Big Bend Community College

Student Listening & Feedback Sessions:

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Facilitated & reported by

Maureen Pettitt, Ph.D.

Consultant

Winter 2024

Background

The current report details the development, conduct, and results of the student DEI listening and feedback sessions held on the Big Bend Community College main campus in February 2024. It builds upon focus groups held in 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years, and a climate assessment conducted in Spring 2023 that included students and all employees. The results of each of these data collection activities were well documented. The purpose of the listening sessions is to follow up on the previous findings to better understand students' current experiences with and perceptions of BBCC's climate in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This work is designed to support and add depth to the college's existing equity work.

This work is in support of BBCC's stated diversity statement*: "Big Bend Community College believes that every person's background, which includes identifiers such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and ability, helps enrich our campus community when an environment is conducive to the expression of that identity. We commit to providing a campus climate where equity, inclusion, and diversity thrives, and leads to individuals pursuing their educational, personal, and professional goals."* It also supports several objectives in the college's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan (https://www.bigbend.edu/wp-content/uploads/DEI-Strategic-Plan.pdf).

Planning for & Conduct of Listening Sessions

The consultant provided college staff with a draft planning document for review in December 2023. That document included proposed target audiences and logistics, and a draft protocol for the listening sessions. The "flow" of the questions was: ask participants their vision of a diverse, equitable and inclusive environment; in what ways the college supports a DEI environment; their experiences, if any, related to prejudice or discrimination; barriers to creating a positive environment at the college; and suggestions for changes that could improve the campus climate. The protocol also included an introductory section and remarks about participation and confidentiality.

Focus Groups were held February 5th, 6th, and 7th. The Dean for Institutional Research and Planning, with support from faculty and staff, recruited students from English, College Survival Skills (CSS), Robotics, Mechatronics, and Basic Education for Adults (BEdA) classes. Students were also recruited from ASB officers and some targeted populations.

As an incentive, students were told they would receive a $25 gift certificate for their participation in the session.

A total of 37 students participated during the six sessions. A majority of the participants were Hispanic.

February 5	February 6	February 7
English class, 7 attended: (5), ASB officers (2) All female	CSS class 6 attended, 2 female, 4 male	BEdA, ESL class, 8 attended, 4 females, 4 males
Special population, 1 female	Mechatronics Club, 8 attended, 2 female, 6 male	Robotics Class, 7 attended, 5 from the class, 2 ASB officers, all male

Students were asked to sign an informed consent when they arrived at the room and to sign for their gift card prior to the beginning of the session. Gift cards were distributed at the end of each session. Pizza was also provided for participants at each of these sessions.

Two researchers were in the interview room: one asking questions and the other taking notes.

Results from the Listening & Feedback Sessions

A summary of student responses to each of the five (5) listening session questions is provided below. In some cases, their responses are categorized to add clarity and to support the continuing conversations about students' perceptions of the DEI climate at BBCC.

Question #1: How would you describe an environment that is equitable and inclusive?
Student participants described an equitable and inclusive environment as one where there are "equal opportunities for all students" and where "students *feel* like they have the same opportunities." Students also thought that "there should be a level playing field for everyone."

The participants also described an equitable and inclusive environment as one where "no prejudice is shown" and they "are allowed to be themselves." Students also suggested that in this environment people "respect each other."

Students also pointed out that in an equitable and inclusive environment they can see others like themselves: "You feel more welcome. Even if you are first generation."

Running Start students had some very specific issues regarding access to information about Running Start at the high schools, and the perceived inequities the result from where and how information at the high school is disseminated. They advocated for making sure a wider range of courses and students got information about the Running Start program.

Question #2: From your perspective, in what ways does BBCC support a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion?

Listening Session participants described a variety of ways in which the college supports a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Their comments addressed a range of differences, including gender, race/ethnicity, and abilities.

1. **Diversity and Cultural Awareness**

Students noted several examples that demonstrated diversity and cultural awareness at the college, including:

- o Displays of flags from other countries
- o Mechatronics Club (characterized as a club with "different people, all ages, different ethnicities")
- o Japanese Culture Display
- o Chicanx Literature class
- o Anthropology class
- o Groups and events for diverse interests and cultures
- o Spanish signs celebrating non-US holidays like *Dia de los Muertos*
- o Support for Black History Month

One student provided an example of BBCC's support for diversity by contrasting their high school experience: "In my high school, students could wear a confederate flag to school, but the school board wouldn't let us put up the flags of other countries for an event."

