

Texas Commission on Community College Finance

June 21, 2022 Hearing

Texas Community College Student Advisory Council: Written Testimony

The Texas Community College Student Advisory Council was formed as a joint initiative of Young Invincibles, Breakthrough Central Texas, The Education Trust, and Every Texan. The student members of the Council ([bios here](#)) include first-generation college students, armed forces veterans, student government leaders, and Texans of diverse races, ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. We thank you greatly for the opportunity to hear feedback from current and recent students across the state, and have included select written comments below for your consideration.

Angel Garcia Donjuan, Dallas College: My relationship with community college began via dual credit in high school. While it was an incredible opportunity offered at no cost, more can be done to properly inform students on how credits transfer to a four-year institution or an associate's degree. Additionally, the implications on class rank and GPA are also extremely important and should be thoroughly explained. I found my academic advisors to be very well-informed and ready to help with registering for the right courses. Following high school graduation, I no longer benefited from free courses and was shocked at the sticker price of full-time enrollment. Community college is often framed as a financially responsible way of starting a degree; however, that does not mean it's cheap or accessible.

Brendan Batchelder, Paris Junior College: I filed my FAFSA, applied and received COVID emergency funding, and still owed the school money. I had to work, but the only jobs that are flexible with a school schedule were jobs that paid incredibly poorly. I had no choice so I pushed carts at Walmart and when they would not honor the agreement to work around my school schedule and told me to leave school, I had to find another job. Despite having the ability to repair ground terminals and the leadership skills I developed in the Marines, I found myself cleaning toilets during my birthday, on Veteran's Day, and during times when my wife and kid were sick and needed more support. In order to afford and meet the demands of school, I had to sacrifice my own health, lower my sleep schedule, request assistance from my extended family in Texas, and accept a smaller role in my own kid's life. Community colleges are providing excellent service. However, the current Student Success Points formula provides no real incentive or reward for supporting the success of students like me. Because SSPs are weighted the same for every student, my struggle and the progress that the college has helped me achieve toward a better future is not valued or recognized as helping the college financially. In fact, the current SSP system does almost nothing in terms of reliable or additional funding due to its volatile nature. To help Texas students who are succeeding and have amazing potential but may have higher needs, this model must be changed to build a better, Talent Strong Texas.

Christian Elizondo, San Jacinto College: One of the biggest challenges I've faced attending college is transportation. I live in Pasadena while studying and working at the San Jacinto North Campus, so I have to commute daily, and especially with rising gas prices, it can be costly. There are campuses closer to me, but none of them have the courses I need to complete my degree.

Cristina Navarro, El Paso Community College: I am a first generation college student and graduate, former Student Government Association President, military wife, mother, and chef. Finances for a college student are always a struggle, but even more so for parents like myself who are pursuing a degree to better provide for their families. As a parent working and going to school full-time, I have experienced many sleepless nights of self-doubt and many days of trying to stretch the minutes to complete my homework, be at work on time, and attend my classes. Employed by my college through work study, I did not have to leave the building to drive to work, so I was able to gain relevant work experience, build my resume, complete my hours, and still get to class on time. Along with financial aid and scholarships, degree-specific stipend programs, such as work study, allow students like me to earn a paycheck at times that work around their class schedule while gaining valuable industry-related experience.

Isabel Torres, Austin Community College: At age 22 and trying to maintain my basic needs and health, I could no longer afford to finish paying for courses when I first enrolled in community college. Fourteen years later, my life has changed in many ways, most importantly with the birth of my daughter in 2017. Through my local workforce agency, I connected with a free year-long Pharmacy Technician certification program at Austin Community College and am now about to finish my associate's degree in Allied Health Science. Access to hands-on advising, work study employment, and on-campus child care have been game-changers in supporting my success.

Kay Trent, Austin Community College: The pandemic gave me a chance to reevaluate what I wanted to do with my life and if my values and goals actually aligned with what I was currently doing. The reason I hadn't gone back to school to pursue Psychology was mainly because of resources.

Nautika Trotty, Kilgore College: As a first-generation college student, I was almost completely lost when I first started my higher education journey. My counselor was extremely helpful in getting me admitted and registered for classes and all of my professors were extremely understanding and helpful in learning how to navigate my college experience. Having watched many of my peers experience burnout and anxiety, students need more mental health resources to succeed academically. Programs like TRIO, which allow students to access books and supplies and additional advising and tutoring services, are critical but not available to all students who need it. I can also personally attest to the reality that the cost of tuition is only the tip of the iceberg in paying for college. Even with scholarships, I work four jobs to afford rent, utilities, gas, and food. Current state funding and financial aid are barely enough to help us get by.

