

Texas Pathways

Focus Group & Interview Guide



Texas Success Center



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Introduction

The Center for Community College Student Engagement created an earlier version of this manual for the American Association of Community Colleges' Pathways Project. The Texas Success Center has adapted the original materials for use with Texas Pathways.

An appendix contains all of the materials necessary to successfully plan, schedule, and facilitate focus groups or interviews with students.

These structured discussions will help colleges better understand students' experiences, as well as uncover possible opportunities for improvement. Focus groups or interviews will provide qualitative information to enhance other data. To complement findings from the focus group or interview discussions, student participants should be asked to fill out the profile sheet, which collects demographic and other information.

The qualitative report that the college prepares based on the findings of the focus groups or interviews should complement survey and other quantitative data to provide the college a more complete picture of student experiences on campus.

Before scheduling focus groups or interviews, check with your college's institutional research department to learn about established procedures and existing forms.

Cadre Assignments

- Cadre 1 colleges will conduct focus groups with up to 10 students.
- Cadre 2 colleges will conduct focus groups with three to five students.
- Cadre 3 colleges will conduct two individual interviews or one focus group with two or three students.
- Cadre 4 colleges will conduct one interview with one student.

If desired, your college may complete the assignment for an advanced cadre. To maintain effective communication, please include no more than 10 students in a focus group.

Report – Due April 10

Following the focus group or interview, review the notes, recording, or transcript of the session with your Pathways team. In a two or three-page report, address the following prompts:

1. How would you characterize the student's/students' experience?
2. How does the student experience compare to the college design? For example, if general education courses are contextualized for metamajors, do students say they relate to their pathway?
3. Which of your understandings or assumptions of the student experience were confirmed? Which were contradicted?
4. Which student experiences speak to the need for pathways reforms?
5. Which implemented reforms seem to make a difference?
6. What aspects of the student experience might you investigate further?



Planning Focus Groups and Interviews

Preparation and planning for conducting effective focus groups and interviews consists of four key components: proper scheduling; targeted recruitment of participants; effective communication with participants; and attention to logistics. The college should identify a campus employee to serve as the focus group or interview coordinator.

Step 1: Schedule Focus Group or Interview Sessions

- Focus group sessions will last approximately 75–90 minutes.
- Interviews will last approximately 45–60 minutes.

The focus group should be scheduled at the time that is best for students. Make every effort to attract a representative cross-section of students.

Because an interview is conducted with one student, scheduling is more flexible.

Step 2: Recruit Participants

► Student Participant Specifications

The Center for Community College Student Engagement uses the following guidelines in identifying student participants. The college may use other criteria; however, this is a suggested model:

- Students need to be over 18 years old.
- To the extent possible, students should reflect the diversity of the college's student population by enrollment status (full- time/less than full-time), major or program of study, first-generation/not first-generation status, and

socioeconomic status (as determined by eligibility for financial aid or students' self-reporting about need for financial assistance).

- It is recommended that dual credit students not participate in the focus group.
- It is recommended that student government and honors students not be recruited. Try to recruit your institution's typical student.

► Student Recruitment

Recruitment should begin as quickly as possible. Sample invitation emails to students are provided in appendices of this manual. If the college is able to use other technology, like posting a message on the college's website, texting students, or using Facebook, these methods have also proven effective recruitment strategies.

Step 3: Communicate with Participants

Following up with students to encourage participation is the most important strategy to ensure they feel a commitment to the focus group or interview and attend. The focus group or interview coordinator will be responsible for communicating with recruited students.

Prior to the focus group or interview, the coordinator should

- send an email and/or call each participant following initial recruitment and one week before the focus group or interview;
- have the college president's office e-mail or phone each participant prior to the session, thanking them for agreeing to participate, emphasizing the purpose of the focus group or interview and its importance in



helping the college provide the best experience and support for students; and

- call or text each student that agreed to participate the day before the focus group or interview, reminding her or him of the session, providing directions to the location, and confirming attendance.