2. **Community Support**

- o Supportive staff, including President Tweedy
- o Financial aid resources like WES, Trio, and the food pantry
- o Snack bars and events like Taco Tuesday to foster a sense of community
- o Assistance for students with financial difficulties or personal challenges like the loss of a loved one
- o Free feminine hygiene products and help hotlines in bathrooms

3. **Academic and Career Support**

- o Anthropology classes
- o Mandatory DEI courses
- o Encouragement to use resources like tutoring and the STEM Center

- Support for attending classes, including accommodating "students with morning work schedules."

- Access to laptops

- Opportunities for "education and vocational training, catering to diverse needs and ages."

4. **Inclusivity for Different Abilities and Backgrounds**

- Students also noted support for people with disabilities, including opportunities that might not have been available in their home countries.

Question #3: If you are comfortable sharing, in what ways have you witnessed or experienced prejudice or discrimination at BBCC?

Most of the respondents indicated they had not seen any discriminatory or prejudicial behavior at the college and thought that BBCC was a comfortable environment. However, several students did report incidents they had witnessed.

One such incident happened in a specific class and the dean was called in to discuss the consequences of continuing to make racist comments. It appears that his discussion ended the problem. Reportedly, other students liked that the individuals making these comments were being held accountable for their behavior.

Another participant admitted that sometimes the joking (among his peers) can go too far, but they "get called out and bring it in."

One female participant talked about being uncomfortable with males in certain situations and "didn't know how to deal with it." She declined to elaborate when another student asked her about it.

Another student talked about a female student who had enrolled in a welding class, but "she dropped out because she didn't feel comfortable."

There are, according to the students, incidents occurring on the 2nd floor of the WEC building, including harassment and confrontational behavior. Students described it as "talking smack; being punks."

Another student remarked that "no one should be shamed because they believe something different." While the student did not elaborate, one wonders if the student had, in fact, experienced or witnessed this shaming behavior.

A somewhat different equity theme suggested by students related to targeted programs: "Some programs aren't for everyone; certain programs won't help students because their income is too high." Several students saw these programs as discriminatory.

Question #4: What are barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college?

The session participants identified several barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college. Some students noted a conservative atmosphere on campus and expressed concerns about inclusivity, gender dynamics in certain classes, and political differences. They also highlighted the importance of communication among peers and staff and emphasized the need for cultural understanding to avoid misunderstandings and promote inclusivity. It was noted that LGBTQ+ students often feel isolated and sometimes fearful, which impacts their learning and mental health.

Other comments related to the following categories:

1. **Communication and Resources**

Some students noted they had struggled to find information about programs and events, feeling that there was a lack of communication and clarity, particularly with regards to sports events and program offerings.

> "It's hard to find out about sports games – nobody advertises."

> "If we had an area where all of this could be posted it would be easy to find."

> "What if we had a link in Canvas that would take you to college events?"

Many students were initially unaware of resources like WES (Workforce Education Services) and the Food Pantry but found them useful once they discovered them. They suggested that having a central area to advertise services like WES, the Food Pantry, and TRIO could improve accessibility. At the same time, there were concerns expressed about the website:

> "Make the website user friendly."

> "There are 10 links to get to something."

> "Sometimes it pulls up old data."

2. **Social Spaces/Food**

Students expressed a desire for a designated area to hang out, as the library is primarily for studying and the old cafeteria lacks food and appeal.

> "People don't know about places where they can go to hang out."

"It would be nice to have an area where there is a place for students to hang out."

"The library is good, but you go there to study. I'd like a place to go and hang out."

"There's no draw to the old cafeteria because there's no food. It's not very inviting."

3. **Accessibility and Support**
   o Some students faced barriers navigating Canvas and accessing necessary materials, suggesting improvements in user-friendliness and access to resources like books from the library.
   o They also mentioned the importance of support systems, such as Zoom meetings and mandatory sessions, especially for first-time college students.

