Understanding Sense of Belonging as Defined and Experienced by Community College Students

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Introduction

As the Talent Strong Texas Pathways (TS Texas Pathways) model continues to evolve and state-level legislative funding changes take effect, community colleges across Texas are being challenged to build strategies which support their students' success in ways that are well-defined, measurable, and relevant. Strategy to increase retention and completion must be well constructed and informed by data.

The TS Texas Pathways strategy supports Texas community colleges to redesign the student experience through guided pathways. The strategy places belonging and wellness as foundational to student success and places the onus on the college to build systems and structures that attend to student success. In the context of TS Texas Pathways, belonging is defined as "the extent to which each member of the college community feels connected, valued, supported, and included" (Texas Success Center [TSC], 2024). The strategy defines wellness as "when each member of the college community thrives because their basic needs are met and barriers to resources are removed, enabling them to focus on success" (TSC, 2024).

A student's sense of belonging impacts all aspects of their community college experience – retention, persistence, performance, and commitment (S. Won et al, 2021). Therefore, in order to support student success, it is important to understand how community college students define and experience sense of belonging to inform college efforts to redesign the student experience in student-centered ways.

Sense of belonging at a community college can be experienced at various levels (e.g. institution, classroom, and social) and from many student perspectives (e.g. veteran, online degree seeker, minority, working-class). This study sought to explore sense of belonging at an institutional level and to examine potential differences in definition and experience between traditional and non-traditional students. For the purposes of this study, traditional students were defined as those between the ages of 18-24. Non-traditional students were defined as any student aged 25 and above.

Methods

Research Questions

My study was guided by the following research questions:
- How do traditional and non-traditional students define sense of belonging?
- How do traditional and non-traditional students experience sense of belonging?
- How do the definitions and experiences of sense of belonging compare between traditional and non-traditional students?

Objective

The primary objective of this study was to gain understanding about Houston Community College's (HCC) traditional and non-traditional students as related to the research questions. A secondary objective was to use study findings to support student success efforts at HCC.

Data Collection

During the summer and fall 2024 semesters, focus groups were conducted to gain insights into students' perspectives on sense of belonging at Houston Community College. Participant recruitment activities included: flyers posted on campuses, classroom announcements made by instructors, event sign-up tables, and emailed invitations to online students who had previously indicated a willingness to be contacted for studies and surveys.

Participants were required to complete a Participant Information Survey (See Appendix A), which had a mixture of open-ended and multi-choice questions. Participants had the option to complete the survey online (via Qualtrics), electronically (via fillable PDF), or manually (using a printed form). Participants were also required to complete a Consent Form for Students (See Appendix B). This form was provided in both print and electronic formats.

Focus groups were conducted in accordance with the protocols approved by the Houston Community College Institutional Review Board (See Appendix C).

Findings

Demographics

Between June 27, 2024, and September 16, 2024, a total of 41 students participated in 11 focus groups. Eight in-person sessions were conducted at campuses throughout the college district, and three virtual sessions were held via Zoom. With the exception of two female participants who did not respond to one question about academic and career goals, responses for all Participant Information Survey questions were obtained from all participants.

Since participants self-selected by volunteering for the study, it was not possible to purposefully select a representative sample. However, analysis indicated that total composition of the focus groups, with the exception of the number of white or Caucasian participants, was similar to student demographics as reported in *HCC Fast Facts Fall 2024*.

Table 1
Age of Participants

Age Group	Number	Percent
Non-Traditional (25 & up)	13	31.7%
Traditional (18-24)	28	68.3%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 2

Gender of Participants

Gender	Number	Percent
Female	26	63.4%
Male	15	36.6%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 3
Race and Ethnicity of Participants

	Number	Percent
Asian	5	12.2%
Black or African American	14	34.1%
Hispanic or Latino	16	39.0%
Multiracial	3	7.3%
Other, indicate: Chadian	1	2.4%
White or Caucasian	2	4.9%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Participant Information Survey Results and Analysis

Academic and Career Goals

As part of the Participant Information Survey, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question regarding their academic and career goals. No limitations or requirements for level of detail were given. This section provides analysis for non-traditional and traditional students followed by a comparison of the responses.

Responses from Non-Traditional Students. Non-traditional participants' stated goals ran the gamut, ranging from being very specific – both in terms of immediate and long-term goals - to being less developed or non-existent.

About half of the non-traditional participants, primarily those pursuing associate degrees in the health care professions, indicated that they plan to continue with their education. Some will be pursuing bachelor's degrees immediately upon completing their programs at HCC. Within this group, there was a strong indication that they saw a need for possible advanced degrees as well. Several within this group indicated that they plan to work for a few years before returning to school to further their education so that they could advance in their field. Three indicated an interest in opening a private practice and discussed the need for a business degree.

