

SENSE OF BELONGING AT CLOVIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE (CCC)

OVERVIEW

In Spring of 2024, we conducted a study that sought to increase our understanding of Clovis Community College students' sense of belonging in the classroom and on campus. These focus groups put students at the center of our research and our goal was to learn from their experiences. Their participation may benefit the student body at Clovis Community College by improving practices that lead to a stronger sense of belonging on campus. We recruited student clubs, student organizations, and affinity groups at Clovis Community College. Each focus group lasted 60 minutes, was recorded, and took place on campus.

The first round of focus groups had one participant in the first group, the second had two, and the third had seven participants. We hoped to get more participants, so we conducted two more groups. The first group had eight and the second group had six participants. In total, there were 24 participants. Some participants self-identified with the following affinity groups: Hispanic (nine participants), Asian-American (four participants), African American/Black (one participant), and LGBTQIA+ (twelve students). Additionally, three stated they were first generation students and one stated she was an unhoused youth.

All participants were given light snacks or pizza and \$20 Amazon, or Target, gift cards for their participation. There were no anticipated risks beyond those experienced during an average conversation. Our report will not include any names or personally identifiable information. Below are the findings from this study.

FINDINGS

Participants were asked to define sense of belonging at Clovis Community College (CCC). One participant commented that sense of belonging means "being recognized as who you are without any question about who or why you are." This comment encompasses the overall definition of belonging given by participants. Most responded with words such as "safe" and "comfortable" to describe sense of belonging. Others commented, "being represented by staff and faculty" and "go to a campus where I feel free."

Sense of belonging
is "being
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Others stated that belonging at CCC meant they found people and classes where they feel “valued” and “being able to find community with fellow students and staff” increased their sense of belonging. Another student wrote, “to belong at Clovis Community College means being respected, valued, and cared about...”, which are words that are found throughout most of the definitions given by students. The word cloud below is a representation of common words found in student definitions of sense of belonging (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Common words given by students to define belonging



SENSE OF BELONGING ON CAMPUS

Participants were asked to describe specific incidents where they felt like they belonged to CCC. Several participants noted that others on campus were non-judgmental, staff and faculty were quick to respond to concerns, and feeling like they belonged increased as they spent more time on campus. One participant recalled the solar eclipse event and how that made them feel like they belonged. They stated:

“Just with the like maybe last week, with the solar eclipse, they had a bunch of people outside with and they had a like contraption where you could see the eclipse projected onto a piece of wood, and then they handed out the eclipse classes, and then we could like look up and it was just a bunch of different people, different teachers. And then I felt like I had a community right there. I felt like I belonged.”

HISPANIC STUDENTS

One participant attributes their sense of belonging to their participation in student clubs. They stated, “whenever I do events with my club, or clubs, depending which one I’m in, I feel that belonging.” Another stated that an English course made them feel “more welcome.” They claim that the professor, through weekly communication, made them feel unafraid to reach out and made them feel “comfortable.” They also stated that they feel comfortable being themselves at CCC “because everyone like the student & staff are friendly & it’s like family.” Other participants noted that “inclusivity is highly encouraged at CCC” and that CCC is “where I have fostered friends faster.”

Participants were asked about the number of hours spent on campus and how they perceived this affects their sense of belonging. One participant stated that the more time they spend here the more it contributes to their sense of belonging. Another stated that they are able to see professors outside of class and this allowed them to ask questions.

One participant did note the lack of Hispanic representation in class. They stated, “I don't see as many Hispanics in class, and like, as far as I've known, there's like no like groups dedicated to that. So, like it's not like us like it doesn't hurt that it's not there, but it's not hurt...It wouldn't hurt if it was there.” However, another participant stated that the increase in Hispanic events made them feel emotionally supported because “I was able to learn more about my culture.”

AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK STUDENTS

Among the group of participants was a student who identified as Black and Muslim. When asked about belonging on campus, the participant responded that they “eventually felt comfortable” on campus. Also, they noted that the more time they spent on campus and became more involved, they felt more belonging. Notably, the participant highlighted how welcoming Dr. Armstrong is and how their participation in student clubs has helped foster a sense of belonging at CCC.

