

**Daring to Lead: Reflections on Courage and Completion**  
**Montgomery College President**  
**Dr. DeRionne Pollard**  
**Town Hall Meeting**  
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Thank you for that welcome. It's so nice to see all of you here. I missed you! I have made a few trips to the College over the past few months but for the most part, I have been on sabbatical. I spent time on several projects over my break—one of them being, I reconnected with my family. I am going to offer to you five power lessons from my sabbatical.

Power Lesson #1: My family needs me and I need them, too. I think I spent more time with my family than I have in eight years! I don't know how many of you remember this but Myles was up to my waist when we moved here and now he is taller than I am! I think everyone can appreciate how quickly times goes by when you are busy and I can hardly believe that Myles is in middle school now! I'm having a little challenge letting go of him.

He's clearly not a man but has some of the height, and at 11, that makes him look more like 14 years old. I think about that a lot as he is becoming more and more independent but doesn't have the life experience to know how others may perceive him. We have had several difficult talks about that, I have had "the talk," but that's part of our reality these days. I'm sure many of the parents out there can relate to that.

I did spend time with some members of my College family, as well: I went to Florida to spend time with some of your colleagues from MC at the annual American Association of Women in Community Colleges meeting. We had a great time there building networks with women from across the US. I also went up to New York for the annual Association of Community College Trustee conference. Here I am with Trustee Bob Hydorn and outgoing ACCT Board Chair Emily Yim.

I spent a lot of time talking to people I respect about the future of education. I also spent time studying the future of Montgomery County. As you may know the new County Executive Marc Elrich asked me to serve on his transition team, so we have been looking very carefully at the intersections of economic growth, workforce development, demographics, and education. I believe there are some positive collaborations coming together there. But I spent much of my sabbatical focused on the College and planning for our future. I did a lot of reading about leadership and successful teams; about poverty and privilege; about inequality and opportunity. These are all topics that we have grappled with at the College for some time, so I was looking to get a new angle on them and I came upon something unexpected. This brings me to my second power lesson. We often think about leadership as rooted in confidence and ambition. What I found is that it also requires vulnerability—in leaders and in organizations.

One book I read in particular gave me some insights on that. It's Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. I don't know how many of you have read any of Brown's work but she writes passionately about how important vulnerability can be to positive growth—both personal and institutional. She has some great insights on how self-care

can change our relationship to ourselves and to others. *And she is a big believer that strength can come from putting one's self in a position of vulnerability.*

I'll expand on that in just a moment but I want to share one practice I picked up on my sabbatical which is related to this concept. I decided to attend to one of my own vulnerabilities and get a personal trainer. I worked with her twice a week and exercised six days a week—which I am still doing.

Now, I'm sharing this not to brag, but just to say that I had to choose to use some of my sabbatical time to work on one of my vulnerabilities: my physical health and wellness. I had to swallow my pride a bit on this one and say, "I need some help with this." And I got it: in the form of The Filthy 25. I know why it is called that now... because you are filthy when you are finished. And you are humbled. But you get somewhere. You get that surge of energy that says: I pushed through something I thought I couldn't do.

So, I channeled this energy into strategic planning. The MC 2025 plan was my primary focus. I tackled a lot of material about the future of the country and Montgomery County. I studied the job market. I looked at the skills that will be called for. I examined the technology that our students will need to master. What I took from that panorama was that *outcomes* will be increasingly critical. Not just for the job market that students are entering, but for the economic conditions in which they will compete, and for the funding realities that we face from the state and the county.

Being outcomes-driven is no longer an aspiration. *It is a necessity.* It changes the game for us on a few different levels. When we reflect on the skills and competencies our students need, we can no longer ask short-term questions. We can no longer say, "How many semesters of developmental education is too much?" We know the answer. We can't stagnate on the question of whether advising should include rigorous academic planning. We know the answer.

We can't vacillate on whether the College needs ambitious strategic enrollment management. Or if we need scheduling that allows students and faculty to be guaranteed courses for several years in a row. We *know* those answers too. Now we need to live into them.

So, how does vulnerability fit into this? Back to my reading list. As people—and as organizations—we tend to *contract* when we feel vulnerable. Fear sets in. Criticism. Cynicism. Fearmongering. Fear is often what keeps us from answering questions like the ones I just listed.

We already know these answers and we whisper about them, but we don't say them out loud.