One non-traditional student is enrolled in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program so that she will be able to earn her general education diploma (GED). After that, she plans to continue her education by enrolling in an academic degree program. She echoed the sentiment of another non-traditional student who said, "Most definitely, this (certification or associate degree) is not the end."

Goals for others within the non-traditional student group were less detailed. These responses included completing an associate degree and gaining high level qualifications which would enable them to secure employment in a profession of their choosing. One student indicated a desire to spread the word about the importance of attending college, and one student did not respond to the question.

Responses from Traditional Students. Five of the traditional student participants responded that they plan to complete workforce certifications which will allow them to enter the workforce immediately. Additionally, they shared plans to complete continuing education units in order to maintain and build on their skills, as well as the desire to complete additional certifications which will allow them to advance and have more flexibility in their chosen fields.

More than half of the participants in the traditional group shared plans to complete their associate degree programs at HCC. While some will enter the workforce, most plan to transfer to four-year universities to complete their bachelor's degrees, and the majority of these respondents indicated that they have plans to complete some type of advanced degree.

As with their counterparts in the non-traditional group, the responses of the remaining traditional students were less developed. They included earning another associate degree, being prepared for the workforce, deciding what they want to study, and possibly opening their own business. Several students indicated a desire to make good grades and maintain a high GPA throughout their time at HCC. One student did not specify a field or academic preparation but would like to "earn six figures yearly." One participant in the group did not provide a response.

Comparison of Non-Traditional vs. Traditional Student Responses. Responses from both groups were very similar with many expressing both short- and long-term goals for their educational and career journeys, as well as indicating their understanding of learning as a life-long process. In both groups, less developed responses were provided by some and no response at all was provided by one.

Focus Group Responses and Analysis

Questions used during the focus groups were designed to elicit insights and answers to the three research questions. During analysis, three themes emerged: (1) knowledge of HCC and making the decision to attend, (2) initial sense of belonging, and (3) changes to sense of belonging after passage of time. This section is grouped by those themes with separate analyses for non-traditional and traditional students followed by a comparison of the responses.

Knowledge of HCC and Making Decision to Attend

In this segment of the focus group, participants were invited to introduce themselves and to share how they learned about the College's programs and services, as well as how and when they decided to come to the College. They were also invited to share any feelings they experienced when making their decision.

Responses from Non-Traditional Students. Many participants within the non-traditional category indicated that they learned about HCC by talking to family members or friends, and some indicated that they had personal experience or knowledge of dual credit courses that were offered at their high schools. Participants who had no knowledge or experience with HCC stated that the primary way they learned about the college and its programs and services was through web searches. Additionally, they saw the campuses in their communities and stopped in to ask. When making the decision to come to HCC, several participants in the non-traditional group indicated that they also explored what was offered at other institutions and did a side-by-side comparison with what HCC promised to provide.

For the majority, the decision to come to HCC was one of convenience and affordability combined with programs that interested them and aligned with their goals and needs. The process to apply and enroll was "easy," and campuses were close to their homes or places of business. In addition, classes were

offered in a variety of formats and fit within their family and work schedules. Tuition and fees were affordable, and, if needed, financial aid was readily available for those who qualified.

In the non-traditional group, some students noted that they experienced some nervousness about taking college classes. This was especially noted by the international students who were attending college for the first time away from their home country. Overall, though, respondents were excited about the opportunity to attend HCC. In fact, about one-third of the group stated that they feel very motivated because it is "their time to learn, grow, and succeed."

Responses from Traditional Students. As with their non-traditional counterparts, participants in the traditional category indicated that they learned about HCC by talking to family members, friends, or their high school college and career counselors. Most indicated that they had personal experience or knowledge of dual credit courses offered at their high schools. Participants also became aware of HCC by seeing the campuses and buildings when traveling through their neighborhoods.

Those who wanted to learn more about the college and its programs and services asked their friends and family members who were closer in age to them about HCC and asked their opinions and advice. They also conducted web searches and compared HCC with other institutions.

For one international student, an advisor from his home college recommended HCC as a good place to attend while completing core courses and getting used to the educational system in the United States prior to transferring to a four- year institution. Another international student indicated that she learned about HCC from her spouse. She was excited to learn that she received credit for classes taken in her home country, which put her further along the path to her desired degree right from the start. Her feelings on day one? "It's my first American first-day-of-school!"