However, the participant responded that they felt comfortable “most of the time” and did not want to elaborate further. The participant commented that when they first came to CCC as a new student, they felt uncomfortable being themselves, they did not know where to wait on campus during breaks, and they did not know much about CCC prior to attending. This also made them want to drop their courses. When asked about feeling comfortable being themselves at CCC, one comment that stood out was: “So, to a certain extent, I do feel comfortable, but I still have to be wary of how people perceive me.” They did not want to elaborate further. As an observer, the participant’s body language also suggested a lack of comfort with the question as they slowly sank into their chair.

ASIAN AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER

One participant identified as Asian American, specifically Taiwanese. They are new to the country and expressed wondering how they could make friends on campus. They noted that staff and faculty were “nice” and quick to help when they were in a car accident on campus. When asked about belonging at CCC, the participant responded that CCC is “safe,” the “classmates are so nice,” and are “glad I come here.” Also worth noting, the participant said they like coming to campus even on days where they do not have classes. Lastly, the participant stated that their English professor meditates with them and checks in with each student. They said that the professor “really care about the class” and “find the values in each person’s story.”

“ So, to a certain extent, I do feel comfortable, but I still have to be wary of how people perceive me.”

However, there was a specific time where the student felt like they did not belong to CCC. The participant described being overwhelmed with the course load and not knowing many people. This led to them wanting to drop out of CCC. The student described this experience by saying, “I was in the drawing class and after that I just pack all my stuff...in the classroom and I just decided I’m not going back anymore.” The student described that they cried alone in a corner and felt the school was “uncomfortable at that time.” When asked what caused them to change their mind, they noted that they made friends and wanted to give it another try for at least one year.

Another participant recalls a recent Asian Pacific event that they attended that made them feel a sense of belonging. They stated, “I felt a sense of belonging when Clovis Community College started to host like more events.” They also stated they feel “comfortable being myself at Clovis Community because I don’t feel judged when expressing myself.”

LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ participants commented on the pride flags displayed throughout campus feel welcoming. One student recalled an incident that made them feel welcomed:

“...the most memorable moment of belonging that I had was when I first enrolled here. The semester was going to begin. And I'd say, maybe 2 weeks. I emailed all of my professors about my preferred name and pronouns because I didn't know how to change that at the time. And my, my psychology professor emailed me back really soon, and she got me set up with the GSA immediately. And she gave me the information to get my name and my pronouns changed on the dashboard and on Canvas, and I just felt incredibly welcomed then.”

Another participant noted that they were greeted by name at the tutorial center, which made them feel welcomed. Finally, a student noted that being able to participate in and “talk to people who are interested and people like me, or who are like me. It was really, it felt, really welcoming.”

Participants also commented that they were often misgendered or “dead named” in class by faculty and their peers. Likewise, one participant recalled a time when during club rush other students,

“were saying a lot of dog whistles, as you would call it, in the sense of like things that non-LGBTQ+ people wouldn't take very seriously at all. But as an LGBTQ+ person, I get what they're saying in the sense of saying that, you know, we should have more of a focus on cis, straight people in our club. And you know, not focus on LGBTQ+ people and just being intrusive, I guess.”

“ So, to a certain extent, I do feel comfortable, but I still have to be wary of how people perceive me.”

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Participants were asked about a specific time they felt engaged in the classroom and on campus (not in the classroom). Responses are below.

CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Respondents noted that some professors encouraged class discussions, which made the class more engaging. One respondent stated that their history professor gave students a preview of lessons prior to learning it in class, asked critical thinking questions and shared fun facts. Another noted that their English professor meditated with students prior to starting class. Also, the same teacher checked in with students about their lives before beginning class. The participant stated, "I find that he just find the values in each person's story and sharing...I really like that part." Another participant commented that when the professors reflect similar views it makes the class more engaging.

However, some participants claimed that some classes lack participation. Interestingly, they stated that engagement was high on Canvas discussion boards, but when class discussions were held, they did not see that same engagement. One participant commented, "what people do inside those [online] assignments, are really expressive are really more about who they are. You just don't get that in class." Another followed this comment with, "Speak up because I think if people understand what other people are thinking...you can see a lot of similarities in what we're learning in class. You could make more connections and, therefore, you could end up feeling belonging." One participant recalled a specific time when they felt engaged in the classroom:

"the class got into like a mini discussion. I wanna say, like probably small debate, the main discussion of like talk, it was literally went on for like 15 min, 15-20 min, like just talking about it, and like what our opinions and everything, and mostly like she just like moderated it to make sure we didn't go too much off topic. I like that part cause definitely like the you get to like, say, your own ideas and credit other students and everything not just like whole, like I don't like fully, just like lecture cause like you don't feel involved because you're just like listening the whole time."

