



AACC REPORT

Challenges of Urban Community Colleges

Dr. Margaret Ford Fisher, Chancellor, Houston City College (HCC)

Dr. Andrea Burrige, Vice Chancellor of Strategy, Planning & Institutional Effectiveness

Presented at AACC Conference - April 2026

Intentional Retention Efforts Are Essential

Without focused support, low confidence and limited academic readiness can impede student completion and success.



Dr. Margaret Ford Fisher, Chancellor, Houston City College (HCC)

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A Year of Growth and Success

2024-2025



ANNUAL ENROLLMENT

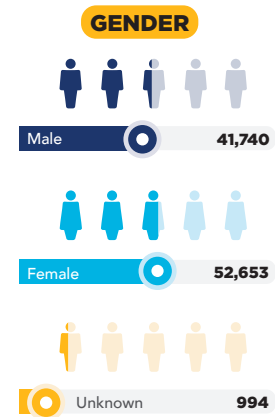
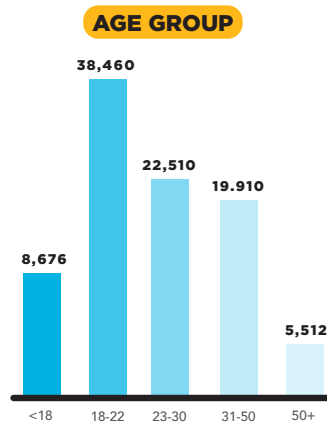
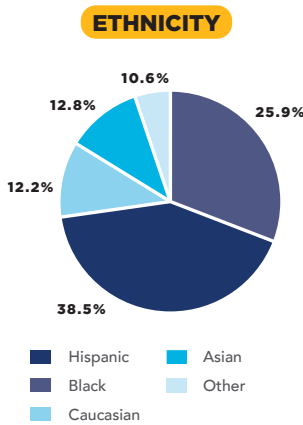


