

Centering Justice, Community, and Leadership in Undergraduate Teacher Education

Tamara Spencer and Monica Fitzgerald

*Justice, Community, and Leadership Program,
School of Liberal Arts, Saint Mary's College of California*

Abstract

This paper offers a case study of how Saint Mary's College of California developed an undergraduate teacher education pathway that focuses on equity and social justice. Responding to the needs of students and families in California, Saint Mary's sought to cultivate an anti-racist pedagogy and cultural humility for future teachers. To do so required faculty to reimagine the traditional Liberal Studies curriculum that has historically been the route for undergraduates pursuing careers in teaching and to develop an entirely new curriculum. As the sphere of K-12 and higher education changes, and the demand for teachers continues to grow in the state, it is critical that teacher education programs are dynamic and responsive. They must be leaders in training for social justice.

Keywords: social justice education, community engagement, undergraduate teacher education, curriculum development

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If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up
with mine, then let us work together.

—*Lilla Watson*

As students in the undergraduate major Justice, Community, and Leadership enter the program offices at the university, a poster with this quotation from educator and activist Lilla Watson serves as a daily reminder of their collective work as future teachers. A liberatory education praxis grounds the program and its commitment to developing transformative teachers with cultural humility, anti-racist pedagogy, and an equity lens that fosters humanizing classroom spaces. This approach to an undergraduate major, combined with the state licensure coursework, provides a comprehensive framework for teacher preparation that provides practical teaching techniques alongside theories for social change.

In 2020, as the public grapples with the ongoing impact of societal inequity and systemic racism, a clear need for collective action towards social justice remains. K-12 teachers play a central role in advancing this commitment. Against this backdrop, today's generation of new graduates face unique economic, political, and COVID-19 related challenges that lead to uncharted paths towards professions. Institutions of higher education must scrutinize the curriculum to ensure that programs in teacher preparation deliberately center equity, justice, and advocacy in institutional and pedagogical ways. At our Californian, mission-based liberal arts college, we strongly advocate for a program that can move forward with the urgent and complex landscape of today's educational systems.

Preparing and retaining the teaching workforce perennially faces challenges. Both the most populous state in the United States and one of the most diverse, California remains a center stage for educational policy and reform in the United States (Public Policy Institute of California, 2020). Indeed, California's vast geographic, linguistic, and economic variability makes it one of the most complex states in which to envision curricular innovation and reform. Thus, as California shows clear signs that the state is unable to

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keep up with the current demand for new teachers, attention is once again on the ability of teacher education programs to stay in sync with the needs of the field (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

While the states grapple with demand for K-12 teachers, higher education is also struggling with how best to serve college students in today's unforeseen landscape. The purpose and value of liberal arts undergraduate education has become highly contested, as increased attention challenges the value of higher education for workplace preparation and success (Decatur, 2016). Historically, this journey has been particularly long and fraught for K-12 teacher education, as colleges and universities have siloed this work in schools of professional education. and in doing so, "institutions of higher education [have become] complicit in trends that continue to make public education more separate and unequal" (Mucher, 2014, n.p.). Also, looming federal and state professional teaching standards, standardized teacher performance assessments, and an increasing disconnect between student populations and those who will go on to teach them, results in a workforce that is largely disconnected from the undergraduate liberal arts program from which teacher preparation was once derived.

It is well established in both research and policy on social justice and teacher education (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016), that preservice teachers require "knowledge about diverse communities, in addition to subject matter expertise and pedagogical knowledge, to be effective" (p.18, Mule). Indeed, this is underscored in the mission of the California Commission of Teacher Credentialing, which is to "ensure integrity, relevance, and high quality in the preparation, certification, and discipline of the educators who serve all of California's diverse students." (n.p. 2018). As Darling-Hammond observes:

In classrooms most beginning teachers will enter, at least 25 percent of students live in poverty...from 10 to 20 percent have identified learning differences; 15 percent speak a language other than English as their primary language (many in urban settings), and about 40 percent are members of racial/ethnic 'minority' groups, many of them recent immigrants from countries with different educational systems and cultural tradition. (Darling-Hammond,

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cited in Mile, 2012, p. 12)

Thus, understanding the facets of diversity and inclusion, including the impact of systemic inequity, must be a priority in teacher education.

