

RADICAL HOPE: A TEACHING MANIFESTO

by Kevin M. Gannon

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Because of the increasing diversity of students arriving on campuses, colleges and universities across the United States are wrestling with reimagining what constitutes postsecondary success and how to actively support that success through policies and practices across the institution. This reconceptualization process includes expanding the idea of what it means to support “success,” moving from a historical focus primarily on student retention to a more holistic set of considerations that question how the structural and cultural components of schooling either support or inhibit student inclusion, belonging, thriving, well-being, and overall resilience. We see evidence of this phenomenon in the proliferation of campus leaders considering one-stop student services models, prioritizing more robust assessments of risk factors to student success, and embracing early-alert student data systems (Villano, Harrison, & Lynch, 2018). However, these student support changes largely lie outside of the classroom.

The academic experience within and related to the college classroom has tremendous effect on students’ sense of academic belonging, engagement, efficacy, and expectations. As such, the tools of the academic experience—curriculum and syllabi, pedagogical practice, teacher mind-sets and biases—are fair game for critical examination. Kevin Gannon, director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and a professor at Grand View University, asserts that these teaching and learning resources demand recalibration lest they direct students out of the college pipeline instead of through it.

In *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, a title in the Teaching & Learning series published by the West Virginia University Press, Gannon reflects on the urgent need for *radical hope*, a critical approach to teaching and learning in college teaching. Gannon argues that radical hope reframes the college experience as additive for diverse communities of students and includes ten key practices and reflections for college faculty to adopt, ranging from engaging students as agents at the center of their educational experience, to embracing inclusive practices in course design and teaching, to critically reassessing course tools such as syllabi. This praxis of radical hope, Gannon asserts, extends the critical pedagogical conceptualization of education as emancipatory and transgressive by actively challenging existing norms that may further marginalize students. Furthermore, radical hope asks that faculty relocate theoretical reflections about teaching for emancipation from thought exercises to actionable classroom and learning management practices. In doing so, Gannon argues, higher education may actually extend beyond a perpetuation of hope in theory into an operationalization and enactment that positions stu-

dents and instructors alike as agents in the process of promoting postsecondary success.

Gannon asks that we consider two important questions in order to engage in radical hope in our college learning spaces: “Who are we as we present ourselves to our students?” and “What are we saying to students about how we perceive and receive them?” These questions challenge the dogged and traditional attachment to objectivity in teaching, the durable prevalence of the banking method of teaching Freire (2000) argued against, and both of their related epistemological assumptions about learning—going so far as to name these practices as complicit in promoting antitransgressive and antiradical hope (p. 42). To operationalize this philosophical manifesto, Gannon invites instructors to reimagine their often-used tools of teaching, such as syllabi and preferred texts, beyond their static, objective figural structure and instead as conveyors of scholastic promotion and validation (p. 53) and as mediators of student academic perceptions, identification, and emotional engagement (p. 67). In this argument, pedagogy combines with the practice of teaching and theories of student development, teaching, and learning to form an inter-sectional recipe that produces either student academic success or academic disengagement.

Radical Hope stands out from other books on the (virtual) educational bookshelf in two ways. First, Gannon’s insistence on compelling instructors to engage in both reflective considerations, such as the one-word pedagogical summary (p. 104), *and* to take tangible actions, such as reviewing course reading assignments for community erasure and underachievement expectations, is noteworthy. Toward this orientation for individual reflection and action, Gannon presents each tenet of radical hope in a separate chapter, each of which closes with an “Into Practice” section that offers thoughtful questions and suggestions for enacting the theoretical concepts. For instance, chapter 7, “Syllabus Worth Reading,” ends with the enactment of Lang’s (2016) “small teaching” approach to course design and teaching through recommendations for critically examining one’s course syllabus via peer feedback, publicly available student syllabi checklists, and word cloud tools to gain more insight into the messages the syllabus conveys to students with diverse backgrounds and needs. By assessing the composition of one’s lesson plan and teaching strategies, Gannon asserts, faculty may also begin to reconceive student classroom performance, reconsidering a lack of focus and classroom engagement as potential indications of their own failure to engage a diverse array of student perspectives instead of a student-centered deficit.

The second stand-out feature of *Radical Hope* is how the author manages to espouse the aspirational idea of teaching with radical hope while acknowledging the practical barriers instructors face. Otherwise “lofty” recommendations about challenging problematic narratives about student behaviors are buttressed by full recognition of modern-day obstacles, such as adjunctification of

faculty, budget constraints (especially relevant in the context of overlapping global pandemics), course load management demands and their variance by institution, and political capital, power, and professional security disparities by faculty category (tenured, tenure track, adjunct, graduate student, or post-graduate instructor). In each case, Gannon acknowledges that every radical hope “battle” is not necessarily fought simultaneously without regard for the implications for one’s career. Instead, the book offers actions each instructor can take to support their own praxis alignment with student success while also advocating for the theoretical case for broader, department- or discipline-level changes should an instructor feel prepared to actively vouch for such.

Radical Hope remains centered around the teaching and learning experience within the classroom and its immediately related activities, such as office hours, but rarely engages in what that means beyond the classroom. Gannon is careful to acknowledge the implications of student diversity, inclusion, and belonging within the broader student experience but limits recommendations and practice suggestions to the classroom realm. This limited focus within the constellation of learning experiences allows Gannon to maintain a narrowly tailored narrative and to suggest a range of actionable recommendations that connect directly to the activities typically within the direct sphere of influence for faculty. Yet, the lack of discussion about the bidirectional relationship between classroom-based learning experiences and the myriad ways students engage in college life beyond the classroom hamstrings the range of implications that might motivate faculty to take up this important work. And given the potentially fraught nature of this radical hope work, which Gannon acknowledges, helping instructors readily identify the implications for their students beyond their classroom performance might support longer-term buy-in and uptake of radical hope as a philosophy and, equally importantly, a set of practices.

Gannon grounds the manifesto in the foundational texts of Giroux, seminal works by Freire and hooks (1994), and connects it to Lang’s (2016) small teaching conceptualization. He even acknowledges the adversarial and deficit-based mind-set that permeates some of the “shop talk” among instructors he has observed directly and via social media and considers how those faculty narratives might shade the language and framing instructors bring into classroom teaching and materials. However, the manifesto fails to synthetically incorporate the work of more contemporary scholars, such as Duncan-Andrade (2009), whose work on “critical hope,” widely cited in the field of education, also urges teachers to consider how their mind-set complicates educational aims; and Noddings’s (2013) theorizing on “the ethic of care” as critical for educational success; or other literature, such as Dweck (2016), Yeager et al. (2017), and Canning et al.’s (2019) work on teacher mind-set, student trust, and their implications for student outcomes. By excluding leading scholarship from the conversation, *Radical Hope* potentially limits its impact by shortchang-

ing the range of practice recommendations that might emerge as a result of the links between the radical hope conceptual argument and the science supporting agentic hope for positive student outcomes.

Ultimately, *Radical Hope* presents an opportunity for a critical conversation at a time when we are wrestling with what successful teaching means in online and in-person formats amid anxiety, uncertainty, and a diverse range of student needs. It offers opportunities for faculty to not only reinsert their agency in student outcomes but to also advance critical pedagogical theories through individual behavioral changes that emerge as the result of instructor (re)learning, practice, feedback, and reflection. The next frontier of radical hope Gannon alludes to is the introduction of these principles into our departmental and schoolwide practices and policies—a frontier guarded by sentinels of tenure advancement and adjunct rehire and renewal. In the meantime, Gannon assures us that not only is change possible, but students and faculty alike will benefit from it.

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