Two of the international students in this group conducted internet searches and found HCC. The requirements and all of the materials needed, as well as the steps for applying, were clearly described on the webpage, and the online advisor helped them to easily navigate the application process, which was very different from what they experienced in their home countries. As a result of working with the advisors and other staff, one stated, "Now, I feel very confident. I feel it's something I can succeed in (doing)."

Most of the traditional students echoed the non-traditional students' reasons of convenience, quality and variety of programs offered, and affordability for selecting HCC. However, several of the traditional students stated that their parents strongly suggested or outright told them they had to go. Two other students in the traditional group indicated that, during their web searches, they accidentally signed up for programs being held at HCC and, after attending those, decided to take classes.

One participant stated that she wasn't sure what to do after high school, so she enrolled at HCC to avoid falling behind while she made decisions about her future. Another shared that a poor high school grade point average (GPA) and not getting his "commit" paperwork in on time kept him from being accepted to his selected four-year institution, so he went with "Plan B: HCC."

Another response that differed from those expressed by non-traditional students was that the traditional students were bored and lonely at home. This was especially true for participants who, while they fall into the traditional category, did not go into college immediately upon graduation from high school. In addition, there were limited job opportunities and those that were available were not fulfilling or well-paying.

Traditional students reported a range of emotions upon deciding to come to HCC. Some were confused or scared, while others felt good about their choice. One student reported that she has a fear of missing out on the experiences her friends are having at their four-year universities. For a handful, entering HCC's educational environment, even though it differed from their high school or non-U.S. college experiences, brought feelings of comfort, security, and consistency.

Comparison of Non-Traditional vs. Traditional Student Responses. The ways in which both non-traditional and traditional students learned about HCC's programs and services are clearly similar. As well, both groups shared that convenience and affordability played a role in their decision to attend HCC and that their feelings while making this decision included nervousness or some fear.

However, in addition to convenience and affordability, non-traditional students also seemed motivated by a mindset that their time for learning and success had arrived. Their decision was highly personal and based upon what worked best for them and their families. Due to this, they indicated being primarily excited about the prospect of going to HCC.

Traditional students' decision-making processes seemed to be more externally driven, whether it be parents informing them that they would be attending HCC or the student asking for and following the advice given by an older sibling or friend. For some, chance played the role of decision maker. Emotions and feelings also clearly had an impact on the traditional students' decisions to choose HCC.

Initial Sense of Belonging

Participants were asked to respond to the statement, **"*The very first time I came to this college, I felt like I belong*"** using a scale of 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, and 5=strongly disagree.

Responses from both non-traditional and traditional students primarily ranged between 1 (strongly agree) to 3 (neutral), resulting in average responses of 2.4 and 2.1 respectively. The overall average response was 2.2, showing a tendency toward agreement.

However, there were two participants in each group who selected either 4 (disagree) or 5 (strongly disagree). Both non-traditional students indicated that they disagreed with the statement. One stated that not knowing English, as well as not knowing what to expect while enrolling in an U.S. college, caused her to feel out of place and anxious. The other indicated that she had disagreed based upon her experience while taking one class more than six years ago; however, she did not provide any additional details.

Of the two traditional students, one strongly disagreed but indicated her rating was based upon bad experiences while taking dual credit classes at her high school when she was not prepared for college-level work, as well as how she felt coming on campus after high school. From her response, it was clear that her opinion was not necessarily specific to HCC but had more to do with transitioning from a high school to a college setting. The other student noted that her four rating reflected her feelings as she adjusted to differences between attending college and high school, especially in the area of advising. She went on to say that her feelings about HCC fell more into the neutral category.

Changes to Sense of Belonging after Passage of Time

Participants were invited to share whether their impressions of HCC had changed since their first visit and if they felt more or less welcome after having spent several weeks in classes. They were also asked if there was a culture of caring at the campus and the role instructors and staff played.

Responses from Non-Traditional Students. Eleven students in this group indicated that their impressions of HCC had changed. Of these students, the majority (82%) stated that they felt even more welcome than previously expressed. They attributed this change to interactions with their instructors and fellow students. Additionally, they cited college events such as Welcome Week and cultural education programs celebrating the diverse student population, as well as having the opportunity to interact with college leaders and staff, as strengthening their sense of belonging.

Due to interactions with their instructors and advisors, two students indicated that their impression of the institution had become more negative. However, they also shared that, as students who attended multiple campuses, inconsistencies across the college – course availability and non-instructional program offerings - also played a role.

Also of note, the student pursuing her GED indicated that, while she felt even more welcome at the institution and was still excited to be here, the "worry that she might be neglecting family responsibilities was always in the back of her mind."