And yet, as issues of teacher retention linger, Darling-Hammond (2010) points out an unsettling relationship between teacher turnover and the teachers' self-assessment of performance and readiness for the profession that returns to considerations of the efficacy of the educator preparation program. To prepare teachers for lifelong careers, a teacher education program must be supported by a vision and institutional structure that values equity, democracy, and diversity, and holds these principles to be central to the purpose of schooling. In that sense, how might a small liberal-arts college have the capacity to deeply inform the nature of teacher education in a rapidly changing field and society?

In this article, we describe our Justice, Community, Leadership major, a pathway that all undergraduate teacher educators pursue at our mission-driven, liberal arts college in California. We seek to describe how a small-liberal arts college can develop an undergraduate teacher education pipeline that is rooted in an interdisciplinary core-curriculum undergraduate major while simultaneously preparing and credentialing high-quality teachers to work in diverse California public schools. As such, teacher education faces the immediate charge of orienting preparation in a perspective that works towards the common good.

Preparing Teachers for Careers in a Rapidly Changing Field and Society

Preparing and retaining high-quality teachers in the most populous state in the country remains a top priority and concern for the state of California. According to the California Teaching Commission (2020), 2014-2015 marked a critical time, as the projected need for new hires exceeded supply by approximately 6,000 teachers, with particularly pronounced needs in the areas of math, science, and special education. At the same time, enrollment in teacher education programs was at its lowest. Over a two year period, this lack of supply and increased demand resulted in nearly double the number of teachers hired on “substandard

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permits and credentials” to total “more than 7,700, comprising a third of all the new credentials issued in 2014–15” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016, n.p.). Darling-Hammond et al. (2016) go on to report:

As in previous years when California has experienced a shortage of qualified teachers, low-income students of color and students with special needs are disproportionately impacted by the shortage. According to California’s educator equity plan, in 2013–14, nearly twice as many students in high-minority as in low-minority schools were being taught by a teacher on a waiver or permit (a teacher not yet even enrolled in a preparation program). (p. ii)

Up until 2017, the customary path to a teaching credential in the state of California had largely relied upon “fifth year” postgraduate educator preparation programs in which a prospective teacher completed teaching requirements after completing an undergraduate bachelor’s degree. In 2016, however, the state adopted a series of financial incentives to increase the support of teachers, targeting undergraduate pathways as a viable route to the teaching profession (Freedburg & Fensterwald, 2016). To address this need, institutions across the state have reintroduced the undergraduate “4-year pathway to the profession,” which in turn, for us carved a deliberate space to expand our undergraduate pathways and to ensure an orientation towards social justice, community leadership, and equity defined them.

In addition, high-quality teacher preparation must not only attract students to the field of education but also provide a program of study that prepares teachers well and qualifies them to remain in the profession. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2016), “Non-retirement attrition is an even larger factor, typically accounting for two-thirds of teachers who leave...Turnover for beginners—who leave at much higher rates than other teachers—is influenced by how well novices are prepared prior to entry” (n.p.). Thus, those that prepare teachers are left with at least two pressing questions to address: 1) how can the state increase the number of qualified teacher candidates to enter the workforce and 2) in today’s changing landscape, how can teacher preparation programs still attract educators committed to long-term careers in the state?

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Simply acknowledging and valuing diversity is not adequate to address the needs of California classrooms. As Cochran-Smith (2004) aptly notes, “When teacher education is regarded as a political problem, all the policies related to the preparation of teachers are problematized and interrogated, particularly with regard to ideology” (p. 20). Mule (2010) further states that “critics of the status quo have emphasized the need for coherent, institutionalized ways of thinking about educating for diversity, and integrating this thinking not just in the curriculum but also structurally in the core values, beliefs and norms” (p.13) Rather, it is the reckoning that diversity is multifaceted and interconnected—i.e., race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic difference, dis/abilities, or linguistic backgrounds—that is interrelated with ongoing systemic inequities. Thus, teacher education that centers social justice and equity is grounded in a theoretical orientation that deconstructs power, privilege, and systemic oppression.