Step 4: Logistics

The focus group or interview coordinator is responsible for the following logistical arrangements:

- reserve and set up the meeting room (suggested room arrangement for focus groups is included in Appendix G);
- provide refreshments/snacks that will be attractive to participants and reflect genuine hospitality and appreciation (e.g., boxed lunches, pizza and soft drinks, brownies/cookies, water, etc.); and
- be available throughout each session to make sure everything is in place, and to text and/or make phone calls to participants as necessary.

Additional Coordinator Responsibilities:

The coordinator is responsible for providing all necessary participant materials, including consent forms, pens, and profile sheets. The coordinator will also identify a note-taker and will provide the note-taker with necessary materials. If you choose to record the focus group or interview, a digital audio recorder is necessary. A variety of recording applications are available for download for phones, tablets, and laptops. A note-taker in the room is also acceptable.

Finally, the designated facilitator or interviewer is responsible for facilitating the session. During each session, the facilitator will follow the outline below (see protocols in Appendices E and F):

1. Meeting overview
2. Consent forms
3. Participant introductions for focus groups
4. Discussion
5. Summary
6. Questionnaires (e.g., demographics forms/survey items, etc.)
7. Thanks



Appendices

The appendices that follow contain materials to assist the coordinator in scheduling focus groups or interviews, recruiting participants, communicating with participants, and preparing logistics.

These templates were designed to help coordinators facilitate sessions and may be modified to best meet the needs of the institution.

- A. Focus Group Invitation Email
- B. Interview Invitation Email
- C. Student Consent Form
- D. Student Focus Group Protocol
- E. Student Interview Protocol
- F. Student Participant Profile Sheet
- G. Suggested Room Set-Up



Appendix A
Focus Group Invitation Email to Students

[Tailor email to meet your student target population. If your college already has a standard focus group invitation, please use that instead.]

To: [student email address]

CC: [if applicable]

Subject: Student Focus Group Discussion at [name of institution]

Dear [student name]:

Your success as a student and your learning experiences at [name of institution] are very important to us. We know that many students face significant challenges in their efforts to achieve their educational goals. Therefore, we are very interested in learning what we can do to help students stay enrolled in school and have a successful and satisfying experience.

To help us identify ways to improve programs and services, we need to hear from you. To learn about your experiences at [name of institution] and hear your opinions, we invite you to participate in a 90-minute group discussion with up to [number, as determined by cadre] other students.

Details on the group discussion are as follows:

Date: [date]

Time: [time]

Place: [place]

Directions: [directions]

Refreshments will be provided! *[strongly encouraged, but not required]*

Because we are talking with a limited number of students, the success and quality of our discussion will depend on the full participation of the students who attend. Please contact [name] at [phone number] or [email address] to confirm your attendance.

We look forward to seeing you on [date].

Sincerely,

[focus group coordinator name]



Appendix B
Interview Invitation Email to Students

[Tailor email to meet your student target population. If your college already has a standard interview invitation, please use that instead.]

To: [student email address]

CC: [if applicable]

Subject: Student Interview at [name of institution]

Dear [student name]:

Your success as a student and your learning experiences at [name of institution] are very important to us. We know that many students face significant challenges in their efforts to achieve their educational goals. Therefore, we are very interested in learning what we can do to help students stay enrolled in school and have a successful and satisfying experience.

To help us identify ways to improve programs and services, we need to hear from you. To learn about your experiences at [name of institution] and hear your opinions, we invite you to participate in a 60-minute interview.

Please reply to this message by [date] to schedule your interview.

We look forward to seeing you soon and learning from your experiences at [name of institution].

Sincerely,

[interviewer name]



Appendix C
Student Consent Form

[Your college may have its own consent form. If not, below is sample text that your institution may choose to use.]

**[name of institution]
Student Consent Form**

[name of institution] is conducting [choose one: focus groups/interviews] with students in order to gain insights into students' experiences at this college. Information gathered through [focus groups/interviews] is used alongside other data to help college leaders identify institutional policies and practices that will help community college students succeed.

Your participation in this [focus group/interview] is entirely voluntary. You can choose not to participate at any time, and your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with [name of institution].

