Ethical Leadership in Community Colleges: Navigating Challenges through the Lenses of Justice, Critique, Care, and Local Community

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Introduction

In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Rosenberg (2024) boldly stated the role of college president in the United States had become "nearly impossible," claiming that:
> either colleges are doing a remarkable job of selecting as their presidents a rogue's gallery of the unscrupulous and the incompetent or—much more likely—they are selecting people who…are being asked to do a job that has become, in many cases, not just difficult or unpleasant, but nearly impossible. (p. 12)

Indeed, the landscape for college leaders, not just college presidents, has become ever more challenging post-pandemic as community colleges struggle to fulfill their open-access missions with limited resources and declining confidence in postsecondary education. With recent opinion polls showing only 36% of Americans as having a "great deal" of confidence in higher education, community college leaders must rethink traditional offerings to address mounting concerns related to cost and relevance; meanwhile, college employee resistance to change has led to increased internal turmoil and leadership turnover (Wood, 2023a). From both internal and external sources, community college leaders are finding themselves facing "unreasonable demands and intolerable critics" (Rosenberg, 2024, subtitle).

A 2023 survey conducted by U.S. News – Harris Poll found that 60% of respondents believed college leaders were "failing students," because they lacked ethical leadership traits such as authenticity, trustworthiness, honesty, and loyalty (Wood, 2023b). While there are many traits needed for community college leaders to be successful, including academic and business acumen, it is ethical leadership that is most needed as "this is a moment for moral courage and moral clarity" (Wood, 2023b, para. 19). Vaughn (2000) asserted that a focus on ethical leadership is not surprising as ethical dilemmas are inherent for community colleges because of their interactions with society. In this light, the challenges facing community college leaders can be seen as ethical dilemmas. These challenges include increased federal and state regulations (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022), enrollment declines and budget reductions (Edgecombe, 2022; Weissman, 2024), the expansion of artificial intelligence (Silver, 2023; U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, 2023), and the rise of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation (Associated Press, 2024; Geary, 2023; Karanth, 2024). The solutions college leaders adopt to address these challenges will not only reflect the unique context of each institution but also the underlying values that drive each leader's decisions.

Ethical Leadership and Ethical Paradigms

How a college leader responds to internal and external challenges stems from their leadership values. Understanding ethical leadership and the use of ethical paradigms is critical to the success of today's community college leaders. Rising to internal and external pressures has never been easy as college leaders also deal with conflict of interest, equity and fairness, trust, and credibility issues along with having the responsibility to morally develop students. Vaughn (1992), as cited in Trent (2016), emphasized the responsibilities of community college presidents in the creation of an ethical environment stating, "Final responsibility for ethics does indeed rest with the president, whether the president chooses to promote ethical conduct or run the risk of ignoring ethical misconduct" (p. 19). Wood and Nevarez (2014) explained that "to understand what it means to be an ethical leader, one must first understand leadership and that it is much more of an organic enterprise" (p. 15-16). Within this framing, ethical leadership becomes "the practice of inspiring others towards a desired outcome while exemplifying an established standard for moral living" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 16). College leaders must understand that practicing and promoting ethical decision-making assists with fostering trust and credibility, ensuring equity and fairness, promoting student success and equitable resource allocation along with upholding academic integrity, just to name a few. The fruits of practicing ethical leadership are many and benefit faculty, staff, students, and members of the local community.

Leaders take on various theoretical frameworks when making decisions. Wood and Nevarez (2014) described four paradigms upon which a leader may draw when leading organizations: the Ethic of Justice, the Ethic of Critique, the Ethic of Care, and the Ethic of Local Community. Wood and Nevarez (2014) noted there are other ethical models, but these four are most frequently used among community college leaders. College leaders who understand these ethical paradigms benefit by gaining greater insight into the values driving their decisions and the connections between the values and actions of themselves and other leaders, by being able to organize contextual factors and predict how these factors may influence leadership decisions, by providing greater opportunity to collaborate with others and influence decisions, and by being able to assess and learn from the course of action the leader takes. The four ethical paradigms are presented below with examples as to how they can be applied by community college leaders.