The remaining two students from this group, both of whom had expressed being neutral about feeling a sense of belonging, indicated that their impression of HCC had not changed since they first visited the institution. However, both indicated that they felt more welcome by their peers and felt a developing sense of community.

Responses from Traditional Students. A little more than one-third of the traditional students indicated that their impressions of HCC had changed for the better. This subgroup was primarily the students who had previously indicated neutral about feeling a sense of belonging at HCC and also included the student who had strongly disagreed with feeling she belonged. Students who had initially indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt they belonged the first time they came to HCC did not note any change.

Interactions with faculty and staff, the ability to access student services, and growing awareness of campus amenities were cited as reasons for the change. Additionally, several students mentioned an atmosphere of inclusiveness that was missing in their high school experience. One traditional student, who came to HCC immediately after graduation, stated that she had come to realize students bear a responsibility in their college experience and had needed to adjust to the changes that come with being an adult student. This sentiment was shared by other students in the same situation.

Although the students' impressions improved, they expressed the need to have separate and adequately sized spaces that allow for studying, eating, and socializing. They also expressed a desire for more core classes to be offered at some of the campuses and to expand student clubs to all campus. Additionally, while students pointed out that staff were very helpful, they also noted that, as new college students, they did not always know the right questions to ask.

The student who had originally indicated she strongly disagreed that she felt she belonged noted that her rating had improved; however, it had only moved to level four (disagree). She noted that this rating reflected what she considered to be a lack of community compared to her high school experience. She also stated that things were getting better. She had made a connection with at least one of her instructors and was beginning to get to know her classmates.

Only one student indicated that her impression had unfavorably changed when she learned her campus did not have a bookstore. She prefers to have hard copies of textbooks but does not have transportation which would allow her to travel to another campus with a bookstore.

Comparison of Non-Traditional vs. Traditional Student Responses. When comparing the students' responses, one thing that especially stood out was non-traditional students' attitude towards sense of belonging and their demonstrated commitment to support their fellow students. It

isn't enough to feel they belong and to have an individual knowledge of all HCC has to offer them; they want to make sure this is true for their fellow students.

During one focus group when other participants expressed a need or frustration, evidence of this commitment took the form of a non-traditional student sharing what HCC programs and services were available to meet those needs. Additionally, the non-traditional student took it one step further, not only explaining how to access the services, but also encouraging the other students to take advantage of the benefits and explaining the potential positive impact to their educational journeys.

One non-traditional student stated that she felt challenged, in a good way, when she saw other students doing better in class than she was. As she watched others succeed, she decided, "I want to be there (at the top of the class), and then I want to help others get there, too." She saw room and possibility for all to excel and succeed.

In contrast to their non-traditional peers, perceptions of the traditional students were more affected by external factors. Improvements resulted from making connections with their classmates and instructors and beginning to understand the ins and outs of college life.

Implications and Recommendations

During focus group discussions, many concepts were identified as contributing to a student's overall sense of belonging when on campus. *As such, the results of this research suggest that students would define belonging as being seen, respected, and supported as individuals, whose specific needs and unique viewpoints are valued and taken into consideration when impactful decisions are made – fostering emotional connections within the HCC community.*

Using both the definition of belonging as outlined in the TS Texas Pathways strategy and the definition developed from this student-centered research study, Texas community colleges can continue to implement and scale practices that promote belonging as the foundation to student success.

What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive list of practices and behaviors identified in this research, but rather a good sampling of what students feel contribute to their sense of belonging. College leaders should give consideration to these preferences when creating focused student success strategies. Additionally, they should seek additional student input where it may be needed. By doing so, they increase the probability of success – both for our students and for the institution.

Personal connections. These were important across both age groups; however, there were differences in expectations and needs expressed by non-traditional and traditional students. Non-traditional students leaned toward connections that would benefit them as they moved into the workplace. Traditional students were more interested in building a network of friends through participation in student clubs, study groups, and special events or programs sponsored through Student Life.

Clear and planned communications. There are an overwhelming number of methods, as well as uncountable reasons, that we reach out to our students, and both student groups indicated that good communication is vital. To them, good communication includes a clear message which has a purpose for being sent. Additionally, it should be distributed though channels that students prefer and regularly check.

Perceptions are reality. Their first-time experiences coming onto HCC campuses or receiving services via the Virtual Student Lobby made an impression on each student. However, in some cases, negative perceptions held by the student – apprehensions about college in general or memories of bad experiences at previous institutions – also informed several opinions share by participants. As we work with students, we need to take the time to get to know them and to understand not only what their concerns are, but where they originate. This will allow us to do a better job of serving and supporting our students. Working more closely with our ISD partners will enable us to prepare high school and dual credit students for the transition to both college and student life on campuses.