In K–12 settings, classroom teachers are central to the enactment of social justice pedagogy. Picower (2012) describes social justice in classroom settings as “trusting relationships [that] lay the foundation for democratic environments based on care, respect and liberation” (p. 6). Dover (2009), drawing from Carlisle et al. (2006), further defines social justice education through the enactment of the following five principles: “Inclusion and Equity; High Expectations; Reciprocal Community Relationships; System-Wide Approach; and Direct Social Justice Education and Intervention” (in Dover, 2009, p.509). Rather than characterizing social justice pedagogy as an addition to teacher preparation, teacher educators need to develop a deep understanding of how it might be integrated fully within the undergraduate academic programs of a university major for all future teachers

Mills and Ballantyne (2016) synthesized the past ten years of research on social justice and teacher education; their review identified four central components: 1. Teacher preparation programs where students frequently examined beliefs and attitudes on social justice and diversity; 2. Documented shifts in students' beliefs over the lifecycle of an academic program; 3. Extensive field experiences and service-learning that build upon and deepen

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a strong social justice focus and; 4. Coursework and preparation that did not shy away from critically examining the challenges and opportunities present in centering social justice and equity within the teaching profession and in teacher education (p. 264).

Liberal Arts Education and the Professional Landscape for College Graduates

The Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted a comprehensive employer report (2006) to identify the essential skills and outcomes required of employees in today's complex global economy. Above all recommendations, the report cited that the skills, knowledge, and disposition developed through a liberal arts education were most essential for today's complex and competitive global workforce. Employers prioritized the balance of a broad range of knowledge with the technical skills needed for any field. In addition, employers cautioned against overlooking the importance of this broad and comprehensive approach to higher education by focusing solely on the discrete skills required of a specific professional field. With this emphasis on the liberal arts, we are particularly interested in the relationship between a liberal arts college's commitment to social justice, high-quality teacher preparation for a complex professional landscape, and the intersection of that learning and discovery through community-based learning experiences. Community-engagement within a liberal arts program can be understood as the alignment of core academic outcomes and learning experiences within a course that partners with a community-partner. Brukardt et al. (as cited in Mull, 2010, p. 19) characterize community engagement as a method to "renew the civic mission of higher education and to expand the learning and discovery that has been at the foundation of the academy." Mull (2010) further aligns community engagement and teacher preparation when she writes, "Community-based pedagogy can increase preservice teachers' engagement with course content, enhance participants' civic and social responsibility, encourage innovative pedagogy among faculty, and contribute to the development of quality education for diversity" (p. 23). While teacher preparation programs have long required field-based teaching

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experience to meet state licensure requirements, we distinctly consider those community experiences that occur outside of classrooms so that students can examine the “interconnections between their experience and their responsibilities as members of social or professional communities (St. Mary’s College of California, 2020).

By prioritizing the value of a liberal arts education, we developed an undergraduate major/teacher education pathway that aligned the hallmarks of a liberal arts education with the needs of today’s teaching landscape. Roose and Zande (2005) align excellence in teacher education with the liberal arts as “preparing preservice teachers who are broadly educated, have a strong command of content knowledge and pedagogy, and are thoughtful and discerning professionals. Students from such an institution are active learners, critical thinkers, problem solvers, decision-makers and risk takers” (p. 5). Furthermore, we argue that the liberal arts teacher preparation is particularly poised to offer a nuanced and comprehensive program to develop social justice when institutions leverage the following: a vast array of content-area coursework through a core curriculum, a commitment to community engagement and field-based experiences, and a social justice and equity framework to situate the major through which students are credentialed.