The Ethic of Justice. The concept of justice provides the underpinnings of the ethical paradigm that is arguably the most applied by community college leaders: the Ethic of Justice. The Ethic of Justice (Justice) is "grounded in the notion that the 'right' decision in each circumstance will be rooted in the 'rule of law' and the more abstract concepts of fairness, equity, and justice" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 57). Justice approaches decision-making from an impartially rational, unemotional, and public frame, assuming this "right" decision is grounded in "universal principles" accountable to a higher, moral law (Enomoto, 1997, p. 353). In this light, Justice is rule-based and is driven by the regulations and policies adopted by an organization (Beckner, 2004).

At its core, Justice is about fairness (Akram et. al, 2017). However, how fairness has been defined has varied over time with five general forms of justice emerging in the literature: procedural, substantive, retributive, remedial, and distributive (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). Procedural justice speaks to compliance with laws and regulations "in a manner that is neutral,

objective, and fair" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 52). In its application, procedural justice assumes fairness as inherent in the law and can be seen as due process and other efforts to maintain consistency and alignment with the established policies and procedures of the organization. Substantive justice also seeks consistency but questions "the fairness of rules, codes, policies, and standards" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 52), challenging the procedural notion that these regulations are by default just; however, once regulations have been determined "fair," they should then be followed.

The Ethic of Justice has been infused into many aspects of the community college environment. Our commitment to fairness can be seen in our human resource practices—such as due process and progressive discipline—in our admissions processes, and in scholarship applications. From how we hire, apply grading rubrics, establish objective criteria for budgeting, and make resources available to students, Justice drives community college leaders to seek impartiality, consistency, and equality in each decision they make. With increasing state and federal compliance requirements, Justice is an effective tool in documenting an organization's commitment to fairness and can protect the institution from litigation and other external complaints. Justice can be seen in our bureaucratic structures that are hierarchical, emphasize divisions of labor to ensure consistency and impartiality, and reinforce the role of specialized experts as those best suited to make isolated decisions (Febrianti et. al, 2022; Anderson, 2019). The language community college leaders use in describing their work also connotes a Justice focus in terms such as "democracy's college," "access for all," and "all boats rise with the tide," emphasizing fairness as the grounding principle of the community college's mission (Bowen & Muller, 1999; Mejia et. al, 2023).

Community college leaders applying the Ethic of Justice have also had an impact over the years on issues of equity within the lens of equality. For example, the open access philosophy undergirding these institutions has made them home to the most diverse student population within higher education. Fairness-minded regulations have also been embraced, such as with Title IX guidelines that brought parity in resources for women's athletic programs (Kenney, 2013). In addition, recent system-focused changes, such as remedial education reform and improved student planning and advising tools, have demonstrated progress in closing performance gaps using a Justice lens (Bickerstaff et. al, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2021). Each of these solutions has emphasized standardization and equality in application, both underpinnings of a Justice-based philosophy.

Despite their focus on fairness, leaders applying the Ethic of Justice have not succeeded in closing longstanding equity gaps in student performance. Critics of Justice-minded efforts argue that this approach too often prioritizes the interests of the institution over the interests of individuals and reinforces a status quo that fails to serve students and communities who have been historically underserved. While Justice may appear to be impartial, decisions made by community college leaders under the banner of fairness have often resulted in outcomes that were partial and subjective (Wood & Nevarez, 2014).

The Ethic of Critique. The Ethic of Critique developed in part as a counter to the Ethic of Justice. The Ethic of Critique (Critique) has been defined as "a decision-making paradigm which is critical of societal inequities, and is committed to uncovering, challenging, and overcoming

inequities through social justice" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 71). Unlike Justice's inherent belief in the rule of law, Critique assumes that laws cannot be trusted because subjugation is inherent in all societal structures (McLaren, 2003). Critique also questions the wisdom of objective and rational decision-making as championed within the Ethic of Justice, perceiving that objective rationality perpetuates injustice by ignoring or minimizing the actual consequences of the decisions being made (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Thus, the Ethic of Critique challenges community college leaders to question fairness and impartiality as the most important aspects of ethical decision making.

The origins of the Ethic of Critique are found in critical theory. Stemming from the work of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s, critical theory analyzed social inequities through an economic lens, asserting that economic systems determined the human condition (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). Through this paradigm, society is split between the "base," or the economic systems undergirding a society, and the "superstructure," or the social organizations and systems built upon the base. Values and pressures from the base inherently influence the superstructure, causing the inequities in the base to play out in the social organizations and systems that base informs. Thus, critical theory drives to "liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244).

