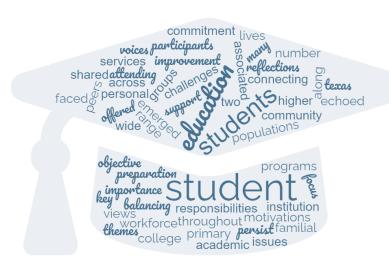## Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design:
Findings from Student Focus Groups at Texas Community Colleges
September 2022

Texas Pathways colleges conducted student focus groups in preparation for the Texas Pathways Institute focused on the third pillar of the Texas Pathways strategy: Keeping students on their pathway. The goal of the focus group process was to help colleges integrate student voices into the inquiry and design of their Texas Pathways action plans. Overall, 43 colleges conducted focus groups to learn from students. In this focus group brief, we highlight what colleges learned from students.

Colleges engaged students with questions related to several objectives:
- **Objective 1:** To understand what motivates students to persist in higher education.
- **Objective 2:** To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs.
- **Objective 3:** To understand what the college needs to improve student success.
- **Objective 4:** To understand the importance of financial services in helping students meet their goals.
- **Objective 5:** To understand the importance of basic needs support in helping students meet their goals.

Objective 1:
To understand what motivates students to persist in higher education.

Across colleges, students expressed a number of key issues related to persistence. For objective 1, two primary themes associated with motivations to persist in higher education emerged from student voices: **(1) academic and workforce preparation and (2) personal and familial improvement.** Students shared their views of the Texas community college they were attending, the challenges that students faced in balancing their commitment to education along with the many other responsibilities in their lives, the importance of connecting with their peers, and reflections on the wide range of student support services and programs offered by the institution.

Theme 1: Academic and Workforce Preparation
Students reported that one of the main motivators for persisting in college was to gain the academic skills necessary for degree completion and the technical skills necessary to enter the workforce. Students noted they persisted to: (a) reskill or prepare for a new career, (b) earn a degree, and (c) transfer to a university.

Reskill or prepare for a new career. Students persisted in college to gain new skills to prepare for a new career or to refresh skills previously acquired. Colleges noted that continuing education students were more likely to note career preparation as a motivator, however students enrolled in credit-bearing courses were also aware of the need to prepare for careers. Students were reskilling to be prepared for careers that would support their families. Students from **25 colleges** reported they persisted in college to reskill/prepare for a new career.

Earn a degree. Students persisted in college to complete a degree or certificate. Colleges reported that students were seeking an associate degree to enter a health profession program, an associate degree to enter the workforce, or a certificate to enter the workforce. Colleges noted that students persisted to earn an associate degree or certificate in technical fields. Students also had goals to earn baccalaureate degrees at four-year partner institutions. Students from **13 colleges** reported they persisted to earn a degree.

Transfer to a university. Students persisted in college to transfer to complete courses or "basics'" necessary for a four-year university. Colleges reported that students were pursuing an associate degree to transfer to a university for a baccalaureate degree and/or a post-graduate degree such as a doctorate. Student-athletes also aimed to prepare for transfer to university. A total of **12 colleges** reported students were motivated to persist to transfer.

Student Voices: Academic and Workforce Preparation

Students answered why getting an education was important for their academic and career goals with statements such as:

"To get a better job."

"College opens up better job opportunities for me," and "Job security."

"Get on my feet and obtain certification to get out in the workforce."

"I would say just to grow more in the field, the more training and education we get in this particular study the more experience you get, the better job you get, the better job opportunities."

Theme 2: Personal and Familial Improvement

Students reported that another key motivation for persisting in college was to improve their personal lives and the lives of their families. Students noted they persisted: (a) for a better life, (b) for family reasons, and (c) when they had personal support.

A better life. Students persisted in college to create a better life for themselves and their families by preparing for jobs that earn higher wages that provided more security. Students aimed for personal growth and for an improved future quality of life. Students from **25 colleges** reported that they persisted to create a better life.

Family reasons. Students persisted in college to set an example for family or contribute to others' success. Colleges reported that first generation college students do not want to let their families down and want to be a role model for their siblings. Students wanted to be able to get good paying jobs to support their families. Students reported at **6 colleges** that family was a motivator for persistence.

Personal support. Students persisted in college when they felt other people cared about their success. Colleges noted that student responses made it clear that motivation for persistence came from the combination of the students themselves and from the supports they receive at the college. Students credited faculty that were caring and motivating as reasons why they persisted. Students appreciated the availability and flexibility of course offerings and tutoring, connection through student life, and overall communication with instructors. Students at **3 colleges** noted the importance of personal support for persistence.