Space for me. Both student groups agreed that having dedicated spaces especially for students (i.e. it's their space vs. classroom and/or student services areas) is a key element of feeling that they belong on campus. These spaces would allow students to socialize or enjoy a meal together, provide space for studying and study groups, and also provide quiet spaces to relax.

Training and college-awareness opportunities outside of the classroom. As one traditional student put it, "Help! It's my first time in college, and I don't know what I don't know." Short programs on general information new HCC students need to know and information on how to use the student portal were requested. It was noted that brand new students receive this information through mandatory EDUC 1300 class; however, some students were exempt from this course and others took it several semesters ago and would appreciate a refresher. Several traditional students suggested providing basic training on how to use the college's learning management system for everyone as they are accepted into the institution, and they recommended that it be available well in advance of a student enrolling in classes. Non-traditional students echoed this sentiment and also indicated a need to become more technologically savvy in general.

Limitations and Future Work

During this study, additional opportunities for future work were identified. From these, the following research topics and questions were developed.

Avoiding unintentional sample bias and reaching the unheard student. The potential for sample bias was identified during focus group recruitment when it was noted that most students participating in the study indicated they were involved on their campuses. How do we encourage and increase involvement of all students? Is it possible that the unstated needs of these students may be met, at least in part, by actions taken as a result of the current study's findings? If so, how might the impact and effectiveness of these actions be measured

Fostering sense of belonging and community in students enrolled in online only programs. How is sense of belonging experienced by students in online only programs? Do these students desire greater connections and community with the institution, or did they enroll in online only because it offered them an opportunity to avoid such connections?

Community-mindedness in students at two-year commuter institutions. When and how does a student's personal sense of belonging transform into a desire and lead to actions aimed to ensure that other students are engaged and that their needs are being met? What strategies for fostering community-mindedness currently exist within the college and how effective are they? Are older students more inclined to be community-minded?

Internally vs. externally motivated students. If a student's decision-making processes about their education and other life choices is primarily directed by external forces (e.g. parents' directives or preferences, advice of older siblings or friends, happenstance), how do their outcomes compare with those who indicate they are self-motivated? What differences in retention and completion may exist?

Fostering sense of belonging in the college and their host country for International Students. Orientation sessions provide international students with the information necessary to navigate within the college environment, but many experience frustration and confusion when navigating their day-to-day lives outside the college walls. What information do these students need to feel comfortable in their host country? What programs and services can the college provide or connect students to that will build a sense of belonging for students in their communities?

Geography, size, and sense of belonging. What role may an institution's geographical setting (location and/or region) play in campus culture and their students' feelings of wellness, belonging, and success? What role may an institution's size play in their students' feelings of wellness, belonging, and success?

Conclusion

Study results indicate that the majority of HCC students, whether they are considered to be non-traditional or traditional, experience a fairly strong sense of belonging at the institution. Additionally, the average initial perception ratings of both groups were very similar, and several weeks into the semester still maintained that similarity.

While most participants' expressed definitions seemed to align, there were clear differences in how non-traditional and traditional students experience of sense of belonging. This knowledge will be beneficial to college leaders as they design, implement, and evaluate student success strategies associated with recruitment, retention, and completion.

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Appendix A. Sense of Belonging:
Participant Information Survey

This form collects HCC student information for the purpose of identifying participants for Sense of Belonging focus groups. Individuals who qualify for participation will receive a separate calendar invitation via email. Please note that students under the age of 18 are not eligible to participate.

At the end of the survey, you will have the option to request that a copy of your responses be emailed to you. If you have questions about the focus groups or use of information, please contact [facilitator] in the Research Office via email (email address) or phone (phone number).

Contact Information

Please note that the primary means of communication will be your HCC email address. If provided, your preferred email will be added to any communications.

Full Name (first and last): _____
HCC email address: _____
Preferred email address (if different from HCC email): _____
Phone: _____

Demographic Information

1. Which best describes your gender identity?
   o Female
   o Male
   o Transgender
   o Nonbinary / Gender non-conforming
   o Other   _____
   o I prefer not to respond

2. What is your age group?
   o Under 18
   o 18 - 19
   o 20 - 21
   o 22 - 24
   o 25 - 29
   o 30 - 39
   o 40 - 49
   o 50 - 64
   o 65+

3. What is your racial/ethnic identification? (Select all that apply.)
o   American Indian or Alaska Native
o   Asian
o   Black or African American
o   Hispanic or Latino
o   Native Hawaiian
o   Pacific Islander (non-Native Hawaiian)
o   White
o   Other (please specify) _____
o   I prefer not to respond

4. Are you an international student or foreign national? Yes/No

5. Have you served in the military? Yes/No

Educational Background
6. Briefly share your academic and/or career goals. (Open-ended response space provided.)