A Justice, Community and Leadership Framework for Undergraduate Teacher Education

Critical theory is a key component of student learning. Utilizing the Freirean pedagogy of co-education and theory to praxis, faculty and students collaborate on creating knowledge in the classroom and working in the community. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, 2018) is revisited by students several times in the program, as they get deeper into analyzing what it means to create liberatory spaces and the radical potential of education. Students read feminist theorist hooks (1994) to understand intersectionality, feminism, and black feminist thought as well as to explore oppression and liberation. Students are exposed to scholar-activists, such as Ginwright (2009), who writes about urban education and the need for what he calls radical healing.

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Ginwright offers a window into how to empower young students to create change in the world, recognizing the need for teachers to help heal the trauma experienced by racism. Throughout the program, students are exposed to authors with a multicultural education framework (i.e., Gay, 2018; May & Sleeter, 2010; Oakes, 2015), that challenges them to evaluate their own internal biases, examine the structures of oppression, and understand how teachers play a critical role in deconstructing racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia.

Students take multiple community engagement classes. However, as research shows, without proper preparation to work in communities, this sort of service-learning can actually inflict harm on the partner communities and reify existing biases in students (Stoeker, 2016). Pre-service teachers must have an asset-based approach to their school communities and families, which we foster through targeted community engagement experiences. From comprehensive research on collaborative community engagement Mule (2010) notes, “Teacher education for diversity should involve a combination of university/college, school and community-based activities” (p. 121). Thus, community engagement is multifaceted, fully embedded in the curricula of a liberal arts program. Institutional level commitment and sustained support are the critical mechanisms required for its enactment.

The Teachers for Tomorrow Program at Saint Mary’s College of California

Founded by the Christian Brothers, a Catholic order founded over 300 years ago by John Baptiste De La Salle to teach the poor, Saint Mary’s College of California has a long history of supporting teacher education and its mission of educating the whole person. The Teachers for Tomorrow program (TFT) first began in the 1980s as the Diversified Liberal Arts major to align with the mission. The program changed its name and curriculum twice in the 1990s, first to Liberal Studies and then to Liberal & Civic Studies. For many years St. Mary’s program mirrored others across the state as a 4 year Liberal Studies program with a 5th year to complete the credential and optional Masters in Teaching. TFT was a signature program of the College and produced

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students with successful long term teaching careers (Brunetti & Marston, 2018).

Like other Liberal Studies programs, the required courses for TFT across the sciences, humanities and social sciences offered a breadth of exposure to fields of study but did not address the growing and distinct needs in California for teachers who had a much greater understanding of the multicultural context of their students, families and school communities. As the College changed its general education requirements, or core curriculum, to explore global perspectives, American diversity, and community engagement, the Liberal and Civic Studies Program began to reimagine its major with more of a critical grounding in social justice and equity. As a mission-based Catholic Liberal Arts College, the program had the advantage of a mission with the core values of concern for the poor, addressing the whole needs of the student, respect for all persons, and social justice. The faculty wanted to strengthen the program by reducing some of the interdisciplinary requirements (reducing breadth) while adding more depth. The program faculty rewrote the mission statement, learning objectives, and course offerings to focus on equity, leadership, and justice. These changes also aligned with the College's Academic Blueprint of curricular programming that responded to societal needs and characterization of students as servant-leaders.

In 2014, LCS became the Justice, Community, and Leadership Program (JCL), developing a deeper focus on critical pedagogies, with a commitment to equity and liberatory education. In a year-long process, the faculty surveyed current and former students, invited key partners throughout the campus from different schools and units, and researched other programs throughout the country. Working-groups were tasked to develop new courses, learning goals, curriculum maps, and pre-service teacher community engagement experiences. We created courses and experiences that educate students on histories and critical theories about systems of oppression (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, abilities, environmental) on a local, national, and global scale. Using counter-narratives and stories, critical self-reflection, and an intentional learning community, the program helps develop empathy, cultural humility, and allyship. Creating a strong department culture is

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critical, and JCL faculty regularly conduct assessments, collect student feedback, and hold workshops and retreats to evaluate our strengths, areas of development, and student needs. This ensures consistent evaluation, growth, and change.