Also notable were the comments about group activities in the classroom. One participant stated, "that last group communication that we had that was actually the first time that we became like we became like really strong, like getting things together, work together, message each other, not just only by canvas, but like texting and emailing and stuff. Yeah, that was a pretty good experience towards the end of the semester."

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CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT

Participants noted their involvement with several clubs, such as GSA and ASG, as a contributing factor in their own sense of belonging at CCC. One participant commented that they participated in an on-campus haunted house, and it was “fun” and well attended. Another highlighted club field trips, such as the trip to Colonel Allensworth, as engaging. Also noted were other campus events such as the read-in for Black history month and several events related to politics and civil rights.

One event that was not sanctioned by the school but was memorable for LGBTQIA+ students was their Christmas party. They stated that many LGBTQIA+ students do not have somewhere to celebrate so they decided to have a Christmas party on their own. Participants raved about the fun they had and felt that it was a tradition they will continue in future years.

Other participants noted that a cornhole tournament for the Speech and Debate Club led to students staying after the event to talk and hang out with each other. However, another participant noted that not many students “don’t really like to hang out like after class.” The student noted that most students need to go to work, or have other obligations, as a reason for students not staying after class to spend time with their peers.

Participants were also asked about a specific time when they felt like they didn’t belong on campus. Responses included a philosophy debate event where a participant was the only female and felt that their responses were minimized because of their gender. They stated,

“I was the only girl, and it was interesting because a lot of the questions you could tell that, like the men were starting to like, align with each other. And then, if I had a differing opinion, there was one of me, and there was like 10 of them, and they were like, You're wrong. Oh, you're and one of them at one point went, well, that's just because you're a woman. That's why you feel that way.”

The participant goes on to state that they understand what “the girls that go here that like are in stem majors talk about” referring to being one a few females in the room.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Participants were asked about the support services and/or resources they receive at CCC that may have contributed to their success. Participants noted that the student educational plan given to them by the counselors was helpful for keeping them on track. One student commented that seeing a counselor and creating an educational plan “made me less stressful.” They agreed that the educational plan decreased their stress.

“I felt a sense of belonging when Clovis Community started to host like more events...an event that I attended to was this Asian Pacific event, and they're like hosting like different shows and stuff.”

However, some participants were left “confused” after seeing a counselor. One participant commented, “But like I don't think counselors do good enough job... ‘cause I feel like a lot of times, I actually do almost the entire work.” The participant goes on to state that they only see a counselor because it is a CCC requirement and feels like “they actually either mess me up, or I put me on a track that's slower.” Another agreed and added that the counselors they have seen do not know “everything about there is for transfer” and they have had “difficulty seeing what courses will transfer over.” They also noted that transferable courses are not clearly set by the district noting that some of the same courses from CCC are not transferable even though they are at other schools. They stated, “Like on the online transfer website, even like Reedley has more classes that transfer to my major. But it's the same class, at community and Reedley. So, the counselor, some of them, they don't know that.” The participant noted that they attended transfer workshops at other schools to learn about the transfer process. When asked if they knew CCC had a transfer center, most participants were unaware of this resource being available to them.

Other programs and service highlighted by participants are student clubs and committees, faculty support (academic and social-emotional), psychological services, tutorial center, computer lab, preferred names are honored by professors, and discord chat services. One program that students felt was helpful to them was the EOPS program. One participant discussed a specific event that helped them feel both academically and emotionally supported. They stated the counselor “created such a safe environment where I I shared with her and and she also like helped me like, get get some like more guidance.” They also attributed this experience to helping them begin therapy to work through other issues. Another student agreed that the EOPS program has helped them feel supported at CCC. They also stated that they wish it were advertised. They stated, “all the EOPS counselors are fantastic, like every single one I've talked to have all been very open... I genuinely feel like they're doing everything they can to like, offer that support.”

Another notable comment was that Dr. Armstrong helped a student network at events. The student stated, “I told [Dr. Armstrong], I'm a political science major and then she had me talk to this lady and get her business card.” Also, Dr. Armstrong invited this student to events that helped them network and was “nice” and “asked me questions,” which made them feel supported.