7. While in high school, which of the following courses did you take? (Select all that apply.)
o   College classes (dual credit)
o   College Prep classes
o   Advanced Placement (AP) classes
o   Honors classes
o   I did not take any of the courses listed above.

8. While in high school, which of the following tests did you take? (Select all that apply.)
o   PSAT
o   SAT
o   ACT
o   College placement test
o   Other (please specify) _____

9. Did you enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school? Yes/No

10. Is HCC the first college you have attended? Yes/No

11. Is this your first academic semester at HCC? Yes/No

12. How many classes are you enrolled in this summer (fall)? 1/2/3 or more

13. What is the highest academic credential you have earned?
   o None
   o High School Diploma or GED
   o Associate Degree
   o Vocational / Technical Degree or Certificate
   o Bachelor's Degree
   o Master's / Doctoral / Professional Degree

14. Who in your family has attended at least some college? (Select all that apply.)
   o Mother
   o Father
   o Brother / Sister
   o Spouse / Partner
   o Legal Guardian
   o Child
   o None of the Above

Financial
15. During this semester, my college expenses (tuition, fees, books, etc.) are being paid by:

	Major Source	Minor Source	Not a Source
My own income or savings	o	o	o
Income / savings from family	o	o	o
Employer contributions (i.e. your employer is paying your college expenses)	o	o	o
Active military or veteran benefits	o	o	o
Grants	o	o	o
Scholarships	o	o	o
Student loans (bank, etc.)	o	o	o
Public assistance	o	o	o

16. Do you have children or other dependents living at home with you? Yes/No

17. If you have children living with you, which of the following best describes your childcare situation?
   o My children are enrolled in a childcare center at this college.
   o I currently have childcare arrangements for my children outside of this college.
   o Finding childcare is a major issue for me.
   o My children do not require childcare.

18. In a typical 7-day week, about how many hours do you spend doing each of the following:

	None	1-10 hours	11-20 hours	21-30 hours	More than 30 hours
Working on campus					
Working off campus					
Providing care for dependents (parents, children, spouse, etc.)					
Commuting to and from class					
Participating in community organizations, religious groups, politics, etc.					

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Appendix B.
Consent Form for Students

Participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to be in the project at any time, and your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with Houston Community College.

The faculty and staff of Houston Community College are committed to doing all we can to help students be successful. The purpose of conducting student focus groups to help HCC better understand how our students define and experience a sense of belonging. Outcomes will provide insight into how the work currently being done at the college may be impacting our students' potential for success and may also be used to improve or develop new programs.

The information gathered in this focus group will be summarized by the focus group staff, and the college administration will receive a summary of the discussion. Participant comments may be recorded and/or video-recorded for the sole purpose of maintaining an accurate record of the discussion that will be a reference for any reports derived from the discussion. Information derived from this focus group discussion may be used in publications and presentations to further the educational goals of this community college. All written publications and reports will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify individual participants as project participants.

Students who participate in this project will be interviewed in a 90-minute focus group and will be asked to complete one short student response sheet.

Students who participate for the full focus group session will receive $50 (gift card) in consideration for their time. Other benefits may include greater awareness of services offered by HCC and improvements to those services.

Houston Community College needs a signed consent form for every student participating in this focus group project. **By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in the project.**

For this study, there are minimal risks associated with confidentiality and mental health. The records from this project will be stored securely and kept confidential. Individual participant responses will be kept confidential; however, in the event a participant indicates a clear, serious, and direct harm to self or others, confidentiality will be broken and necessary information will be reported to a college counselor. Authorized persons from the college have the right to review focus group records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact the focus group coordinator, [coordinator name] at (phone number and email address). You may also contact HCC's Institutional Review Board at irb@hccs.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Consent

I, _____, a student at Houston Community College, understand that:
        Name (please print)

       a.   This interview/focus group may be audio recorded and/or video-recorded for the purpose of maintaining an accurate record of the discussion that will be a reference for any reports derived from the discussion;

       b.   The information gather in this focus group will be summarized by the focus group staff, and the college administration will receive a summary of the discussion; and

       c.   Information derived from this focus group discussion may be used in publications and presentations to further the educational goals of this community college.

       d.   I must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this focus group.