STUDENTS TRANSFERRED TO 4-YEAR SCHOOLS

University Partnerships



Student Demographics



4,034

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (F1) ENROLLMENT

Top 5 represented countries



VIETNAM



NIGERIA



INDIA



CHINA



PAKISTAN

Total Revenues

*Tax rate \$0.096 per \$100 assessed value



\$207,936M

Ad Valorem Taxes

\$122,407M

Tuition & Fees, NET

\$68,550M

State Appropriations

\$24,677M

Other Local Income

TOTAL REVENUE
\$423,590M

*FY 2024 as of 8/21/2024

Centers of Excellence



Academics
hccs.edu/academics



Architectural Design & Construction
hccs.edu/construction



Advanced Manufacturing
hccs.edu/manufacturing



Business
hccs.edu/business



Consumer Arts & Sciences
hccs.edu/consumer-arts



Digital & Information Technology
hccs.edu/digital



Education Professions
hccs.edu/education



Engineering
hccs.edu/engineering



Global Energy
hccs.edu/energy



Health Sciences
hccs.edu/health



Logistics
hccs.edu/logistics



Material Science
hccs.edu/material-sci-manufacturing



Media, Visual & Performing Arts
hccs.edu/arts

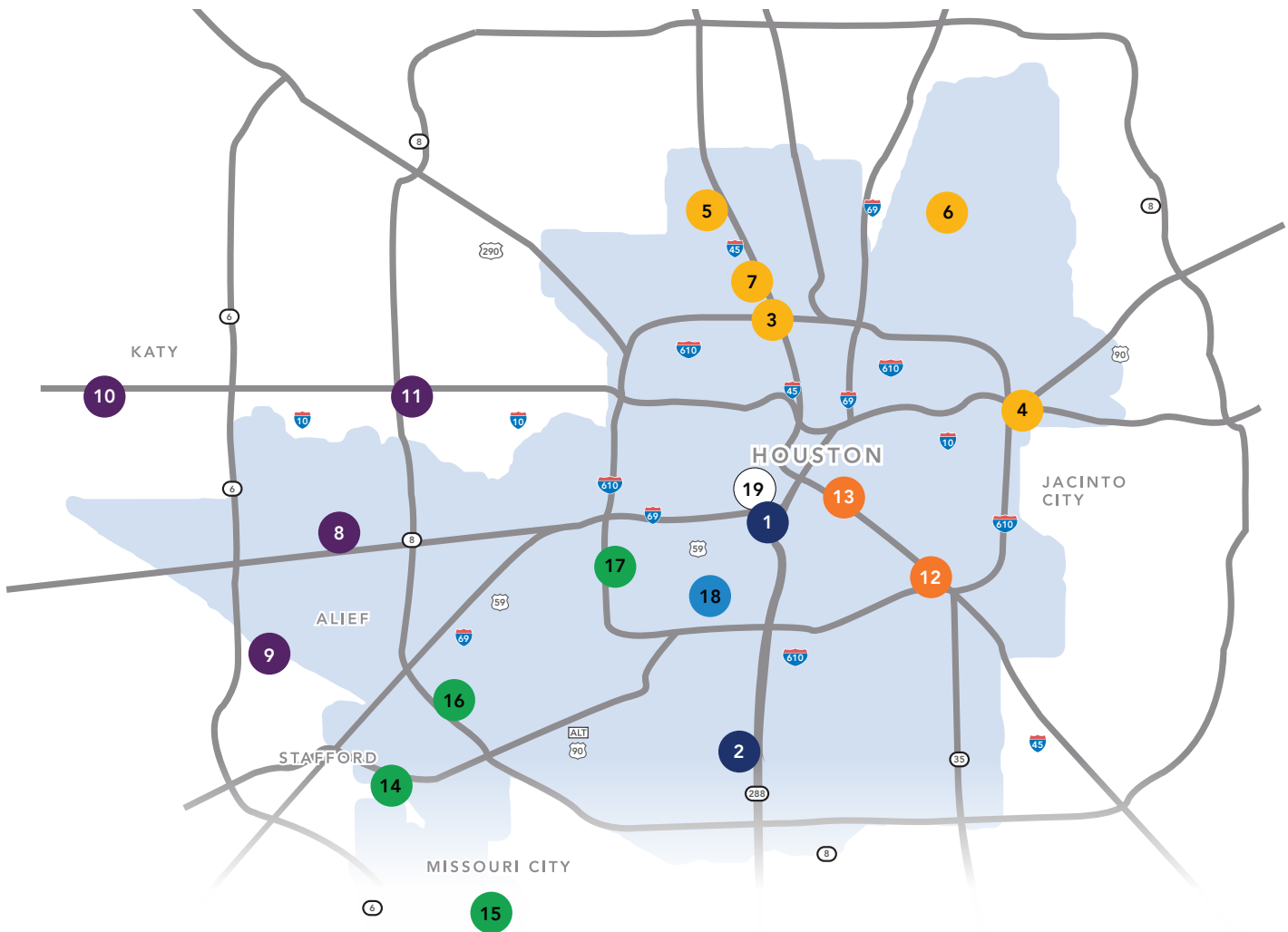


Public Safety
hccs.edu/public-safety



Transportation
hccs.edu/transportation

Houston City College's Service Area



COLLEGES

- Central
- Coleman
- Northeast
- Northwest
- Southeast
- Southwest
- Online*
- HCC Service Area

CAMPUSES & CENTERS

1. Central Campus
2. South Campus
3. Northline Campus
4. Northeast Campus
5. Acres Homes Campus
6. North Forest Campus
7. Automotive Technology Training Center
8. Alief Hayes Campus
9. Alief Bissonnet Campus
10. Katy Campus
11. Spring Branch Campus
12. Eastside Campus
13. Felix Fraga Academic Campus
14. Stafford Campus
15. Missouri City Campus
16. Brays Oaks Campus
17. West Loop Campus
18. Coleman Campus
19. District Administration

*Offered throughout the colleges

Challenges of Urban Community Colleges

Presented at AACC Conference - April 2026

Dr. Margaret Ford Fisher, Chancellor, Houston City College (HCC)
Dr. Andrea Burrige, Vice Chancellor of Strategy, Planning & Institutional Effectiveness

Urban community colleges are commonly defined as two-year public institutions that are located in densely populated areas of 50,000 residents or more and typically serving diverse populations of students who experience high rates of financial, academic, and socio-economic challenges. The National Institutes of Health indicated in 2021 that 46% of urban community college students report food insecurity, and 58% report unstable housing. In data from early 2026, according to the Center for Higher Education, 48% of learners faced basic needs insecurity with over 48% also experiencing food insecurity. Regional data in California, for example, show that over 70% of community college students have reported being food insecure. The lack of basic needs increases the stop-out and dropout rates. For many students, the housing costs typically exceed the cost of tuition and fees; and in the area of transportation, data from the Hechinger Report show that 57% of community college campuses are not within walking distance of a public transit stop, and while 84% of the students may have access to a vehicle, 1 in 5 students report that the vehicle is only somewhat reliable or not reliable at all. The aforementioned challenges in addition to the need for childcare, transportation, healthcare and other support services make it unmistakably clear why only 33% of community college students complete a degree within six years. According to the Community College Research Center publication in January 2026, nearly 40% of students in two-year colleges do not return the second year.