Students who volunteer will essentially participate in a [group conversation/dialogue]. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in one [90-minute focus group/60-minute interview].

I, _____, a student at [name of institution], have read and understand this consent form and agree to voluntarily participate in this project.

Signature

Date



Appendix D
Student Focus Group Protocol

[name of institution] Student Focus Group Protocol

FOCUS GROUP PURPOSE

[name of institution] is conducting a focus group with students. Our objective is to build understanding of pathways integration at the college, the kinds of experiences that students perceive are critical to their success in the community college, and the kinds of challenges they face. What we learn can be very helpful as [name of institution] works to serve its students more effectively.

FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

1. To understand students' educational goals for attending the college
2. To understand students' learning experience at the college
3. To understand students' engagement experience at the college

FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

Each focus group will include the following activities:

- Meeting overview
- Consent forms
- Participant introductions
- Discussion
- Summary
- Questionnaires (e.g., demographics forms, survey items, etc.)
- Thanks

Approximate total time: 75-90 minutes

FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS (pre-discussion)

1. **Introduce facilitator:** Hello, my name is [name]. I work for [name of institution].
2. **Explain purpose of focus group:** [name of institution] is conducting a focus group on our campus. Our objective is to build understanding of pathways integration at the college, the kinds of experiences students perceive are critical to their success in the community college, and the kinds of challenges they face. What we learn from you can be very helpful as [name of institution] works to serve its students more effectively.
3. **Explain desired outcomes and how gathered information will be used:** [name of institution] will prepare a report that captures your voices and major themes of this conversation. Your voice counts! However, you will not be identified by name.
Note: *At this time, the facilitator can read aloud the outcomes provided in this protocol.*



4. **Explain consent form and request signatures:** We ask that you sign a form that stipulates your consent. Participation is absolutely voluntary.
5. **Describe facilitator role:** My role as a facilitator is to ask questions and keep the group on track. We will be moving through the material fairly quickly, so I may have to cut conversations short even when there is much to say about a topic.
6. **Describe participants' role:** Each participant is expected to do the following:
 - a. Share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
 - b. Understand there are no right or wrong answers
 - c. Respect the request that everyone is to participate in discussion and fill out all paperwork
7. **Logistics:**
 - a. 90 minutes maximum
 - b. Arrangements for water and restroom break
 - c. Ask that all cell phones are turned off
 - d. [other?]
8. **Ground rules:**
 - a. One person speaks at a time; no side conversations.
 - b. No one person dominates; everyone will have a chance to be heard.
 - c. There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about your experiences at this college and what we learn will help the college improve upon its work with students.
9. **Questions:** Now, are there any questions before we get started?
10. **Introduction of participants:** As we go around the room, I would like for each participant to state their name, how long they have attended this college, and their primary academic goal.
Note: *If someone does not fully meet the criteria (e.g., is not a current student or is under the age of 18 years), the facilitator should explain why he/she cannot participate, thank him/her for his/her time, and courteously escort him/her from the room.*

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Outcome 1: To understand students' educational goals for attending the college.

1. Why did you decide to attend this college? Did you already have a specific goal in mind?
2. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Outcome 2: To understand students' learning experience at the college.

1. Let's talk about study skills and being prepared for college. Do your instructors help you improve your study skills (listening, note taking, highlighting readings)? If so, please give an example of how they did this.
2. What about the beginning of your classes, when you first enter or start a class, how do you find out what the objectives of the class are? How do you gain clarity about the desired outcomes for the class or exactly what knowledge and skills you are expected to attain in that class?