Talia Christian, Alamo Colleges District: Throughout my journey, the most valuable resources that helped me succeed were my family's support, taking advantage of 504 accommodations, having access to tutoring and mental health services, and surrounding myself with other leaders and hard-working students.

Victoria Hoover, Tyler Junior College: Returning as a "nontraditional" student, I ran into financial worries. Since I attempted so many credit hours, I quickly hit the 150% cap on financial aid. I learned later that a program in Texas [Academic Fresh Start] would have allowed me to void all partial credits, good and bad, if they were over ten years old. I genuinely wish I had known that when I applied, it would have helped me not to have those past failures hanging about my neck like a millstone!

For any questions or follow-up, please reach out to Jonathan Feinstein, Texas State Director, The Education Trust, jfeinstein@edtrust.org.

Texas Commission on Community College Finance

June 21, 2022

Good afternoon Mr. Hunt and Honorable Members of the Commission,

On behalf of the Texas Community College Student Advisory Council, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. Formed with the explicit purpose of engaging in the work of the Texas Commission on Community College Finance, the Council includes twelve current and recent community college students from across Texas, including first-generation college students, armed forces veterans, student government leaders, and Texans of diverse races, ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds.

My name is Victoria Hoover and I am a recent graduate of Tyler Junior College. I am a "nontraditional student" (which is how colleges say "old") who first attended North Harris Community College in 1998, tried again at Kingwood in the early 2000's, and did only marginally better at San Jac a few years later. I experienced community college through multiple incarnations of the system, and that system failed me over and over. I struggled to fulfill my potential in the Texas workforce for many years before returning to college to earn a degree that would actually pay me a livable amount. Community college definitely changed while I was away. This time around I felt supported by the faculty, challenged by the curriculum, and graduated summa cum laude from TJC in May.

I have heard a lot said about the independence of Texans and how wonderful we are at pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Indeed, there is no larger-hearted or hard-working group than the citizens of our fine state. But the independence of the upcoming generation of Texans is in doubt. I know I would personally rather learn to fish than be given a fish any day, and I believe most of you will agree with me on that. Yet, in the workforce, it is shockingly hard to earn enough money to afford fish. I survived many times on Top Ramen when I would have loved a tasty catfish instead. As the available options for employment become increasingly more technical in nature and demands for a skilled workforce continue to increase, what opportunities do undereducated Texans have? Without access to postsecondary training or education, how long will Texans be able to find employment or support their families?

I live in rural East Texas. Every year we watch our high school graduates leave for college or relocate to one of the big cities to earn a living. They seldom return. There simply is not enough industry in our little town to provide good-paying jobs to support them and their families. They have to go where the opportunities are.

I recently met with the Executive Cabinet at Tyler Junior College as part of my work with the Student Advisory Council. One of the members asked me if I knew how industries such as Tesla choose where to put their next factory. I offered up tax credits and public investment into roads. He nodded and asked about the workers. I saw what he was getting at. A key factor for opening a large operation like a factory is, does the area have an educated and skilled workforce to staff it or will the company have to import skilled labor or encourage relocation to that region?

This commission has a generational opportunity to investigate community college finance and make recommendations to the Texas Legislature. I urge you to include practical workforce solutions in your calculations. Here are some options:

- Reevaluate the criteria for Student Success Points to include equity weights. Students are facing a variety of specialized needs and the mission of community colleges must serve a wide range of

individuals from every conceivable background. Taking into account who those students are and leveling the playing field is of critical concern.

- Reimagined student success points could also provide financial incentives to a college for offering workforce-focused opportunities such as certification programs. Award more money to institutions offering night classes, childcare, and robust online courses for students already in the workforce.
- Change the definitions for “success” and “completion” to include the entire range of the services community colleges are expected to provide. There are many different paths to high-demand, high-paying employment and some of them fall outside the standard associate degree formula. Include provisions for continuing education instead of only focusing on credited courses. Many skilled jobs require continued education to maintain licensure; those courses are found at community colleges. Community colleges are on the frontline of workforce programs and it is unfortunate that continuing education and workforce development are historically given less attention than credited courses leading to associate degrees. Adult nontraditional students are looking for a good ROI on their education considering how many responsibilities we often have. We do not always have the luxury of time on our side and the supports nontraditional students need are different from the support that benefit students fresh out of K-12.

You have an opportunity that has not existed in nearly fifty years to review how community colleges are funded. Imagine how much the workforce will be harmed over the next fifty years without affordable postsecondary education. How many industries and employers will elect to build their factories in other states if Texans do not have the skills required to perform those jobs? What will the next generation do if they cannot afford college and how far away will they need to go to find employment opportunities that can support their families? Texans already in the workforce also need to be able to refine and hone their skills via continuing ed classes and certification programs. Continuing to invest in Texans already in the workforce benefits Texas as a whole.