There is an interesting dynamic at work in the US Capitol right now: a new crop of very young, very energetic members of Congress—many of them women—are speaking some truths out loud. Just in the past month or so they have spoken out loud some things that have gone unsaid for the last couple of years. Many of them are getting bullied for it and trolled on social media, which I know creates fear. Brené Brown has an answer for folks who are doing this bullying:

“If you are criticizing from a place where you’re not also putting yourself on the line, then I’m not interested in what you have to say.” Now, this might sound harsh, but there is some powerful truth in it.

We want everyone to be involved in dialogue at the College—and in *democracy in our nation*—but there is a point at which voices that are not self-reflective about their own roles are a hindrance to our mission. That’s a reality.

People who advance the common mission are those who are willing to own their weaknesses and speak some truths out loud. These young members of Congress are doing both—and that takes courage.

Just a few weeks ago, I was preparing some remarks for a Martin Luther King Day event that celebrated the civil rights movement. So I borrowed a phrase from Reverend King’s writings in which he said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” These young, recently elected politicians, are jumping into a maelstrom. This is not a time of comfort in our nation; but they are not slinking back.

In the same way this is not a time of comfort in higher education. Many of our students will not succeed without our support. If we are to be true advocates for our students, we must stand in the challenge and the controversy.

What does this look like? Well, I am going to draw on some of the strength from my sabbatical, to speak some tough truths. Power Lesson #2: fear is not a sufficient reason for not fully empowering student success. It may be an *explanation*—and we have been living in that explanation for some years—but now we need to name it and embrace our vulnerability.

“You can’t get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability...A rumble is a ... conversation or a meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability... to be fearless in owning our parts...”

How often do we approach problems by *trying to be vulnerable*? Does the College start to tackle its challenges by saying ‘how are we contributing to the problem?’ It’s not instinctive, but it’s powerful. It inverts the horizon.

For example, if we don’t courageously address developmental education, strategic enrollment management, and scheduling management, then we are hiding in our fear.

Let me give you just one example: our work around advising has not been primarily centered around students and their needs. There is a lot of angst happening around the changes in advising. Even the way we are talking about it can be confusing. The Advising Review Committee calls it “integrated advising.” Just to be clear for those who are familiar with Terry O’Bannion’s model here—which talks about life goals and the student life cycle being a part of holistic advising—no one is arguing that O’Bannion’s paradigm is not valuable. It is. What I’m talking about when I say “integrated advising” is the essential, collaborative work of counseling faculty and academic program advisors. What I don’t like about the term “integrated advising” is

that students don't need all of this background. They don't need it to be called "integrated." They need strong, relevant advising. Students need an advising system that they can navigate easily. They need one that uses both cognitive and content experts to help them design academic pathways that take them from start to finish. These pathways need to be supported by technology that doesn't force student to use multiple systems.

The term "integrated" is about *us*—it's on the back end of things. "Advising" is about students. It's the front porch. Our work is to reconcile these. We need to make it seamless for students and make our own comfort level secondary, even if it means a fundamental shift in how we think about advising work at the college.

So, this is a vulnerability of the College's as an institution: we are reluctant to change systems that we have gotten used to. We don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable. If we are truthful about it, it's our *students* who pay the price for this. They rely on us to bring our courage to the table and design our systems with *them* in mind—even if it makes us fearful. So, that's where we need to bring in the courage.

So, how do we get from fear to courage? That's the leap. Let me start by showing you how we have already done it. First, it's by naming our vulnerabilities: we have done this for students with extraordinary insight: food insecurity, poverty, immigration status, work schedules, lack of knowledge about college, absence of mentors, disconnection from community. Montgomery College does extraordinary work in identifying the root causes of student non-completion. The creative support systems that the College has developed to shore up these vulnerabilities in students are working. We have mobile food markets; we have emergency funding from the Foundation; we have financial aid counseling, DACA forums, tutoring, laptop loaners, and late night hours at the libraries. This mosaic of these supports is striking, for its creativity and for the passion behind it.

Most importantly, there are *people* behind each of these initiatives. The College is a big institution, so efforts can get lost: if you are in STEM, you have probably heard about how many late nights were required to coach 25 students into successful internships at NIST. But you might not know about how many humanities faculty members sacrificed family time to get our Phi Theta Kappa students to dozens of transfer scholarships.

Or the days it took to accompany five students to Los Angeles to compete in the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) National Construction Management Competition ...or to prepare to host the Beacon Honor conference on the Germantown Campus last year. Or the Science Bowl just last week on the Rockville Campus. You may not know all of the extra time it takes for faculty members teaching in the correctional facility in Clarksburg *to get through security* just so that they can help inmate-learners work on their skills. Or you may not know how many nighttime information sessions were hosted to recruit students to Early and Middle College—I believe there were three evening Early College sessions with 450 people attending *each one*.