There are three core elements to the Ethic of Critique. First, Critique assumes oppression and subjugation are inherent in the human social condition (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). Any system that is built, regardless of the intentions of its designers, is flawed by oppression. Second, Critique emphasizes "critical enlightenment," which focuses on exposing and understanding power interests and relationships within a social structure (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 69). Believing in the existence of oppression and making the oppression visible leads to the final core element of action played out through "social justice," or a commitment to "emancipating and empowering society's oppressed" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 69). With its focus on the consequences of decisions, social justice may play out differently within different scenarios and for different individuals as consistency and uniformity are less important outcomes.

While much of the original work around critical theory developed during a period where antisemitism was the prominent focus, over time it has evolved to include issues of race, gender, class, disability, and other characteristics marginalized within social systems and structures. Critique aligns well to recent civil rights movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, LGBTQ rights, and the anti-sexual assault Me Too campaign (Kelderman, 2023; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). As community colleges are located within communities, these movements have played out across college campuses and have prompted some leaders to question the norms and traditions of higher education as they apply to local decisions and structures. Leaders employing Critique have pushed for more scrutiny of policy and for more action in addressing persistent gaps in student performance that emerge when data is disaggregated by student demographics (Camardelle et al., 2022; Phan, 2019). As Tierney (1992) noted, "A model of integration that never questions who is to be integrated and how it is to be done assumes an individualistic stance of human nature and rejects differences based on categories such as class, race, and gender" (p. 611). The status quo, these leaders have argued, is not good as blatant disparities in outcomes for specific students and communities reinforce existing and severe social and economic challenges.

The Ethic of Critique has informed many current strategies that contain an equity or social justice goal. For example, many colleges have made commitments to set hiring targets for faculty and staff of color, to modify course curriculum to be more inclusive by design, and to review college policies and procedures to remove biases and inequitable practices. Other colleges have increased the involvement of families and community members, specifically for students of color and other underserved student groups, so that these predominant stories about what student success looks like are challenged, and the networks and resources families and communities can provide are leveraged (Mertes, 2013). Critique strategies have also included a push for universal design (or redesign) of all student learning and engagement experiences, abandoning the historical focus on traditional-aged, full-time, non-neurodiverse students (Nance, 2022; Serrano-Johnson, 2020).

Unfortunately, the Ethic of Critique has faced significant criticism and opposition in recent years. In 2021, Ray and Gibbons reported that nine states had passed legislation banning aspects of critical race theory and 20 additional states were in the process of introducing similar legislation. In 2023, Texas was one of a handful of states prohibiting DEI offices at colleges and universities with DEI opponents claiming that "an emphasis on equity in terms of outcomes will overlook individual merit and qualifications" and will undermine "a sense of unity in society" (Gasman, 2023, para 3). In this difficult political climate, community college leaders have been pressured by legislators, donors, and sometimes even faculty and staff, to step away from practices and values supported by the Ethic of Critique while at the same time being expected by others to champion Critique-supported strategies and structures (Mangan, 2023). These pressures place community college leaders employing Critique in difficult and potentially risky situations.

The Ethic of Care. According to Wood and Nevarez (2014), the Ethic of Care (Care) is a leadership approach that is grounded on Gilligan's moral development theory. This theory suggests that moral reasoning is influenced by the context and the relationships of the decision-makers. Gilligan's moral development theory is considered a feminist perspective, as it focuses on otherness and relationships which challenge the dominant male-oriented models of morality (Gilligan, 1977). The Ethic of Care paradigm emphasizes the importance of empathy, compassion, and responsibility for others in leadership. However, Wood and Nevarez (2014) point out that the Ethic of Care paradigm is not exclusive to women, and that men can also adopt and practice this leadership style based on care and compassion for others and the importance of relationships. They also suggest that this paradigm fosters a culture of trust, collaboration and empowerment among the school community.