In the U.S., approximately 83% of the teaching workforce is White (Colby & Ortmon, 2015), and the JCL program demographics tend to mirror national averages, with the vast majority of our students also identifying as women. Consistent with the research on race, social justice, and teacher education (e.g., Picower, 2012) many students enter the major with little to no experience examining teaching as a political act, rooted in systemic inequity and oppression. In addition, consistent with the JCL program's theoretical orientation, is a coordinated effort to diversify the teaching pool to better represent the demographics of the state of California, which is 59% White, 39% Latinx, and 5.8% Black (Census, 2018). To recruit more students (and future teachers) of color, we also created targeted transfer program articulation agreements with local community colleges identifying as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI). With the growth and expansion of the major, the college also went from one full-time faculty member to five. JCL has added four tenure-track faculty, all faculty of color. Through ongoing meetings, the development of symposia, speaker series, and maintaining an active and present voice on the campus, the JCL faculty and staff continually evaluate actions based on the mission of the program and college, understanding our focus and commitment to social justice as both embodied and ongoing.

Teaching and Learning in the Justice, Community and Leadership Major

Justice, Community, and Leadership (JCL) is an interdisciplinary program in which students learn how to analyze and engage with some of the most pressing social, educational, and environmental justice issues of our times. While the teaching credential programs and pedagogy are offered outside of the JCL major within the Teacher Education Department, the JCL program courses interweave foundational theories and perspectives on schooling, equity, and society into all major courses. Through

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training in critical theory, leadership studies, policy and education, and with an emphasis on humility and self-reflection, we prepare our students to participate in and lead collective endeavors to make the world a better place.

One of the challenges to create an integrated program in a liberal arts school is managing the major requirements, CTC standards, and the general education requirement (core requirements at Saint Mary's). In revising the major, we aligned classes with the core. For example, our Introductory class meets 3 requirements: community engagement, common good, and American diversity. The Environmental Justice course meets global perspective, and our theory and methods class meets the university's social/historical./cultural core requirement. We have also embedded some of the Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) in JCL courses. We also created partial credit courses to enhance some of their applied learning, for example, Outdoor Education, Using the Garden as a Classroom; or Mini Math and Science Games for the Classroom. We have three capstone courses on critical self-reflection, community engagement, and research that are designed for students to demonstrate their growth in our learning outcomes. The program learning outcomes reflect the need to develop teachers who are engaged critical thinkers committed to the common good (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Justice, Community, and Leadership Major Learning Outcomes

- Knowledge.** Demonstrate an understanding of engaged pedagogy, critical theory, and social systems as related to justice and leadership studies and be able to apply theoretical explanations to empirical examples.
 - Research.** Use data analysis and interpretation, appropriate library and information literacy skills, and field research to articulate and interpret the complexities of significant social issues.
 - Application.** By using leadership studies and critical theory, assess a complex social or community issue and develop multiple viable strategies that contribute to a more just social order.
 - Communication.** Effectively use oral, written, and new media formats to educate, advocate, and collaborate with multiple audiences.
 - Reflection.** Demonstrate, through written and oral self-assessment and reflection, an understanding of the impact of their own academic learning experience and how it prepares them for a life of active citizenship.
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Many of our courses include working with community members and organizations to learn from their expertise on both the impact of and ideas for addressing structural inequity. Together with these community experts, we grapple with the complexity of policies, laws, and cultural practices that disadvantage some groups of people while benefiting others and consider how we can be a part of leading for social change. Students in our program go on to work in diverse fields—education, the non-profit sector, law, social entrepreneurship, government, and public health—yet they share a common aim to make the world more socially just.

As another example, in the introductory course, JCL 10, students learn about community engagement theories and best practices while conducting direct service with an agency or school in the Bay Area. In the capstone community engagement class, student groups work collaboratively with a community partner on a project. Past projects have included an array of outcomes such as a gap analysis for a local homeless shelter, a college resource website for first-generation college students, training videos for parents with special needs children, institutional histories, and co-created curriculum on diversity for school districts.