The two Middle College events in October were held at local high schools because that's when parents were available—about 400 parents showed up at each event. Most faculty and staff members have a story like this and I have to say, that looks like love to me. Cornell West says

that, "...justice is what love looks like in public." That's what our faculty and staff do in hundreds of different ways. If you are willing to sacrifice family time for a student—that's love, isn't it?

So, I think *love* is the actual bridge from fear to courage. Martin Luther King was a big proponent of love—even for the people who hated him.

He once said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." Love is what gives us the courage to speak truth. The College does a great job of speaking truth about our student's realities—about their vulnerabilities and challenges. I know that will continue—it's part of our social just commitment.

This takes me to Power Lesson #3: In the next phase of the College's growth—through MC 2025—we are going to have to look at our institution's vulnerabilities—and that is going to require some love. We are already aware of them—silos that isolate us, some pockets of toxic incivility, a greater need for career building, and a more disciplined approach to project management.

These are not brand new insights. What is new is that I will be having more courageous, public conversations about these issues. These will be uncomfortable—but I plan to own my part. And I will ask you to do the same. Let me go back to the project management issue—just as an example.

For those of you not familiar with it, the College invested funds into implementing an enterprise resource planning system (or ERP) called Workday.

It is the brains of an organization. It manages all the data—so it has to be efficient and flexible. The goal was to move the College away from servers and to a cloud-based system where Workday could provide many self-service functions that Banner could not. I'm talking about processes such as payroll, accounts payable, recruitment, human resources, and benefits enrollment—sometimes called "back office" functions.

The College hired an implementation partner to set up Workday for us, which is standard, and we did with other ERPs. And in the summer and fall of 2017 it became obvious that this partner was not hitting critical timelines or success criteria.

This could have come to light sooner, but a lack of oversight by some leaders obscured it. There was also insufficient project management by leaders within the College, which slowed our correction of this issue. So, we lost some time recognizing that we had to shift course with our partner. I'll own that. When we eventually brought in a new partner, I had to make some tough personnel decisions in order to hold people at the College and this partner accountable.

I do want to clarify that we could not have spent all of the funds from these costs on employee salary enhancements—I know that story is circulating out there. So, let's bring some truth into that conversation as well. There are distinct budgets at the College and you cannot shift money at will from one to the other. Still, the implementation was not managed well at the leadership level—I don't mean on the ground. I want to lift up HRSTM. Those folks worked so

hard to get us where we are right now, so I want to thank them. It was not the front-line people who created the problem. It was a very complex system and we have some extraordinarily dedicated employees who gave it their all and deserve kudos. That said, mistakes were made. I insisted on accountability, and we have moved on.

The work in the finance business processes has moved ahead. Human Resources portions of Workday have been implemented. Our staff are experienced in successfully implementing complex projects such as Office 365 and the IP voice over telephone.

We have faculty and staff serving on the new Information Technology Alignment and Planning (ITAP) group, which is aligning technology investments with strategic priorities and student success goals. We have strengthened our business processes to enhance the efficiency and outcomes of our work, and we now have a new implementation partner, Collaborative Solutions. But we had to name the problems to get to this point.

My Power Lesson #4: Naming can be scary: but it's the first step. There may be some tough conversations to be had in order to make positive change—like we did with this ERP process—but these conversations are valuable. My new muse, Brené Brown, talks about how when we are afraid, we put on our armor.

This doesn't serve us well in terms of human connection and collaboration. We have to build a culture in which people are *not* rewarded for putting on armor. We need to create spaces in which vulnerability is rewarded. Brown writes,

“... when our organizations reward armoring behaviors like blaming, shaming, cynicism, perfectionism, and emotional stoicism, we can't expect innovation work. You can't fully grow and contribute behind armor.”

That's powerful. She's calling out toxic practices in relationships there, which can apply to personal and professional settings. Practices that build *barriers* rather than bridges.

These are dynamics that each one of us has to look at individually: Do you see yourself in any of these behaviors? Do you see any of this in your team? We're all human so, there is probably a little bit of this in each of us. And there is an instinct in each of us that says, “I'm going to deny it because it makes me uncomfortable.” What Brown says is, ‘let's lean into it: let's name it’. Let's decide that we're going to agree to be vulnerable. And ‘let's build teams where this is called “courage.”

I'm going to read these two slides out loud because I think they are important:

“We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.”

