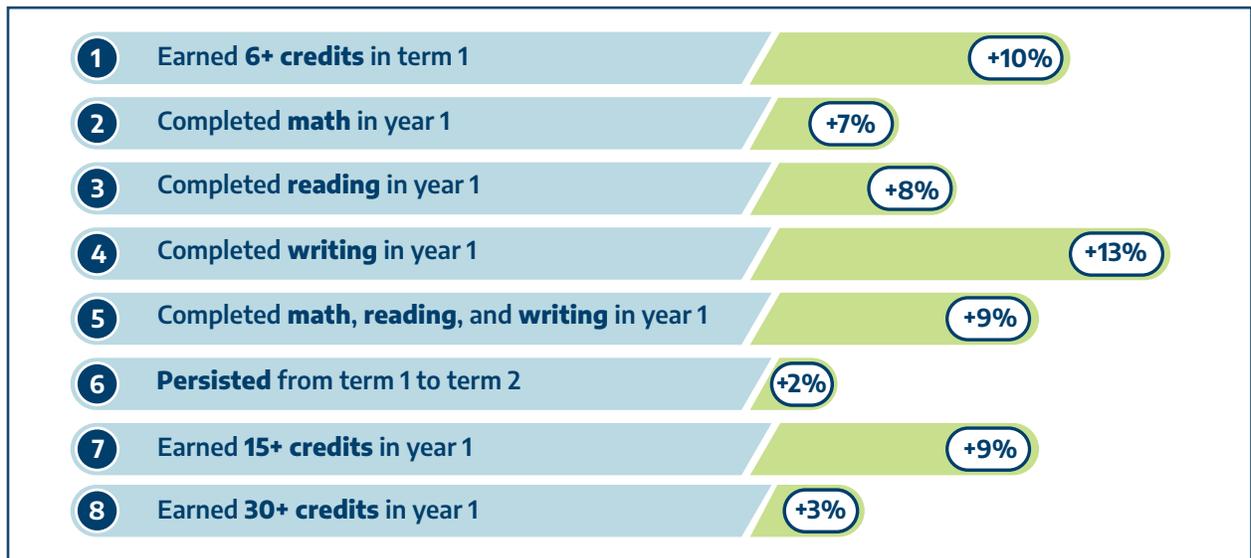# Houston Community College: Continuous Improvement Focused on Student Success

The Texas Success Center (TSC) tracks colleges' progress on eight early momentum metrics. Houston Community College (HCC) has shown improvement on all eight of these metrics. In the past five years — data from 2017 to 2021 — changes at HCC have led to the following gains:

#	Metric	Gain
1	Earned **6+ credits** in term 1	+10%
2	Completed **math** in year 1	+7%
3	Completed **reading** in year 1	+8%
4	Completed **writing** in year 1	+13%
5	Completed **math**, **reading**, and **writing** in year 1	+9%
6	**Persisted** from term 1 to term 2	+2%
7	Earned **15+ credits** in year 1	+9%
8	Earned **30+ credits** in year 1	+3%

Corequisite Education: Going Slowly to Create Lasting Change

Changing to corequisite education has been central to HCC's success, and the college's approach to this transition meant a slower start but more certain, ongoing progress.

HCC started corequisite education with paired English classes — a college course and a support course — and did so before the state of Texas required a switch from traditional prerequisite remediation to corequisite support.

"We saw progress with the English pilot program, so we were already ahead of the game when the state required that we start using the corequisite model," recalls Norma Perez, senior vice chancellor for instruction and student services.

The college used two models for its English corequisite classes: one had a full-time English faculty member teach both courses; the other had a full-time faculty member teach the college-level course and a reading or writing faculty member teach the support course. Thus, the college had data about both models as it scaled its corequisite approach.

"Math was a bit of a struggle for us," Perez says. "At first, the math faculty determined the structure that they wanted to use. In their structure, students took the support course first, and then they took the college-level math course."

That faculty-led structure did not produce completion gains, and HCC leadership wanted the faculty to figure out a new approach. Perez gave math faculty members release time during the summer session so they could develop a true corequisite model for the four gateway math classes available at HCC. (Students take one of four gateway math courses depending on their field of study.)

"Math faculty spent a summer creating a true corequisite model — the college-level math course along with the support course at the same time — and that resulted in significant completion gains," Perez says.

Perez believes that allowing the math faculty to develop and test their own model was a critical factor in the college's ultimate success.

"Based on research and data from other colleges, we didn't think their first model would work," she explains. "But we really needed them to be on board with the change to corequisite support. Because we allowed them to implement their first model, they saw in one semester that it wasn't working."

"It's really clear that success breeds more success," adds Margaret Ford Fisher, chancellor. "The math faculty saw what did not work as well as the successful implementation that followed. This process eliminated any doubt and helped them embrace the model that we are using today."