Thank you for your time and attention. I know there is much work to be done and not much time to do it in. I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about how we fund workforce opportunities, I want to see fewer Texans struggle. I want to give every Texan access to a fishing pole and every industry more reasons to continue to choose Texas workers. The recommendations you make to the Legislature can provide that future. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Victoria K. Hoover
Member, Texas Community College Student Advisory Council

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June 21, 2022

Good afternoon Mr. Hunt and Honorable Members of the Commission,

Hello, my name is LaKristie Davis, and I am a first-generation graduate and alum of El Centro College in Dallas and The University of Texas at Arlington where I majored in public health. As a member of the Student Advisory Council and an advocate for educational equity, I believe that higher education should be attainable for everyone. Not only is higher education linked to increased wages and social and economic mobility, but it directly impacts our quality of life. This means that people with some form of post-secondary education tend to live longer and healthier lives. Unfortunately, for many students, higher education is not attainable. One major barrier has been rises in tuition fees and a lack of student financial aid that has caused many students, like me, to take extended breaks in between school and has caused many others to drop out completely. These are just a few of the comments shared by fellow members of the Student Advisory Council:

- *“Community college is often framed as a financially responsible way of starting a degree; however, that does not mean it's cheap or accessible.”*
- *“One of the biggest challenges I've faced attending college is transportation. I have to commute daily, and especially with rising gas prices, it can be costly. There are other campuses closer to me, but none of them have the courses I need to complete my degree.”*
- *“Between tuition and the “hidden costs” of attendance, going to college isn't cheap. I spend a lot of time focusing on finding the funds to attend instead of fully focusing on learning. It is hard to expand your interests to envision a future career when it might be jeopardized by the many hoops you need to jump through to pay for your education.”*
- *“I can also personally attest to the reality that the cost of tuition is only the tip of the iceberg in paying for college. Even with scholarships, I work four jobs to afford rent, utilities, gas, and food.”*

Remember that these are the stories of those who remain enrolled in or have successfully completed community college in Texas.

As the value and necessity of a postsecondary education has increased, the state's investment in community colleges has continued to decline over the past 40 years. Just since 2007, funding per full-time student has declined by 21%. This decrease in state funding has contributed to the cost of college rising significantly faster than the growth in median income.¹ This has made college less affordable and accessible for students and has caused an increase in the rate of students stopping out, mainly affecting low-income first-generation students and students of color, and leaving others with enough debt to last a lifetime, such as myself. It took almost 10 years for me to get my bachelor's degree, and this was certainly not by choice. I had to decide; I could not work, go to school, and watch my family struggle or take the nontraditional route and take a four-year break from school and work so that we could survive.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students>

I chose the latter, and even with that decision came the difficult decision to take out loans when I returned.

So how can you help? With your recommendations, this Commission can help future students avoid having to make similar choices. Increasing state funding - to institutions through the formula or directly to students through state financial aid programs - will help relieve some of the financial burdens placed on students. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities research shows that bolstering need-based aid programs, as opposed to merit-based programs that benefit students who would most likely attend college without additional aid, is a way that the state is able to assist with reducing financial burdens. Education is a right, not a privilege and it should not be threatened by financial burdens. Thank you all for allowing me to discuss the importance of affordable education.

Sincerely,

LaKristie Davis
Member, Texas Community College Student Advisory Council

Texas Commission on Community College Finance

June 21, 2022

Good afternoon Mr. Hunt and Honorable Members of the Commission,

Hello, my name is Isabel Torres. I recently graduated from Austin Community College at the age of 41 with an Associate's in Allied Health Science. I find passion in helping others and plan to continue my education for a bachelor's degree with the sole goal of being able to successfully grow my career while working at Austin Community College in Student Affairs assisting other students through their higher education experience. As I speak to you about my challenging and ultimately rewarding journey to achieve my higher education goals, I believe there are many other hard-working parenting Texans out there who can thrive as I have with the right opportunities and targeted wraparound services.

After attempting to attend community college once before, I was blessed with becoming pregnant with my daughter in 2016. At the time I was a spa coordinator and worked for a wonderful family-owned business. There were no benefits and nowhere for me to move up in my career. Through the local Texas Workforce agency, I started a Pharmacy Technician certification program offered at Austin Community College. As a single parent balancing my daughter, work, and school, it took me two years but at the age of 39, I completed my certificate program.

I really wanted to continue my education so once again I tried to apply for and this time received financial aid. Through my financial aid, I was able to qualify for a work-study position which helped immensely to balance work with my class schedule.

As a parent, the needs of my daughter always come first. I had been on the waiting list for childcare assistance for two years and still wasn't close to finding a spot. Even with family members helping where they could, I needed more stable and reliable childcare.

