Orientation, and the IEPI SEM Organizing Framework to answer two research questions to explain the phenomenon and to develop the grounded theory.

Interviews with 16 California community college presidents produced the phenomenological explanation that coercive isomorphic influence by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, a predilection to the SEM Academic Orientation, and a lack of urgency presently explain the lack of a chief enrollment management officer position on a California community college president's cabinet. Based on three overarching themes, (1) Indoctrination, perpetuation, and systemization of California community college structures; (2) Abdication, abduction, and accountability of SEM responsibility; and (3) Imagining the unimaginable: Envisioning a California community college chief enrollment management officer, this study produced a nine item model which presidents can use to assess an institution's readiness for a CEMO, to build the CEMO position, and to implement the role within a California community college.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Dan Predoehl, Ed.D., is a strategic enrollment management leader with more than 20 years of experience across public and private higher education, including student services, instruction, noncredit education, and institutional strategy. He currently serves as assistant dean of extended learning and director of the Emeritus Institute at Saddleback College, where he leads large-scale instructional programming that advances access, equity, lifelong learning, and student transition pathways. His professional work sits at the intersection of enrollment strategy, equity-centered planning, student success, and organizational design, with a focus on helping community colleges build the executive structures needed for sustainable enrollment growth. His doctoral work and ongoing research examine executive-level enrollment leadership in California community colleges, with particular attention to the factors that influence presidential support for creating a chief enrollment management officer position. Through this work, Dr. Predoehl contributes to national conversations on how community colleges can align enrollment strategy, equity, institutional mission, and institutional vitality to better serve students and strengthen long-term outcomes. Dr. Predoehl connects professionally on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/danpredoehl/

“A Lift-Up, Not a Handout”: Exploring the Impact of Resource Scarcity and Emergency Microgrants on Community College Students

**by Heather Weinstein, Ed.D.
Northern Illinois University**

More community college students are facing resource scarcity, struggling with insufficient means to cover essential expenses and unexpected costs that might hinder their ability to fully engage in their education. Research increasingly highlights the crucial role of sufficient financial resources in facilitating the academic success of community college students, as a scarcity of such resources can hinder their academic performance. In response, community colleges are more frequently administering emergency microgrant programs to assist students who lack the financial means to meet essential expenses. Although there is a growing body of research on the impact of basic needs insecurity and emergency grants on academic outcomes, there is a notable lack of literature offering qualitative insights into how community college students experience resource scarcity and the effect of emergency microgrants on their educational experience.

The aim of this study was to investigate how community college students experienced resource scarcity and how receiving an emergency microgrant influenced their engagement with the college and their educational journey. This study was guided by Scarcity Theory (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014) and the Perna and Thomas Conceptual Model for Student Success (2008), employing a qualitative instrumental case study methodology. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten participants who received emergency microgrants. Three themes emerged from the research: (1) resource scarcity creates mental strain and hinders academic engagement, (2) emergency microgrants provide immediate financial and emotional relief, and (3) emergency microgrants foster students’ sense of institutional support and care. The findings suggest that community college leaders, including those in both academic and student affairs, should view emergency microgrants not merely as financial assistance but as both (1) a critical academic intervention and (2) a tool to support students’ mental health and well-being.

[Read the full dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Heather Weinstein, Ed.D., is a dedicated educator committed to advancing student success and economic mobility. She brings extensive leadership experience across education, business, and nonprofit sectors to her work at the Community College of Vermont (CCV), where she serves as dean of strategic initiatives and student affairs. In this role, Dr. Weinstein leads high-impact initiatives that advance the college's mission and strategic priorities. She oversees a comprehensive student affairs program and the operations of CCV's 10 academic centers, ensuring effective, student-centered service delivery statewide. As chair of the President's Council, she helps shape institutional strategy and leadership direction. She also leads CCV's strategic planning efforts and co- led the college through its most recent reaccreditation process.

Dr. Weinstein's research explores how resource scarcity affects community college students and how institutions can respond effectively. Her work highlights emergency microgrants as both a financial support and a powerful signal of institutional care that strengthens student engagement and success.

She holds a doctorate in community college leadership from Northern Illinois University, a master's degree in administration, supervision, and curriculum development and management from Georgian Court University, and a bachelor's degree in English and secondary education from East Stroudsburg University. She lives in Vermont with her husband and two sons.

The Silent Heroes: Exploring the Perspectives and Experiences of Military Spouses Within the Community College Transfer Process

**by Jennifer Wisely, Ed.D.
North Carolina State University**

Military spouses, characterized by their transient lifestyles and unique challenges, represent a distinct and often overlooked population within higher education (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Shaler et al., 2017). Despite many military spouses aspiring to further their education, fewer than 50% attain a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Community colleges often serve as a critical starting point for many of these students (Congressional Budget Office, 2019), given their affordable nature and accessibility; however, transferring to baccalaureate-granting institutions frequently presents significant obstacles. Previous research has predominantly focused on veterans, leaving a notable gap in understanding the experiences of military spouses in higher education, particularly as transfer students (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012).

This basic qualitative study aimed to better understand the perspectives and experiences of active-duty military spouses as they navigate the transfer process from community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Using the 4-S Model, developed through Schlossberg's Transition Theory, as a framework, this research investigated the situation, self, supports, and strategies shaping military spouses' academic journeys.

Findings reveal that military spouses navigate unique challenges, including frequent relocations, prolonged separations due to deployment, and limited career opportunities. The military spouses in this study followed a progression or "stages" of growth. First, they felt weighed down and defeated by the military lifestyle (situation) and the stereotypes placed on them (self). Over time, they seemed to come to terms with the reality of their situation and adapt to their lifestyle. They accepted the need to be practical, recognizing that they could not change certain challenges. Finally, through the support of their immediate family members and close military community (support), they transitioned to a place of empowerment, turning those stereotypes into motivation to succeed and using their unique experiences as military spouses to their advantage (strategy). This progression—from feeling defeated to finding agency— informed the recommendations.

This study is significant for policymakers, military leadership, and higher education institutions because it provides evidence-based insights to inform the design of targeted programs and policies. By emphasizing the voices of military spouses, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of their experiences and advocates for systemic changes to better support this vital yet underrepresented population. It underscores the resilience and sacrifices of military spouses.

[Read the dissertation here.](#)

Bio

Jennifer Wisely, Ed.D., is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served as an attack helicopter mechanic and aerial observer, completing three deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Following her military service, she continued her commitment to the military community as a military spouse, supporting her husband, a now-retired Marine, through multiple duty stations across the country.

Dr. Wisely earned both her Bachelor of Business Administration and Master of Science in accounting from Texas A&M University. She is currently a business instructor at Coastal Carolina Community College, where she is dedicated to advancing student success, particularly for military-affiliated learners. Her professional work is complemented by her leadership roles as treasurer of the Children’s Museum of Jacksonville and as a leader within the Military Spouse Kickball Association.

She has been recognized for her excellence in education, including being named Educator of the Year at Coastal Carolina Community College and receiving the Edgar J. & Ethel B. Boone Adult & Community College Leadership Award from North Carolina State University.



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