3. Again, when you are beginning your classes, do your instructors spend time helping you to recognize the value and relevance of the class content for your chosen career area and/or transfer goal? Is there discussion about how what you learn in a particular class connects to what you have learned in another class last term or to what you will learn in a future class?
4. Now, let's talk about your major. What is your major or program of study? Were you advised to take math that's appropriate to or related to your chosen field of study? Tell us more about that. What type of math class have you taken, or do you plan to take?
5. In your required math and English classes, are there readings or other assignments that are clearly relevant to your program area or field of study? If so, please give an example.
6. In general, do your instructors in required general education core classes (English, math, government, history, psychology, etc.) work to include assignments (readings, projects, etc.) that relate to your program of study (major) and your career goals?
7. How often as part of your coursework are you asked to complete assignments (in or out of class) that require you to APPLY what you've learned, to really DO something concrete with the content you're learning? (Prompt if needed: Examples might include building a robot with a group of pre-engineering students, completing an oral history project for a history class, or writing a classroom management guide for early childhood teachers.)
8. Does your program of study require an internship (field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment)? How do internships work? If they are required, have you participated in it yet? What was it like?
9. In any of your classes, are you required to do a portfolio assignment? If so, in what classes? Describe the portfolio assignment. What did you learn in the assignment?
10. You have talked about how you came to understand the expected learning outcomes in a particular course. Now, how does your instructor ascertain whether and how well you have actually learned what you need to learn? What methods are used to assess your learning? (Exams? quizzes? Group projects? Hands-on demonstrations of knowledge or skills? Building a portfolio of your work? What else?) Do your instructors use a mix of these approaches or rely mostly on one? Are any of these methods more effective than others at actually helping you better master and retain the new knowledge and skills? Which methods are most effective in challenging you to do your best work?
11. When you are in a class that you consider really good in helping you learn, what is going on in that class? Tell us what a "good class" is like.
12. Now the other side: When a class is not going well—boring or exasperating, or leaving you in the dust—what is going on in that class?
13. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Outcome 3: To understand students' engagement experience at the college.

1. How frequently do your instructors give assignments that require students to work together in groups? In class? Out of class? Examples?



2. How often do your instructors in a class learn your name? Learn about your academic and career interests? Take a personal interest in you and your success?
3. Have your instructors had assignments that introduced you to other students? Please give an example.
4. How do your instructors communicate with you about their views of your potential as a college student? Share an example—positive or negative, good or bad.
5. Have you talked with your instructor about your plans after college? Plans to transfer? Career plans? If so, describe this conversation.
6. What happens if you are struggling to learn the required knowledge and skills in a course? Follow-up: Does the instructor reach out? Someone else at the college? Do your courses typically have built-in supports to help you succeed? (Tutoring? Time in a lab? Extra instruction? Study groups?) Is participation in these learning support activities optional or required? Are they part of all courses or only some courses?
7. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Conclusion

1. What advice would you give to a new student about the best way to learn and do well academically at the college?
2. What advice would you give to a teacher about how to help students learn?
3. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Summary

Briefly summarize key points from the conversation.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Administer surveys, questionnaires, or participant profile documents for collecting quantitative data on participants.

THANKS

Express your sincere gratitude for students' time and input about their experience.



Appendix E
Student Interview Protocol

[name of institution] Student Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PURPOSE

[name of institution] is conducting interviews with students. Our objective is to build understanding of pathways integration at the college, the kinds of experiences that students perceive are critical to their success in the community college, and the kinds of challenges they face. What we learn can be very helpful as [name of institution] works to serve its students more effectively.

INTERVIEW OUTCOMES

1. To understand students' educational goals for attending the college
2. To understand students' learning experience at the college
3. To understand students' engagement experience at the college

INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Each interview will include the following activities:

- Interview overview
- Consent form
- Conversation
- Summary
- Questionnaire (e.g., demographics form, survey item, etc.)
- Thanks

Approximate total time: 45-60 minutes

INTERVIEW PROMPTS (pre-discussion)

1. **Introduce facilitator:** Hello, my name is [name]. I work for [name of institution].
2. **Explain purpose of interview:** [name of institution] is conducting interviews on our campus. Our objective is to build understanding of pathways integration at the college, the kinds of experiences students perceive are critical to their success in the community college, and the kinds of challenges they face. What we learn from you can be very helpful as [name of institution] works to serve its students more effectively.
3. **Explain desired outcomes and how gathered information will be used:** [name of institution] will prepare a report that captures your voice and major themes of this conversation. Your voice counts! However, you will not be identified by name.
Note: *At this time, the facilitator can read aloud the outcomes provided in this protocol.*
4. **Explain consent form and request signatures:** We ask that you sign a form that stipulates your consent. Participation is absolutely voluntary.