> **Student Voices: Personal and Familial Improvement**
>
> "I [want] to keep growing as an individual right in the world."
>
> "My kids are young, the oldest is nine. The youngest is seven... So I kind of want them to go ahead and see, Hey, you know what, this is what it is. Because they didn't know what university, what college was... Until they started seeing like, okay, what are you doing, dad? Like, why do you have all these books? Why am I always on the computer? Yeah. You know, I started explaining. So now it's like, they're all excited that, like, they can't wait. 'Oh, I want to go to college too. I want to go ahead and do this.'"

Common Challenges Related to Persistence

While some students had clear educational goals that motivated their persistence, other students reported that not having yet made clear decisions regarding education and career goals reduced motivation. Students across colleges noted a lack of time and competing priorities such as jobs, family, and school as challenges associated with persistence.

Objective 1: Motivations to Persist
Recommendations

Student voices provided valuable insights to motivators for persistence in higher education. Colleges can use this information to adjust and enhance college operations and supports. The following recommendations are based on student voices:

1. *Continue to collect student voices, with particular attention to capturing students in different programs and from different backgrounds.*

2. *Recognize academic and workforce preparation goals require clear pathways and frequent communication with students. Systematize program pathway communications to reach all students.*

3. *Engage workforce partners to quickly place students in livable wage jobs upon completion.*

4. *Understand that family is a key motivator for students to pursue and persist in higher education. Systematize ways to include family in college activities and to provide supports for students with family responsibilities.*

5. *Train faculty and student services professionals to understand the key role they play in supporting students to persist. Provide equity-informed professional development to equip faculty and student services professionals staff with the tools and resources they need to support diverse learners.*

Objective 2:
To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs.

Students across colleges shared ways in which the colleges were effective in meeting their needs. For objective 2, three primary themes associated with college effectiveness emerged from student voices: **(1) connection, (2) accessibility of online tools, and (3) finances.** Students shared their views of the Texas community college they were attending, the impact of connected and caring faculty and staff, the availability and accessibility of services, and the role that finances played in their success.

Theme 1: Connection

Students reported that they first and foremost identified with faculty and staff who demonstrated good communication, targeted support, encouragement, and approachability. Students noted that they perceived the college to be effective in meeting their needs when there was: (a) consistent communication and (b) caring faculty.

Consistent communication. Students valued clear communication from supportive community members, such as faculty, advisors, student organizations, clubs, and staff, helped to maintain their momentum in college. Students from **13 colleges** reported they perceived that consistent communication was something that made the college effective in meeting their needs.

Caring faculty. Students noted that they were encouraged and motivated to progress along their pathway by caring faculty who provided either academic or career support. This type of faculty guidance kept students on the right track and focused on their goals. Caring faculty also made students feel valued and connected to the college. Students from **14 colleges** reported they perceived caring faculty to be one way the college was effective in meeting their needs.

Student Voices: Connection

"Professors are very helpful; glad in person classes have returned."

"The advisor was smiling and friendly and not as scary as I thought she was going to be, and I could tell that she was just there to help."

"There's always somebody for whatever you need. Usually at any time somebody's there to help you."

"The employees of the college are accessible, open, helpful, and care about you. Everyone is nice, even the custodians try to help you."

Theme 2: Accessibility of Online Tools

Students noted that (a) online education and (b) learning management systems were effective in meeting their needs.

Online education. Students reported that quality online education course offerings enabled them to learn from anywhere effectively and efficiently. Colleges were effective in meeting their needs when online education was well designed, faculty were engaged, and when the college supported accessibility, such as through wi-fi. A total of **12 colleges** reported students believed that quality online education courses were effective in meeting their needs.

Learning management systems. Students thought that learning management systems (LMS) played a significant role in their learning and provided guidance during the learning process. LMS that was not easy to use or access created tensions and barriers for students. On the other hand, when LMS was well designed, it supported students to complete courses and continue their pathway. A total of **7 colleges** reported that accessible LMS was a way that colleges met student needs.

Theme 3: Finances

Students across colleges noted that they juggled costs associated with college and their personal lives. Students appreciated when the college helped with financial literacy so students could stay on track with their finances in college. Students also understood that community colleges provided an affordable option to pursue their goals. Students noted that they perceived that colleges were effective in meeting their needs through: (a) financial information and (b) affordability, allowing them to take control and be responsible while a college student.