These two complement each other. We need both.

“To scale daring leadership and build courage in teams and organizations, we have to cultivate a culture in which brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and armor is not necessary or rewarded.”

Stepping away from the College for this sabbatical has shown me how natural it had become to put on *my own armor*. You probably know what I'm talking about because you can *feel* yourself putting on your mental and emotional armor when you walk into certain meetings, right? We get so tied up protecting ourselves that we miss how *what we're* not *building* for our students.

In order to give students everything we have, we are going to have to put down the armor. We have to be willing to be vulnerable. We're going to have to bring more honesty and more compassion to our conversations. Now, some of you already do this very well. In fact, the people whom I most admire at the College do this as second nature.

Brené Brown and Martin Luther King both acknowledge the fear that vulnerability creates. They argue that folks are much more willing to put down their armor in *communities of care*.

We don't use those terms, "care" or "love," widely at the College but it's intuitive, right? When we are afraid we want to feel safe, and people who *care* about us provide that safety.

I mentioned earlier that I see love in those sacrifices we all make for student needs. Love is the antidote to fear: it's already a powerful creative force at the College. Now we need to channel some of it into our personal relationships so that we are more willing to share our vulnerability. This will serve students.

Some of this vulnerability and some of this courage are what are needed in the next phase of the College. One of the luxuries of my sabbatical was that I got to think about what we really want the College to do in its next chapter: what came to me were visions of the College that are bold and aspirational, and planted some true awe in my heart.

Then I'd climb on my elliptical machine and confront some moments of personal mediocrity and exhaustion that I am learning to own—and change.

In the process, though, I had some insights: What would student success look like at MC if we stopped planning around divisions and started planning around outcomes? Could more students thrive at MC if we committed to an advising model that privileges student need rather than our own convenience? How can we move forward acknowledging that enrollment challenges and opportunities may mean that we have to fundamentally change our practices in some ways? Do we have the capacity and courage to ensure that the Academic Master Plan and the Student Affairs Master Plan don't perpetuate our tendency towards silos? How do we prepare to have significant conversations and strategize about the nature of our work because work is changing around us?

These are questions to which we must all bring vulnerability and courage.

The good news is that, according to Brown, "Courageous is contagious."

Let me end by sharing some evidence that already demonstrate our courage as an organization: Our strategic planning for 2025 has already attracted input from the county,

community members, faculty and staff, and students. That matters because all of these voices have essential roles.

The National Academy of Engineering has accepted Montgomery College as the very first two-year college to participate in its national Grand Challenges Initiative. There are already more than 60 four-year schools participating. The College is the first community college because *we approached them* and shared our extraordinary program and transfer rates. Early College has had a terrific launch with 50 students in fall, and it is expanding to all three campuses this spring. Our Workforce Development and Continuing Education program graduated its fifth class of students from the Ingleside Nursing Program a week ago. This collaboration between MC, MCPS and Ingleside of King Farm gives every student a 100 percent course scholarship, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation from the High School to the facility.

Enrollment for winter session was at 887—which is up 42 percent over last year.

Last year's Jack Kent Cooke Transfer scholar from Montgomery College, Caroline Azadze, is now enrolled at Cornell University. And we have eight semifinalists for the scholarship this year! Stories like hers, and like Luis Rosales, who won the scholarship another year and is graduating from Georgetown University in the spring, really touch me. They remind me of how transformative the work of the College really is and this forms my final lesson.

Power Lesson #5: "If we all did the things we are capable of doing we would literally astound ourselves." The College is capable of more; we are poised for more. The time has come for us to put down our armor, embrace our vulnerability, and reach for some of that courage that I have talked about today.

I have asked a friend to talk about this topic with me at the Presidential Dialogue Series this spring: former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will be my guest on March 5. If you want to hear from someone who has faced a lot of controversy during his tenure, has refused to compromise over his beliefs in radical inclusion, and has accomplished a lot for public education, this event will speak to you.

Another upcoming event that speaks to radical inclusion is the daylong Equity Summit on April 30 in Germantown. The theme is *From Awareness to Action*. Look for more at MC Learns.

Finally, I want to remind you to nominate your colleagues for the Faculty and Staff of the Year awards. As you know these awards celebrate our colleagues who exemplifies exceptional performance, leadership, and service to the College community. Those are due Friday, March 1. Part-time faculty and part-time staff are also eligible. I look forward to receiving those nominations.

I'm very happy to be back. Thank you again for your warm welcome. We have a great semester ahead of us!

I look forward to a transformative year. Let's rumble...