Another support system that presented itself during discussions was that of online classes. Most participants agreed that they prefer to be in-person but also recognize the benefits of having online classes. One participant stated, “I think Zoom was the greatest resource that we're not still utilizing personally” and goes on to describe that when they are too sick to attend class in person, they would most likely attend class online if that were an option.

“trust with my professor it was important because I need someone to confide in.”

They also stated that “zoom is accessibility” and that students with circumstances that hinder their ability to attend class in person “shouldn’t be left behind just because all of us are ready to be in person...like they matter too.” Another participant discussed how recorded, weekly lectures helped them go back to the content to answer any question they had after class. They stated, “if I have a question that oh, maybe I don't remember from the mid lecture when I was in person, I could go back to rewatch the zoom, you know. Study it over again, and yes, that's helpful to me.”

Lastly, participants noted the many benefits of attending a community college. For example, participants noted that they can graduate virtually debt-free due to attending CCC, they were able to make up grades and get to a better school when transferring and being able to graduate earlier because of dual enrollment. One participant commented, “community college is the reason I don't have any student loans right now. And it's the reason that I got accepted into like UCs, and they're the reason that I'm continuing on my path without worrying about like money.” Another participant said they are “getting two years off my bachelor’s degree basically free.”

STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were asked to provide CCC with recommendations that would foster a sense of belonging for CCC students. Several students that self-identified as LGBTQIA+ recommended a gender-neutral restroom in the AC-1 building as there currently is not one and to create a “literal safe space” for LGBTQIA+ students. Other recommendations included more food options, especially after 5 p.m., more study rooms, places where students could take a nap (with cots or something similar) as many students spend many hours on campus and need a place to rest and incentivize student engagement at events with free food. LGBTQIA+ participants expressed enthusiasm for the pronoun option on their portal, so they recommended to keep it and to publicize it to all students, so they know they have the option to choose their preferred name and pronouns.

Many participants expressed feeling lost and not knowing how to navigate CCC’s campus and resources. Therefore, it was recommended that CCC hold an on-campus orientation for both Fall and Spring incoming students.

One participant stated, “for the incoming students kinda like get to know around the campus. Yeah, cause I didn’t even know where anything was at.” One suggested “maybe doing like an orientation in the fall and spring semester for incoming students, you know, having multiple sessions. So, students can kind of come in, meet a group. So, they come in. They're not just isolated” Another participant said they would want to “see different departments like showcasing what they've done this year because a lot of the departments they do research. And it's like local research is relevant to like where we live.”

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Academically, participants recommended increasing the amount of time spent on classroom discussions and adding subtitles to Google slides or PowerPoint slides. Another recommendation was made based on a participant's experience with an online course. The participant expressed that they were dropped from the course without any notification. They stated,

"I'm looking at the modules in the syllabus, and, and I don't really see anything that it's clear saying, Alright, step one is this step 2 is this, and it's, it's not also asynchronous so you have to be in it."

Due to the lack of clarity, the student was dropped from the course and said that now they must attend CCC longer. It was recommended that the college clarify the process of dropping students. This participant was also given incorrect information about dropping a different course, which is another reason the recommendation was made.

Participants also noted that the registration process was "very stressful." One student stated, "I think just the signing up for classes can be very stressful. So, it kind of feels like you're alone in that aspect, because I know when everyone is starting and everything is busy. No one really knows what they're doing. So, it's kind of chaotic in that sense" Another said, "I think registering for classes has been extremely difficult, and I work in tech. I just couldn't find a really easy way to register..."

Participants also recommended more advertising efforts for campus events, vary the times of the events to accommodate working students, allowing for more student input for the types of events held on campus, and continue having family-friendly events. One participant stated, "I do see kids at our events, and I think that's really good cause that means that their parents feel comfortable and feel like they still belong and can participate in those things, and I want them to feel that way."

Another recommendation was to continue offering student clubs and providing them with funding so they can have more events. They stated that clubs are where they feel they belong so keeping those open is recommended.

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Lastly, participants recommended updating the buildings to add more color. Specifically, they noted that the campus looked like "a hospital" and "it wouldn't kill us to have like I don't know a blue wall, or something, you know, like it would just feel more like not to be like super cliché but like learning can be fun." They noted that our school colors are very bright and should be used as paint colors to make the campus aesthetic "more colorful." Also, participants expressed they would like to see more trees around campus.