5. **Describe facilitator role:** My role as an interviewer is to ask questions and guide our conversation.
6. **Describe interviewee's role:** In this interview we encourage you to:
 - a. Share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
 - b. Understand there are no right or wrong answers
7. **Logistics:**
 - a. 60 minutes maximum
 - b. Ask that cell phone is turned off
 - c. [other?]
8. **Ground rules:**
 - a. There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about your experiences at this college and what we learn will help the college improve upon its work with students.
9. **Questions:** Now, are there any questions before we get started?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Note: *If you prefer a less formal approach, you may use these questions as a general guide to conduct a conversational semi-structured interview. Adapt the questions to your communication style and respond to the participant's feedback rather than adhering strictly to the list.*

Outcome 1: To understand students' educational goals for attending the college.

1. As we get started, how long you have attended this college, and what is your primary academic goal?
2. Why did you decide to attend this college? Did you already have a specific goal in mind?
3. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Outcome 2: To understand students' learning experience at the college.

1. Let's talk about study skills and being prepared for college. Do your instructors help you improve your study skills (listening, note taking, highlighting readings)? If so, please give an example of how they did this.
2. What about the beginning of your classes, when you first enter or start a class, how do you find out what the objectives of the class are? How do you gain clarity about the desired outcomes for the class or exactly what knowledge and skills you are expected to attain in that class?
3. Again, when you are beginning your classes, do your instructors spend time helping you to recognize the value and relevance of the class content for your chosen career area and/or transfer goal? Is there discussion about how what you learn in a particular class connects to what you have learned in another class last term or to what you will learn in a future class?
4. Now, let's talk about your major. What is your major or program of study? Were you advised to take math that's appropriate to or related to your chosen field of study? Tell us more about that. What type of math class have you taken, or do you plan to take?



5. In your required math and English classes, are there readings or other assignments that are clearly relevant to your program area or field of study? If so, please give an example.
6. In general, do your instructors in required general education core classes (English, math, government, history, psychology, etc.) work to include assignments (readings, projects, etc.) that relate to your program of study (major) and your career goals?
7. How often as part of your coursework are you asked to complete assignments (in or out of class) that require you to APPLY what you've learned, to really DO something concrete with the content you're learning? (Prompt if needed: Examples might include building a robot with a group of pre-engineering students, completing an oral history project for a history class, or writing a classroom management guide for early childhood teachers.)
8. Does your program of study require an internship (field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment)? How do internships work? If they are required, have you participated in it yet? What was it like?
9. In any of your classes, are you required to do a portfolio assignment? If so, in what classes? Describe the portfolio assignment. What did you learn in the assignment?
10. You have talked about how you came to understand the expected learning outcomes in a particular course. Now, how does your instructor ascertain whether and how well you have actually learned what you need to learn? What methods are used to assess your learning? (Exams? quizzes? Group projects? Hands-on demonstrations of knowledge or skills? Building a portfolio of your work? What else?) Do your instructors use a mix of these approaches or rely mostly on one? Are any of these methods more effective than others at actually helping you better master and retain the new knowledge and skills? Which methods are most effective in challenging you to do your best work?
11. When you are in a class that you consider really good in helping you learn, what is going on in that class? Tell us what a "good class" is like.
12. Now the other side: When a class is not going well—boring or exasperating, or leaving you in the dust—what is going on in that class?
13. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Outcome 3: To understand students' engagement experience at the college.

1. How frequently do your instructors give assignments that require students to work together in groups? In class? Out of class? Examples?
2. How often do your instructors in a class learn your name? Learn about your academic and career interests? Take a personal interest in you and your success?
3. Have your instructors had assignments that introduced you to other students? Please give an example.
4. How do your instructors communicate with you about their views of your potential as a college student? Share an example—positive or negative, good or bad.
5. Have you talked with your instructor about your plans after college? Plans to transfer? Career plans? If so, describe this conversation.