Financial information. Students felt that if they were in control of their finances they were better prepared in college. Students felt that colleges met their needs effectively if they provided opportunities for students to develop fiscal awareness while providing information on ways for students to meet their financial needs. A total of **12 colleges** reported students felt colleges effectively met their needs by providing financial information.

Affordability. Students shed light on the many financial challenges associated with going to college and stated that they believed that their college supported their success with affordable programs. Affordable programs allowed the students to take on their education while meeting their other day-to-day responsibilities. A total of **12 colleges** reported students felt colleges were effective in meeting their needs by making their education affordable.

> **Student Voices: Finances**
>
> *"I had two choices, either this community college or a university, but I chose this community college because it's more affordable. And I feel like if I was to go somewhere else, I was still going to be learning the same thing, and why pay more when I could pay less?"*
>
> *"Not being able to work equals financial stress, especially when trying to pay out of pocket for all my schooling. The hours are so strict which makes it hard for mothers who have other commitments at home."*
>
> *"I researched nursing programs all over the country and the nursing program here is less expensive."*
>
> *"Taking my basics here is a lot cheaper than taking them at a university."*

Objective 2: Meeting Student Needs
Recommendations

Student voices provided valuable insights how colleges effectively meet their needs. Colleges can use this information to adjust and enhance college operations and supports. The following recommendations are based on student voices:

1. *Continue to collect student voices, with particular attention to capturing students in different programs and from different backgrounds.*

2. *Continue enhancing learning management systems, technology, and equipment and ensure online courses are being developed with student feedback.*

3. *Systematize student communications and support the development of personal relationships between support staff, faculty, and students.*

4. *Continue to provide relevant and easy-to-digest financial information to students.*

Objective 3:
To understand what the college needs to improve student success.

Students shared ways in which their colleges could support their success. For objective 3, two primary themes associated with college improvement emerged from student voices: **(1) classroom experiences and (2) planning and supports.** Students shared their views of the ways in which Texas community colleges could continue to improve practices in these areas.

Theme 1: Classroom Experiences
Students reported several ways in which the college could support student success. Students appreciated being able to network with their peers in classrooms with kind and caring faculty. Students noted that colleges needed to improve: (a) peer-to-peer communication, (b) faculty and teaching, and (c) academic support.

Peer-to-peer communication. Students stated that when colleges provided opportunities for collaboration and peer-to-peer communication they were able to learn by engaging with course material more fully. Students from **10 colleges** reported they would like the college to support faculty to increase opportunities for collaboration in courses across programs.

Faculty and teaching. Students stated that they appreciated learning in a supportive and encouraging environment. Students appreciated faculty who actively collaborated with them and provided relevant tools/resources in the classroom. Students were able to identify teaching practices they perceived to be student-centered and equitable, expressing that having more faculty engage in these practices could support success. Students from **3 colleges** reported felt like they could grow as a student if colleges worked to improve teaching practices.

Academic support. Students in adult education and literacy (AEL) programs and continuing education (CE) programs felt that colleges needed to focus on providing better academic support in order to help students succeed. AEL and CE students felt that they were not treated as academic students and noted that they wanted more information on how to get to their career and how stackable credentials worked. CE students also struggled to understand how to locate and make sense of "stackable credentials." Students from **3 colleges** stated that in order for colleges to improve to help students succeed they should focus on AEL and CE academic supports and resources.

Student Voices: Classroom Experiences

"*Provide resources for students/and or communicate the availability of resources for students.*"

"*It's on the professor to make that connection or take the initiative to establish a relationship, instead of having a strong wall of just being a professor and I'm only here to teach you. Because that relationship drives student success, it makes the environment more comfortable, and it makes the student feel more comfortable to ask them for aid or for help or anything that they need.*"

"*Allow FTIC orientation to provide a helpful overview of available resources and services to lessen confusion.*"

Theme 2: Planning and Supports

Students valued consistent academic support, transparent program planning tools, and access to financial aid resources early in the college process. Students noted that colleges could improve student success by focusing on: (a) program and course planning transparency and (b) financial aid support.

Program and course planning transparency. Students who intended to transfer described the need for transparent program and course planning to allow for efficient program completion and a seamless transition to a 4-year university. Students explained that they already faced many barriers in college and expressed that colleges could remove the planning barrier. They preferred access to resources and information sooner than later as they wanted to ensure they had access to timely information for program planning, transfer application processes, and decision making. A total of **4 colleges** reported students believed colleges could impact student success by improving program and course planning.