Personalized Learning Plans Guide Students From Start to Finish

To pull together all of HCC's guided pathways work, the HCC leadership put student engagement at the center of the college's quality enhancement plan beginning in 2021. The team created two work groups — an advisory council and a design/implementation team — that spent a year figuring out what next steps would most help students. Their solution: personalized learning plans.

By spring 2024, HCC was ready to pilot My HCC Pathway, a custom-designed portal that maps out each student's personalized plan from day one through meeting their career goals. The portal was designed and built by an HCC in-house team.

"My HCC Pathway outlines the courses students should take each semester as well as other steps the students should take. It tells them, for example, when they should develop their resume or participate in an experiential learning activity," says Betty Fortune, interim associate vice chancellor for student retention and completion.

The personalized plans focus on identifying students' academic goals and then helping students attain them. Each student's instructors and advisors can see the plan and send the student recommendations. Instructors might suggest tutoring, or an advisor might provide information about relevant services.

"All of the tools are built into the planning portal," Fortune explains. "The faculty member or advisor simply clicks a button to make a recommendation to the student. It is easy for them to tell students exactly how to get the help they need."

The spring 2024 pilot included approximately 300 students, but an additional 2,500 students used the tool even though they were not part of the pilot. They simply found it in the portal and completed their own information. In fall 2024, HCC plans to make My HCC Pathway available to 50 percent of first-time-in-college students.

Better Communication for Faculty and Midterm Grades for Students

At HCC, any success is considered a beginning, and faculty, staff, and administrators consistently look for ways to improve. In many cases, improvement begins with better communication.

For example, the college introduced professional development to improve communication among the faculty teaching paired corequisite courses. Now those faculty members are better able to discuss pedagogy and coordinate efforts to serve the students in these paired courses.

The college also is beginning to standardize having midterm grades in all corequisite college-level courses. These midterm grades provide important information to students. They also are shared with the paired support faculty members so they can better assist students.

"If a student is doing well with the support course but is not on track to pass the college-level course, the support faculty member will develop an action plan for the student," Perez explains. "They look at where the student needs to improve so they can succeed in the college-level course."

The action plan might include, for example, doing some additional online work to strengthen particular skills. The college also connects students with support services, such as tutoring and peer support.

"With this intervention, we're having a much higher rate of students who are struggling mid-semester but pass the course at the end," says Andrea Burridge, interim vice chancellor for strategy, planning, and institutional effectiveness. "The data is really astounding; the pass rates of students who are identified as needing support and follow through with that support has skyrocketed."

HCC tracks data for corequisite students who are failing the college-level class mid-semester but pass the course at the end of the term. The faculty's perception is that before midterm grades were introduced, few students who were failing at mid-semester ended up passing their college-level classes.

Now, with midterm grades in place, 55 percent of English corequisite students with failing midterm grades end up passing the college-level course. For math, the pass rates for students failing mid-semester were slightly lower but still impressive: 34 percent of College Algebra students and 40 percent of Business Math and Quantitative Reasoning students who were failing mid-semester ultimately passed their college-level courses.

Annual Student Success Summit Gets Everyone on the Same Page

Better communication is also the driving force behind HCC's annual Student Success Summit, which gathers about 300 faculty and staff together to dive deeply into the topic of student success.

"When I arrived, I found that other people were not defining *student success* the same way that I was," Fortune explains. "So the first summit was about developing a common understanding of what student success is."

The summit uses outside speakers, the college's Pathways coach, small-group discussions, and other approaches to help faculty and staff understand one another's work and find ways to better support each other's efforts. While each summit has a different central topic, they all emphasize using data effectively and hearing student voices.

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"We want everyone to understand key metrics and how to use them to improve their work inside or outside the classroom," Fortune says. "And having faculty and staff do this together helps them become a better team."

She adds, "I would never have a summit without including the voices of students. We want our faculty and staff to see the reality of our students' lives and what they go through."

TSC Supports Continuous Improvement

The HCC team credits the TSC with helping them focus on the college's data and share it throughout the institution.

"I'm not sure how far along we would be without the TSC," Fortune says. "They do such strategic work, and that helps us become more strategic with our work."

The TSC also helped HCC better align their programs so more students would earn high-level credentials and degrees.

"We had various certificates and degrees within our programs, but in many cases, they were not stackable," Perez says. "We looked at them closely to figure out how a level-one certificate could feed into a level two and then, of course, into an associate degree."

That thinking led the college to revamp short-term training programs and continuing education to encourage students to continue in the pipeline.

"We're looking at the skills that students learn as a patient care assistant, for example, and asking where those skills might fit in some of our health science programs or our licensed vocational nurse program," Perez explains.

She continues, "Then we will make a plan to find out if a student wants to pursue one of these programs and what kind of credit we can give them for the medical assistant program they've already completed. By realigning programs and creating a pathway, we are finding ways for students to take their credentials and apply them to the credit side of the house."

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