A leader who adopts the Ethic of Care paradigm is attentive to the needs and feelings of others and strives to create positive and supportive relationships within the organization (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). The leader shows empathy for the staff, community, students, and respects their diversity and perspectives. This empathy is often demonstrated through personal contact with employees with the focus on engaging the employee in a meaningful manner. The leader is not self-centered, but rather focuses on the well-being and success of the organization. Ivany (2019) defines empathy as:

a willingness to treat everyone with respect, a readiness to separate a person's belief from the individual, humility to appreciate the gifts and dreams of others, and an openness to learn about people from different cultures and their view of the world. (p. 28)

The Care leader was especially important during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when leaders had to be sensitive and responsive to the needs and emotions of their staff and others who were affected by illness and loss. Leaders who followed this ethic made decisions that were flexible and compassionate, and truly understood the challenges individuals were facing during this difficult time (Schultz, 2022). Another way that the Ethic of Care can manifest in community college leadership is through the promotion of shared governance and the involvement of all relevant groups in the decision-making process. Shared governance is a model that allows different constituencies to participate in shaping the policies and practices of the college or university (Kater & Burke, 2022). Key to successful implementation of a shared governance model are the leadership characteristics of building trust and relationships, which are consistent with the Care paradigm.

One of the ethical challenges that leaders often encounter is how to balance their concern for others with their responsibility to uphold standards and values. While the leaders who adopt an Ethic of Care approach emphasize empathy, understanding, and relationships in their leadership style, they must still be able to address unethical behaviors without risking the reputation of the college. Although they care deeply about the well-being of their followers and try to avoid harming them, they must uphold the standards set forth by the college. This can also create a dilemma when they must deal with an issue that might negatively affect someone for whom they care. In such situations, leaders who practice an Ethic of Care are pushed to rely on other aspects of their leadership, such as integrity, justice, and accountability, acknowledging that caring for others does not mean ignoring or condoning unethical behaviors. In addition, leaders adopting Care need to be able to detach themselves from their personal feelings and act in the best interest of the organization and the common good. As Wood and Nevarez (2014) point out, the Ethic of Care leader needs to overcome their tendency to avoid conflict and maintain harmony at the expense of ethical standards. The Ethic of Care leader needs to be able to confront and resolve ethical issues in a fair and respectful way.

The Ethic of Local Community. According to Wood and Nevarez (2014), the Ethic of Local Community (Local Community) is a leadership approach that prioritizes the well-being of the local community in decision-making. The Local Community paradigm is based on the theories of utilitarianism and communitarianism, which both emphasize the collective good over the individual good. Wood and Nevarez trace the origin of utilitarianism to the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who argued that the best actions are those that maximize the happiness or welfare of the society or the community. Communitarianism, as explained by Wood and Nevarez, is similar to utilitarianism in its focus on the community, but it also stresses the importance of shared values, norms, and identities that bind the community together.

Community colleges are examples of organizations that embody the Ethic of Local Community, as their mission and vision are centered on improving the quality of life of the community. These institutions offer programs, curricula, and partnerships that cater to the needs and interests of the community, including the promotion of workforce development, open access, and low tuition

costs, which are aligned with the principles of utilitarianism and communitarianism (Karam et al., 2022). Local Community-oriented leaders guide the organization with a vision that prioritizes the common good, fostering a culture of service and collaboration among the members of the organization. These leaders practice servant leadership, which is based on the principles of empathy, stewardship, and ethical decision-making (Wood & Nevarez, 2014).

Community engagement and local context are crucial for Ethic of Local Community leaders. Community partnerships are vital for the local community leader, as such partnerships offer a way to achieve specific goals and objectives that benefit the community. These leaders need to regularly interact with their defined community and meet its needs in a timely manner. Such an approach also requires greater visibility and activity in the community, signaling to government, industry, and other local stakeholders the college's external investment (Gearhart & Miler, 2018). Leaders manifesting Local Community philosophies in their work allocate resources in response to community interests, such as dedicating funding to assist local municipalities attracting new businesses or corporations to the community with a focus on the potential economic benefits (Karam et al., 2022). This engagement can also involve public/private partnerships with industry visibility on campus; dedicated scholarships and other resources for key external constituent groups, such as an industry partner's employees or incumbent workers receiving government aid; and, specific program development and budget prioritization based on the needs of external partners.

Community college leaders embodying the Ethic of Local Community must remain aware of both external and internal pressures and expectations. As the Association of Governing Boards noted, college leaders are "expected to meet an endless stream of individual needs and specific demands within and outside the institution" (as cited in Bourgeois, 2016, p. 15). The Local Community paradigm encourages a "reductionist view of the college's perspective mission," which can run counter to the traditional view often held by faculty, staff, and community members that the "institution [should] be 'all things to all people'" (Wood & Nevarez, 2014, p. 109). Seeking strategies and investments that support the greater good of the community will only be successful if individual relationships and interests are also attended to.