Financial aid support. Students felt colleges could improve communication regarding financial aid since they struggled to understand financial aid "lingo" and "literacy." Students felt it was important for colleges to provide simple yet comprehensive information at one time to help them identify the best financial aid options. Students would prefer this information to be available in the same space/time as academic advising. A total of **4 colleges** reported students wanted colleges to let them know how much money would be needed to enroll up front and to provide information on ways to pay when registering.

Student Voices: Planning and Support

"For my program that I'm trying to enter there's no updated information, so everything is based on last year even though the application is due in June...June's really soon."

"I would have liked to see a full plan for the program all at once at the timeline with dates so I could be prepared.".

"Going back and forth between advisors and financial aid makes me feel like I'm not getting anywhere."

**Objective 3: Opportunities for Improvement
Recommendations**

Student voices provided valuable insights on how colleges effectively met their needs and the ways in which colleges can improve to support more students. Colleges can use this information to adjust and enhance college operations and supports. The following recommendations are based on student voices:

1. *Continue to collect student voices, with particular attention to capturing students in different programs and from different backgrounds.*

2. *Systematize ways to increase awareness of the network of student supports available to students.*

3. *Train faculty and staff to advise CE students of the next step to continue their career goals and how credentials are packaged, such as stackable certificates.*

4. *Provide professional development for faculty related to collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer communications in the classroom.*

5. *Continue to scale advising practices that provide quicker response times and consistency in messaging to all students.*

6. *Provide systematic financial aid assistance and guidance to all students.*

Objective 4:
To understand the importance of financial services in helping students meet their goals.

Across the colleges, a number of key issues related to finances were echoed by focus group participants among various student populations. For objective 4, two primary themes associated with understanding the importance financial services play in helping students meet their goals emerged from student voices: **(1) cost of college and (2) financial support.** Students shared their views of the Texas community college they were attending, their understanding of the cost of attending college, the importance of affordability, and reflections on financial support programs offered by the college.

Theme 1: Cost of College

The cost of a higher education left students feeling "the pinch" as tuition costs have risen over time. Students reported that they chose to attend community college instead of a 4-year university because of the significantly lower cost of attendance. Students noted that (a) financial status and (b) affordability were significant issues they managed while attending college.

Financial status. Students struggled financially to manage school, work, family, and other responsibilities. Students wanted to feel less stressed about their finances when in college. Some students shared that financial stressors prevented them from doing their best in college; students also perceived that financial constrains kept them from graduating. Students from **8 colleges** reported that their financial status impacted their ability to do well in school.

Affordability. Students wanted to complete education that they could afford. Due to many students having limited economic means to take care of themselves and their families while in school, they chose community college because it was more affordable and would decrease their worry while in school. Students from **7 colleges** reported that their choice of community college was related to the affordability of the education.

Student Voices:
Cost of College

"Finances play a huge role. Depending on the circumstances that everyone is coming from, you have to stick to your decision and take the first step."

"Financial cost of getting your education can put a damper on your ego and spirit."

"A lot of students might not have financial freedom. It's difficult to juggle both, education and financial aspect."

"We need more financial help."

Theme 2: Financial Support

Students perceived the college to be effective in meeting their needs when the college offered quality support such as: (a) financial support programs and (b) grants.

Financial support programs. Students found they needed a better understanding of financial support programs and services in order to continue in college. Students wanted colleges to ensure programs helped students be aware of different types of aid, and apply for, process, and maintain eligibility for aid throughout their program. Students also reported that tuition installment plans were a viable alternative to student loans. When students were able to borrow less money for college through payment plans, it helped them to keep to their budget in college. A total of **6 colleges** reported students sought accessible financial support programs to continue in college.

Grants. Students reported that grant opportunities helped them pay for college. They appreciated that grants did not need to be repaid and believed this helped them persist in college. Grants were supportive to the student, but often required students to do research to find them. When students were awarded grants, they found that the funding helped to cover a variety of education-related expenses including tuition and fees, room and board, and even books and supplies. A total of **8 colleges** had students that reported when grant opportunities were provided to them, they could focus on their educational goals.

Objective 4: Financial Services
Recommendations

Student voices provided valuable insights how finances play a role in their education. Colleges can use this information to adjust and enhance college operations and supports. The following recommendations are based on student voices:

1. *Continue to collect student voices, with particular attention to capturing students in different programs and from different backgrounds.*

2. *Provide regular and consistent messaging about student financial support services and processes, including by email, by text, and on the college website.*

3. *Curate grant opportunities on the college website and communicate about their availability to all students.*

4. *Create easy-to-follow information about tuition and fees payment plans and provide one-on-one support for setting up payment plans.*

Objective 5:
To understand the importance of basic needs support in helping students meet their goals.