6. What happens if you are struggling to learn the required knowledge and skills in a course?
Follow-up: Does the instructor reach out? Someone else at the college? Do your courses typically have built-in supports to help you succeed? (Tutoring? Time in a lab? Extra instruction? Study groups?) Is participation in these learning support activities optional or required? Are they part of all courses or only some courses?
7. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Conclusion

1. What advice would you give to a new student about the best way to learn and do well academically at the college?
2. What advice would you give to a teacher about how to help students learn?
3. [Other college-specific questions your Pathways team would like to include]

Summary

Briefly summarize key points from the conversation.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Administer surveys, questionnaires, or participant profile documents for collecting quantitative data on participants.

THANKS

Express your sincere gratitude for the student's time and input about their experience.



Appendix F
Participant Profile

[name of institution]
Student Participant Profile Sheet

ALL RESPONSES WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

1. What is your gender identity?
☐ Man ☐ Woman ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to respond
2. How old are you?
☐ Under 18 ☐ 18-19 ☐ 20-21 ☐ 22-24 ☐ 25-29

☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-64 ☐ 65+
3. Did you enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school?
☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Is this the first college you have attended, or did you begin college elsewhere?
☐ Started here ☐ Started elsewhere
5. Is this your first academic term at this college?
☐ Yes ☐ No
6. What is the highest academic credential you have earned?
☐ None ☐ High school diploma/GED ☐ Vocational/technical certificate

☐ Associate degree ☐ Baccalaureate degree ☐ Master's/doctoral/professional degree
7. Who in your family attended at least some college? (Check all that apply.)
☐ Mother ☐ Father ☐ Legal guardian ☐ Sibling ☐ Spouse/partner

☐ None of the above
8. What is your enrollment status?
☐ Full-time ☐ Less than full-time
9. What is your area of study [or college's term for meta-major]? _____



10. Are you eligible for financial assistance?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
11. If you **are eligible** for financial assistance, please indicate which of the following describes your current situation?
☐ I have received financial assistance.
☐ I applied, but I have not received financial assistance.
☐ I have not applied for financial assistance.
12. Are you married?
☐ Yes ☐ No
13. Are you employed?
☐ Yes ☐ No
14. If yes, how many hours do you work each week?
☐ 1-5 hours ☐ 6-10 hours ☐ 11-20 hours ☐ 21-30 hours

☐ More than 30 hours
15. Do you have children or other dependents living at home with you?
☐ Yes ☐ No
16. If you have children living with you, which of the following best describes your child care situation?
☐ My children are enrolled in a child care center at this college.
☐ I currently have child care arrangement for my children outside of this college.
☐ Finding child care is a major issue for me.
☐ My children do not require child care.
17. What is your racial/ethnic identity?
☐ American Indian or Native American ☐ Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander
☐ Black or African-American ☐ Latinx or Hispanic
☐ Native Hawaiian ☐ White, Non-Latinx or Non-Hispanic
☐ Other (please specify) _____
18. Are you an international or foreign national student?
☐ Yes ☐ No



Appendix G Suggested Room Set-Up

Characteristics of a Suitable Space for Focus Groups or Interviews

1. Size
 - For focus groups, the space must be large enough to accommodate the group, with a separate small table, if available, for the note-taker and any audio-visual equipment.
 - Interviews may be conducted in a smaller space, and it is preferable for both people to sit at a table rather than to position interviewer and participant across a desk.
2. Quiet
 - Be sure noise from other rooms, the hallway, or the outdoors cannot be heard.
3. Lighting
 - If you are video-recording the focus group or interview, make sure windows have shades because too much sunlight may obscure the image.

Recommended Focus Group Table Arrangement

For large focus groups, approximately three classroom style tables in a U-shape is the best arrangement, allowing focus group participants to face the facilitator and also to see each other. Long rectangular classroom tables, end to end, but wrapped into a semi-circle, make it easiest for the facilitating team to reach the participants. The note-taker's table may be near an electrical outlet, if the note-taker is entering information on an electronic device or recording the discussion.