Question #5: What should the college do to improve the climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The students provided numerous suggestions for improving various aspects of their college experience and were responding to some degree to the barriers they noted in the previous question. However, their suggestions for improvement were very much more focused on inclusivity and diversity from multiple perspectives.

1. **Cultural Awareness & Events**
   o Foster a welcoming environment by celebrating diverse cultures. "Have different cultural events such as Chinese New Year." "Have fun events like the Welcome event with the Mariachi band with culture, fun things to do." "It's fun to meet people from other cultures." "More events bring people together in a fun environment."
   o Incorporate different cultural perspectives into the curriculum.
   o "It is not just about culture; it is about religion, too."
2. **Instructional Support & Pedagogy**
   o Provide flexibility in attendance policies for students facing personal challenges.
   o Let students know when the instructor is likely to respond to their requests.
   o [Instructor] "has everything online, encourages you to come in, emails us to help us keep up." "My English teacher also records lectures; that is really good as well."
   o Offer alternative teaching methods and ensure access to resources for students with disabilities. "The online environment was not conducive to my learning disability—extra time isn't what I needed. I need to be taught in a different way."

o Promote collaborative and interactive learning environments. "It would be nice to have more group work, in person assignments, and collaborative work."

3. **Social Environment/Making Connections**
    o Create more opportunities for socializing and community-building, including events with cultural elements.
    o "There aren't opportunities to be social. It's so quiet. There just isn't that space for socializing."
    o "A place for food is so important to bringing people together.
    o Provide opportunities for students to engage in social activities, such as offering free coffee. "A more open space – where everyone can hang out. There aren't places here for that – not study rooms in the library. Includes everyone – so that everyone can come."
    o Use underutilized spaces like the old cafeteria to provide food options and host events.

4. **Physical Environment & Accessibility**
    o Design spaces that promote a warm and inviting atmosphere to combat feelings of depression or isolation. "The physical environment isn't very warm." "You could make this hall [Peterson Gallery] more comforting. Not just a place to answer your phone. More comfortable chairs. The walls are not inviting."
    o "Include more art – representing native Americans, Africans, Pacific Islanders, etc. - in all buildings. The interior design is dull." "A lot more art – it's so bland. There is nothing to look at."
    o Address broken accessibility doors and puddles during rainy weather.
    o Ensure syllabi include disability accommodation information for both students and parents; "Every syllabus has the disability accommodations statement. It helps students know what to do if they have a disability...instructors need to tell people about accommodations available...a syllabus test would make sure you read the syllabus. It could be 'open book'. Extra credit. Most simple assignment."

5. **Communication & Student Support**
    o Improve communication about class scheduling changes and available resources.
    o Enhance online platforms to facilitate finding clubs and access to services.
    o "Promote productive, constructive and respectful communications so students are more likely to listen to, care for, and connect with each other."

Observations

Overall, the students who participated in the listening sessions felt that BBCC provides a welcoming, supportive environment that fosters learning, personal growth, and inclusivity for all students, regardless of background or circumstance. They were pleased with the cultural events, the availability of culturally diverse courses and clubs, and BEdA courses. At the same time, students identified a need for improved communication, accessibility to resources, cultural events, and social spaces to enhance their college experience and promote inclusivity and success for all students. They particularly lamented the lack of spaces to connect with other students.

While overall, the students emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment that addresses the diverse needs and interests of the student body, they were equally interested in learning about the backgrounds and cultures of students who were from other countries. One student noted that while people want to be comfortable with the known, "I want to be in an environment where I'm pushed to learn new things. As a [program] student I'm pushed to grow. Also learning about other people." Having done these sessions with students at several colleges, I am truly impressed at the many requests for opportunities to learn about others.

While most students reported that they had not experienced or observed an instance of prejudice or discrimination, those who did share such experiences or observations noted some specific instances as well as locations. Follow-up by administration may be useful. As one student noted: "BBCC must bridge the gap between diversity concepts and practice."

The positive and negative aspects of their experiences and ideas for improvement offered by this group of students reflect many of those provided by students who participated in earlier focus groups. I will work with college staff to map these various aspects identified by students to support the continuing conversations about students' perceptions of the DEI climate at BBCC and how their concerns might be addressed.