When the pandemic altered the semester in spring 2020, students pivoted to help their partners cope with new and urgent needs, helping to develop websites, wellness resources, and community outreach strategies. This capstone class on community engagement also uses theory to praxis by asking students to interrogate systemic oppression and apply their leadership theory to an anti-racist agenda. To be in community and in collaboration with its members is a much different type of service than “volunteering” to “help” or “save” a community. It’s critical that teachers see themselves as partners in the communities in which they serve and value the assets and strengths the community and families bring. Working with Komives’s *Leadership for a Better World, Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development* (2016), students reframe leadership from a top-down approach to a collaborative, community-centered theory that fosters capacity building spaces to create change. This theory to praxis approach enables students to see their classrooms as a microcosm of the larger social, political, economic, and cultural

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structures of our society and see themselves as agents of change.

Since its inception, the JCL major has become the fastest-growing major in the School of Liberal Arts, seeing a 40% increase in students, with a 100% job placement rate. The Association of American Colleges and Universities recognized JCL along with 21 other colleges for innovative curriculum design, and the program was chosen as one of 9 departments to be featured case studies of civic learning programs (Longo et al., 2017). This recognition spotlights the growing demand and importance of rethinking the liberal studies model of undergraduate teacher education programs for a deeper focus on equity. With an increase in the ethnic, linguistic, and economic diversity in the population, and amid a national conversation on racism, sexism, and homophobia, it is more prescient than ever that teacher education programs respond to the call to educate for justice.

Towards Embodied Justice, Community, and Leadership in Teacher Education

While elementary education undergraduate majors still remain the most common path to the profession, liberal arts colleges often prioritize a major outside of the credential area that supports a cross-disciplinary approach to entering the teaching profession (Datawheel, 2020). Lederhouse (2014) contends that liberal arts preparation provides a means to prepare teachers who are agents of change, embodying justice, making ethical and reasoned decisions, and acting in a Christ-like manner. We concur with this assertion and believe that critical thinking, concise writing, teamwork, and strong verbal communication skills are integral in the art and science of effective instruction. We strive to train culturally-responsive teachers for students with diverse needs and backgrounds—teachers who are prepared to make thousands of moment-by-moment decisions with a breadth of knowledge to make connections across content areas. We believe that we have an opportunity to repair this divide with liberal arts, mission-driven education that both coexists with and complements teacher preparation, simultaneously improving teacher preparation processes and elevating the profession.

Liberal arts education and teacher preparation programs are

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increasingly attending to the need for a more deliberately inclusive curriculum, however, the JCL model shifts this priority to the foreground. McDonald and Zeichner (2008) assert:

The term social justice will simply highlight existing practices such as a course on multicultural education or placements with students in diverse schools, and may do so without significantly considering how such offerings support a programmatic social justice mission. . . . If social justice teacher education is to become more than rhetoric and more than merely a celebration of diversity, we argue that it must strive to take a different path. (p. 595)

Studies relevant to an undergraduate major are highly formative in the life cycle of a student and the student's subsequent professional path. Thus, integrating the principles of equity and justice within an undergraduate major, separate from but central to the credential teacher preparation, presents unique possibilities for how we aim to prepare teachers sensitive to the realities of the profession who hold deep conviction to improve them.

As we write, the nation struggles with a global pandemic—COVID-19; however, the widespread pandemic of racism and systemic inequity long precedes and will endure beyond the year 2020. In that sense, the liberal arts program provided in JCL feels more urgent than ever. Kumashiro (2015), describing social justice teaching, writes that it “involves preparing students to succeed in whatever context they find themselves, including contexts that privilege and value the dominant narrative, the mainstream culture, the ‘traditional values,’ and the rules for succeeding that are often unspoken and taken-for-granted” (p. xxv). Thus, to ultimately transgress the systemic inequities pervasive in schools and communities, requires future teachers to engage in a comprehensive interdisciplinary study of justice, community, and leadership that is all too often siloed into just a handful of courses.

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