I have read and understand this consent form and agree to voluntarily participate in this project.

Participant's Signature   Date

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Appendix C.
Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Purpose
Houston Community College (HCC) is conducting focus groups with students throughout all of our colleges. Our objective is to understand how students define and experience sense of belonging at HCC and also to examine any similarities and differences expressed by participants in student focus groups.

Focus Group Outcomes:
What we learn will be used to inform planning and improvement in the services provided to our students and, potentially, training that is provided for our employees.

Focus Group Outline
Each focus group will comprise the following activities:
- Meeting Overview
- Consent Forms
- Questionnaires (e.g., demographics forms/survey items, etc.)
- Participant Introductions
- Discussion
- Summary & Close

Approximate Total Time: 75-90 minutes

Focus Group Agenda
A.   **Meeting Overview**
- Introduce facilitator -- Welcome interviewees and thank them for their participation. Introduce yourself and let them know that your role will be to facilitate the discussion.
- Explain the purpose of focus group -- The purpose of this focus group is to gain understanding about how students define and experience sense of belonging at the institutional level and also to examine the similarities and differences expressed by various student groups with a focus on what HCC would define as traditional and non-traditional students.
- Explain the desired outcomes and how information gathered will be used --The findings from this project will be used to inform planning and improvement in the services provided to students and, potentially, training that is provided for our employees. What we learn will help not only this college, but other colleges as well to improve their work with students.
- Audio Recording / Note taking / Video Recording (online sessions only)
  - For the purposes of highlighting "student voices" as part of HCC's efforts to improve student success.
  - To support development of final report to be shared with college leaders.
  - No names will be used.

5. <u>Additional Logistics</u>
- 90 minutes maximum
- Arrangements for water and restroom break
- Students will receive a $50 gift card for their full participation.

B. **Consent Forms**
- <u>Explain</u> consent/human subject form.
- <u>Distribute</u> consent/human subject form.
- <u>Collect signed</u> consent/human subjects' forms.

C. **Introduce participants**

D. **Individual Roles and Ground Rules**
- Describe the facilitator's role:
    o To ask questions and keep the group on track
    o Explain that we'll be moving through the material fairly quickly, even though people might have more to say about a topic
- Describe participants' role:
    o Share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
    o No right or wrong answers
    o Everyone to participate in discussion
- Ground rules:
    o For confidentiality purposes, please indicate a name (pseudonym) you will use during this focus group. Using large print, please print this name on the table tent provided or by updating your name in Zoom. This helps with transcription.
    o Everyone will have a chance to be heard.
    o To achieve this,
        ▪ (For in-person session) We ask that one person speak at a time and that there be no side conversations. I will ask the question and you may raise your hand if you would like to answer first, and then we will move on to the others until everyone has had a chance to answer the question. I may also call on you individually to respond to a question.
        ▪ (For Zoom session) I will ask the question and you may raise your hand in Zoom if you would like to answer first, and then we will move on to the others until everyone has had a chance to answer the question. Also, please mute your mic if you're not speaking. I may also call on you individually to respond to a question.
    o A timer will be kept so we can get through most of the questions.
    o There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about your experiences. While you may not relate to or agree with everyone's experiences, please be respectful of their willingness to speak.
    o Your responses are confidential, de-identified, and will not be linked to your name. We will be reporting themes from the different interviews. We hope that you will speak honestly about your experience.

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E.   **Questions**
- Any questions before getting started?
- Reminder, we will record only the audio for this focus group for transcription purposes.
- Thank you in advance for taking time to share your insights with us.

Discussion

Read the main and sub questions before asking for responses and repeat, if necessary.

1. Please introduce yourself and briefly share how you learned about the College's programs and services. How and when did you decide to come to HCC? What feelings did you experience when making the decision?
2. On the following scale, please respond to the following statement: **"The very first time I came to this college, I felt like I belong."**
   1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree.
   (show of hands to each response)

   Please explain your response.
   - Has your impression changed since your first visit?
   - Do you feel more or less welcome today? If so, please explain why.
   - Describe if there is a culture of caring at this campus. Explain how you came to this conclusion.
   - Do you feel like the instructors care about your success in the courses that you are taking?
   - Do you feel like the college staff (other than instructors) care about you?

3. Think about your first week here and the people you met in class and outside of class. Who in the college knew your name at the end of the first week? Do more people know your name today than at the end of the first few weeks? If so, how did you meet them?
4. Describe a time or an experience you have had at the college that has or has not been favorable when you think about feeling you belong at HCC.
5. Considering your own characteristics – your gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, whether you are a part-time student, whether you are a working student, etc. – how well do you think the college is doing for you and people most like you?
6. If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important things the college could do to help students feel like they belong, what would you recommend? Why do you believe those are the most important changes?