Through Austin Community College's Support Center, I applied for my daughter to attend the ACC Child Lab School on campus. Because there are so few spots available and it cost just 2% of my financial aid award, I often tell people that it was like "winning the lottery" when she was offered a spot that allowed me to study and focus on my schoolwork. The average monthly cost for full-time, full-day care in Austin is \$1,100 per month. Approximately a quarter of undergraduate college students are parents, and 42% of parenting students nationwide are community college students according to Institute for Women's Policy Research.¹ It is important for Texas to collect specific data on how many parents are enrolled in Texas community colleges in order to design and deliver targeted supports, such as on-campus child care.

¹ Institute for Women's Policy Research (2021). https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Supporting-Student-Parent-Recovery-through-State-Policy_FINAL.pdf

Affordable child care that worked for my schedule was just one of the many basic needs I was able to access through the ACC Support Center. I met with my support counselor once a month who would check up on me and my daughter to see how I was progressing. I was able to access the book-lending program, along with emergency aid when my car broke down so both my daughter and I could get to school and work. When I had to go to the emergency room, had no health insurance, and was overwhelmed with this new added cost, my community college helped me so that I was able to continue my schooling. And when the pandemic hit and we had to do our studies from home, my community college lent me a tablet and Internet access.

Through ACC's wraparound services, I was finally able to successfully complete my Associate's degree, pursue a career I love, and have an income that will sustain the needs of my daughter and myself. Imagine how many more Texas students, families, and employers would benefit from having the same kind of support. As you continue your work as a Commission, please focus on the needs of working parents who want to further their education without sacrificing the basic needs of their families.

On behalf of the Texas Community College Student Advisory Council, we thank you for your time in listening to us today. We would love the opportunity to answer any questions you might have. We hope to continue in discussion toward supporting community colleges in Texas and building a strong future for students in our state.

Sincerely,

Isabel Torres
Member, Texas Community College Student Advisory Council

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Good afternoon Mr. Hunt and Honorable Members of the Commission,

Workforce education students are an integral part of the community college system. When they succeed, so does the surrounding community. These are students who chose the non-traditional college experience to catapult themselves into the workforce and begin contributing economically, socially, and industrially. I am asking for your support in the form of state funding to contribute to their success.

My name is Cristina Navarro. I am a first-generation college student and graduate, former Student Government Association President, military wife, mother, and chef. Growing up in a traditional Hispanic community had its challenges, but none greater than the attainment of a higher education. I started my educational career in 2019 at the age of 33. I chose a program at my local community college that interested me but that would also help me enter the workforce.

Finances for a college student are always a struggle, but even more so for parents like myself who are pursuing a degree to better provide for their families. As a parent who was working and going to school full-time, I have experienced many sleepless nights of self-doubt and many days of trying to stretch the minutes to complete my homework, be at work on time, and attend my classes.

I was up at 5:00am to double-check my homework and make sure that I was ready for class. I was out the door by 7:15am to be at work, clocked out at 2:00pm and went straight to class until 8:00pm. I went home, did homework and repeated the next day. I did not have to leave the building to drive to work, so I was able to gain work experience, build my resume, complete my hours, and still get to class on time. I was employed by the college through work study and while I am grateful to have had the opportunity, the pay is nowhere near a livable wage. It is important to understand the value that work study positions bring to the college and, in return, how those positions impact students.

Along with financial aid and scholarships, degree-specific stipend programs, such as work study, allow students like me to earn a paycheck at times that work around their class schedule while gaining valuable industry-related experience. My work study experience gave me confidence that I could succeed in my chosen career path.

I think of my peers who did not have the same opportunities. I filled one of only two work study positions in a program of about 300 students. That means 298 students were not getting the work-based experience and resume-building skills that I was receiving. If there were partnerships in place within our local community that provided similar opportunities, more students would see their goals come to fruition. State investment in work study partnerships would benefit students who never thought they could get that far, and employers would see an uptick in hireable candidates.

In addition, funding that inspires community colleges to promote and track student success would be beneficial for the student and the institution. If the institution receives funding in correlation to their success rates, students would be at the receiving end of support and encouragement towards their career goals. It would help to create a positive environment where students know they will succeed and go on into the workforce to strengthen the community.

Furthermore, state funding could go as far as the creation of partnerships with universities as well as

employers to further reinforce student success. If a student decided that they would like to pursue a higher degree, they could more easily transfer. If a student decided that they wanted to advance their career through a workforce program through their employer, they could do that. These partnerships are a lifeline to students who opt for the non-traditional education for various reasons.

I am that student. Thank you for the opportunity to share my personal story of vigor, determination, and effort. I experienced the hardships of being a workforce student firsthand and I know that the support of my state would have made a difference.

Sincerely,

Cristina Navarro
Member, Texas Community College Student Advisory Council