Synthesis of Ethical Paradigms

As presented above, each of the four ethical paradigms—Justice, Critique, Care, and Local Community—can provide value to leaders navigating the challenges and complexities faced by community colleges in our day. In fact, the unique positioning of community colleges within higher education often requires leaders to apply components from multiple ethical paradigms in their decision-making. There is value in leaders seeing this multiplicity as a strength as opposed to self-restriction to a single paradigm. As Stumpf et al. (2011) emphasize, leaders need to examine each situation thoroughly and make the best decision that is consistent with their individual ethical principles and standards.

In the courses we teach on value-based decision-making, we routinely invite doctoral students to complete self-assessment inventories for each of the four ethical paradigms to help them better understand which paradigms resonate most with their approach to decision-making (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). Unsurprisingly, these students find themselves aligned to more than one ethic.

The combination of the ethics of Justice and Care is most common, with students balancing a sense of fairness and commitment to laws and rationality with a desire to create belonging and meet the needs of individuals. In a college setting, this can be seen as leaders using individual, anecdotal stories to inform institutional policies and regulations for students and employees or establishing "exception" procedures within standardized procedures and processes.

Other combinations of ethical paradigms also emerge. Justice and Local Community are often combined, encouraging decisions that prioritize local community needs within consistent, objective processes. Local Community and Care paradigms encourage leaders to foster the personal relationships behind local workforce or governmental demands, and Critique and Care place the interests of individuals and inequities above the pressures of compliance-driven regulations and the consistency of the status quo. Often, three ethics paradigms are combined, resulting in decision-making that integrates fairness, interpersonal care, local needs, and/or social justice strategies. All four ethical paradigms can even be combined, or at least aspects from each, in informing the values and decision-making approach community college leaders take.

Of course, the tensions that exist between different ethical paradigms can be challenging for community college leaders. For example, the Ethics of Care and Critique were developed as alternative approaches to the Ethic of Justice and question a leader's reliance on fairness and impartiality as core values in decision-making (Wood & Nevarez, 2014). The needs of local industry partners that emerge in the Ethic of Local Community do not always prioritize the impact of decisions on individuals, which could also create stress for leaders simultaneously aligned to Care or Critique. Leaders committed to established procedures within a Justice-mindset may be stretched as they also attempt to support faster-paced, spontaneous needs of local employers, and leaders concerned with maintaining interpersonal peace for employees and community members may struggle with conflict that results from social justice conversations and goals.

Despite these tensions, leaders are best positioned to lead through complexity and change when they view all four ethical paradigms as tools in fulfilling the mission of the community college. The future will require community college leaders to manage increasingly burdensome federal and state compliance requirements in a contentious, litigious environment. They will also need to attract and maintain a talented and engaged workforce in a highly competitive market; remain relevant and responsive to dramatic changes in local economic and social dynamics; and, successfully serve an increasingly diverse study body. The Ethics of Justice, Care, Local Community, and Critique each provide frameworks for leaders to support them in navigating the opportunities and challenges that will emerge in the future and to reinforce the values inherent to "democracy's college."

Conclusion

The community college landscape is undergoing significant transformation, and these institutions are challenged in finding leaders who are prepared to navigate the complex ethical decisions that lie ahead. The evolving role of community college leaders is marked by a critical need for competent, visionary individuals capable of seeing new solutions and opportunities while addressing the current and future demands of these organizations. Simultaneously, the ethical

challenges facing higher education in general—increased federal and state regulations, budgetary constraints, developing a diverse workforce, and the implications of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies—in addition to the unique ethical landscape of community colleges, characterized by issues such as non-selective admissions and low retention and completion rates, further underscore the importance of ethical leadership and the responsibility community college leaders hold. Ethical decision-making in this context is not achieved through mere adherence to moral standards; instead, it requires inspiring and guiding others towards positive outcomes through internal and external complexity. By using the ethical paradigms of Justice, Critique, Care, and Local Community as tools, community college leaders can establish ethical foundations that will allow them to weather the challenges these institutions face and bolster the environment in which community colleges can continue to fulfill their mission well into the future.

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