Summary and Close

- Thank participants again for sharing their insights.
- Distribute gift cards.

Appendix D.
Additional Results: Participant Information Survey

Table 4
International Student Participants

	Number	Percent
Yes	5	12.2%
No	36	87.8%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 5
Veteran Participants

	Number	Percent
Yes	2	4.9%
No	39	95.1%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 6
Courses Taken in High School by Participants

	Number	Percent
College classes (dual credit)	10	24.4%
College Prep classes	4	9.8%
Advanced Placement (AP) classes	20	48.8%
Honors classes	5	12.2%
I did not take any of the courses listed above.	16	39.0%
Total	**55**	**134.1%**

Number and percent greater than 41 and 100 respectively due to participants selecting multiple options for high school courses taken.

Table 7

Tests Taken in High School by Participants

	Number	Percent
PSAT	17	41.5%
SAT	25	61.0%
ACT	5	12.2%
College placement test	9	22.0%
Other	3	7.3%
None	6	14.6%
Total	65	158.5%

Number and percent greater than 41 and 100 respectively due to participants selecting multiple options for tests taken.

Table 8

Participants Enrolled in College Immediately After Graduating High School

	Number	Percent
Yes	28	68.3%
No	13	31.7%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 9

HCC is First College Attended by Participants

	Number	Percent
Yes	29	70.7%
No	12	29.3%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 10

First Academic Semester at HCC for Participants

	Number	Percent
Yes	18	43.9%
No	23	56.1%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 11

Number of Classes Enrolled in for Current Term for Participants

	Number	Percent
One (1) Class	9	22.0%
Two (2) Classes	9	22.0%
Three (3) or more Classes	23	56.1%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 12

Highest Academic Credential for Participants

	Number	Percent
High School Diploma or GED	32	78.0%
Associate Degree	2	4.9%
Vocational / Technical Degree or Certificate	3	7.3%
Bachelor's Degree	3	7.3%
Master's / Doctoral / Professional Degree	0	0.0%
None	1	2.4%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 13

Participant Family Members Attended College

	Number	Percent
Mother	16	39.0%
Father	18	43.9%
Brother / Sister	19	46.3%
Spouse / Partner	6	14.6%
Legal Guardian	0	0.0%
Child	1	2.4%
None of the Above	7	17.1%
Total	**67**	**163.4%**

Table 14
How College Expenses Paid by Participants

Funding Source	Major Source	Minor Source	Not a Source
My own income or savings	19.5%	34.1%	46.3%
Income / savings from family	24.4%	14.6%	61.0%
Employer contributions	2.4%	0.0%	97.6%
Military or veteran benefits	2.4%	0.0%	97.6%
Grants	58.5%	4.9%	36.6%
Scholarships	9.8%	9.8%	80.5%
Student loans	9.8%	4.9%	85.4%
Public assistance	9.8%	2.4%	87.8%
Total	136.6%	70.7%	592.7%

Percent totals greater than 100 due to participants selecting multiple sources and options.

Table 15
Children or Other Dependents in the Home of Participants

	Number	Percent
Yes	11	26.8%
No	30	73.2%
Total	**41**	**100.0%**

Table 16
Childcare Situation of Participants

	Number	Percent
Finding childcare is a major issue	2	18.2%
My children do not require childcare.	8	72.7%
No Response	1	9.1%
Total	**11**	**100.0%**

Table 17

Hours per Week Spent on Activities Outside of Class by Participants

Activity	None	1-10 hours	11-20 hours	21-30 hours	More than 30 hours
Working on campus	61.0%	22.0%	12.2%	0.0%	4.9%
Working off campus	36.6%	14.6%	17.1%	17.1%	2.4%
Providing dependent care	56.1%	19.5%	4.9%	4.9%	14.6%
Commuting to and from class	12.2%	65.9%	14.6%	4.9%	2.4%
Community Activities	43.9%	41.5%	12.2%	0.0%	2.4%
Total	**209.8%**	**163.4%**	**61.0%**	**26.8%**	**26.8%**

Percent totals less than or greater than 100 due to participants selecting multiple activities and options.

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Texas Success Center

The Texas Success Center supports the Texas Association of Community Colleges members' efforts to improve student success and directs Talent Strong Texas Pathways – a statewide strategy focused on building capacity for community colleges to design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all students. For more information, visit tacc.org/tsc.