Community college students expressed the ways in which they are humans with basic needs. When these needs were not met, student were faced with barriers to learning and their overall wellbeing. On the other hand, when colleges provided for basic needs as well as academic needs, students prospered. For objective 5, three primary themes associated with how basic needs services help students meet their goals emerged from student voices: **(1) basic needs, (2) technology, and (3) access to supports.** Students shared their views of the Texas community college they were attending and reflections on the wide range of general resources offered by the institution.

Theme 1: Basic Needs

Students reported that to stay actively engaged in course curriculum, they needed their basic needs to be met. Students identified several needs that could be addressed by colleges: (a) transportation, (b) childcare, (c) food insecurity, (d) clothing, and (e) mental health.

Transportation. Students reported that a lack of transportation affected their ability to get to campus and had a negative impact on learning outcomes. Students wanted to avoid the struggle associated with finding reliable ways to get to and from school. Students suggested that colleges could offer resources to reduce the cost associated with public transportation. Students from **14** colleges reported they perceived that providing a transportation assistance program would help meet their basic needs.

Childcare. Students reported that parenting while in college was like a balancing act; parenting students had to manage their academics, family responsibilities, finances, and their health. Students believed that it was critical to have childcare programs available since college demanded much of their attention and focus. Students cited the need for affordable childcare programs. Students from **9** colleges reported that childcare is a basic need to be addressed by colleges.

Food insecurity. Some student learners reported that they often had to decide between paying for their tuition or eating. As such, students suggested that colleges provide information on food banks, grocery assistance programs, and food stamps. Students from **7 colleges** reported they wanted to know more about food assistance programs.

Clothing. Students stated that access to clothing closets was critical for persistence and improved their confidence and wellbeing. Students found themselves in need of professional attire at times for upcoming interviews, career fairs, or other professional experiences. Clothing closets on campus helped students not only to look their best, but to also feel their best. Students from **3 colleges** reported that clothing assistance programs on campus would support a basic need.

Mental health. Students felt that visible onsite and mental health services were necessary as a basic needs service on campus. Students noted that as a college student, they were often challenged to do well in class, take care of their families, and work. Students stated that they would appreciate access to mental health services on campus, such as counseling, to help achieve balance and success. Students from **3 colleges** reported that mental health services were important to help them meet their goals.

Theme 2: Technology
Students noted that they faced challenges with technology including having reliable access to Wi-Fi and appropriate devices such as tablets or laptops. Students reported that lack of internet access or spotty internet connections at home proved problematic when trying to attend class online, complete homework, and/or submit assignments. Some students remarked that they would appreciate access to computer loaners to be able to successfully complete their work. Students from **7 colleges** reported that addressing accessibility issues with Wi-Fi and lack of technology devices would support a basic need.

Theme 3: Access to Supports
Students noted that there were many ways the college could support their needs, and some were surprised to hear from the college that services were available. Students noted there were often times when they were not advised of new or existing basic needs resources. Students suggested colleges provide a hub for information to provide the latest resources for students with basic needs insecurity. Some suggested messaging by email, text, and social media to raise awareness of support options. Students also sought support for applications or processes related to aid. Students from **5** colleges reported that colleges could improve awareness about basic needs support.

Student Voices:
Access to Supports

"The service might be available but it is not pushed out enough so no one knows about it so no one is going to use it."

"Initially I didn't know about the resources. Over time, I heard about the grants and scholarships. I have a baby, so I took advantage of online courses and the grants that were available."

Objective 5: Basic Needs Support
Recommendations

Student voices provided valuable insights how colleges can effectively meet their needs. Colleges can use this information to adjust and enhance college operations and supports. The following recommendations are based on student voices:

1. *Continue to collect student voices, with particular attention to capturing students in different programs and from different backgrounds.*

2. *Review services available at colleges and campuses. Conduct a gap analysis of the college's basic needs supports. Work with key institutional stakeholders, including faculty and staff, to enhance access basic needs supports on campus.*

3. *Create easy-to-access information related to basic needs supports. Review current communication processes related to basic needs supports. Develop a communication plan to provide students regular information on basic needs supports, such as transportation programs, food assistance programs, clothing closets, mental health programs, and childcare assistance programs.*

4. *Provide training to faculty and staff on how to communicate with compassion and encourage students to connect to all available resources for which they qualify.*

5. *Ensure that students have access to reliable internet on campus and at home.*

Acknowledgment

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