In another survey conducted by the Community College Research Center and published on January 2, 2026, the results highlight why students who participated in the survey indicated why they are leaving their postsecondary institutions. Financial hardship was the number one reason at 45%; academic challenges were ranked two at 39%, and stress was the number three reason at 33%. While according to the report, students previously held high expectations about completing



Nearly **40%**
of students at two-year colleges do not return the second year

48%
of learner face
Basic Needs Insecurity

Over
48%
of learner face
Food Insecurity

a 4-year degree when they enrolled in college, by the time they departed, they cited low confidence in their academic abilities and a diminished connection to their college. The issues impacting students' lives are daunting. The challenges reported by students coupled with the dropout and stop-out data beg the question that seeks a solution in the integration of proven self-efficacy strategies needed to support more resilient students who persist, even in the midst of challenges. Other concerns arise as a result of media influences. In an interview with a former school administrator, it was indicated that Social Media Addiction is potentially a new challenge that colleges must address in addition to other challenges referenced above. Social Media Addiction adds to the stressors that students face pursuing degree completion. The addiction is one that is defined as "uncontrollable urge to use social media even when it impacts other areas of life."

It is clear that intense and intentional work must be done to retain students to ensure that low confidence and limited academic readiness do not become impediments to student completion and success. The numbers of dropouts and stop-outs are staggeringly high. In fact, according to Inside Higher Education, over 43 million American adults have dropped out of college without a credential, with roughly 37.6 million of them being under the age of 65. In 2022 and 2023, however, the trend reversed with 156,000 fewer dropouts—largely attributed to the work of community colleges.

Texas Community Colleges Continuously Innovate to Help Students Complete their Educational Journey

The Texas message of student success outcomes success is one that resonates with faculty and staff at the educational institutions throughout the State via House Bill 8. The message is clear: “To build a talent-strong Texas, we must focus not only on helping students start their postsecondary journeys but also on helping students complete them.” Thus, the 89th Texas State Legislature shifted its funding model for community colleges from an enrollment-based formula to a student outcomes-based model – legislatively referred to as House Bill 8 that highlights “Credentials of Value.” In the State of Texas, community colleges have experienced record-setting growth and completions. The growth reflects how successful the colleges are in connecting the students from enrollments to completions, transfer, and employment in high-demand occupational fields.

Under the new funding model, HCC is one of the drivers of student success in the categories of student retention, completion, and transfer. As a multi-college district, Houston City College is singularly accredited by the Southern of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and is in good standing with SACS to offer certificates, associates degrees, and baccalaureate degrees.

Within the HCC structure, there are 6 geographical colleges that are a part of a singularly accredited Institution that serves students in both urban and suburban municipalities. There is also a 7th college that is fully online. The total geographical area that HCC serves encompasses 635 square miles and 2.5 million residents. The enrollment at HCC in 2025 was 95,000 students in a semi-autonomous, decentralized district. HCC was founded in 1970 and is one of 50 public community college districts in the State of Texas where

over 760,000 students were enrolled during the last reporting cycle. The student outcomes data have been transformative and record-setting due to intentional strategies at the colleges with the support of the State and the Texas Success Center regarding ways to support the “Whole Student” via Caring Campus initiatives to create a sense of belonging for students and to also help shepherd each student to success.

Some of the innovative practices that have been implemented at HCC to develop student success follow: Guided Pathways; Expanded Wrap-Around Services; Case Management Advisement; Caring Campus Initiative; Seamless Pathways with Public School Students (Dual Credit, Early College High Schools, P-TECH High Schools); Registered Apprenticeships; Digital Support Centers; Scholarship Support (Houston Reconnect and Connect to Workforce, and others. In Fall 2026, additional student support will be provided via a “First Year Experience Program” designed to build students strengths, self-efficacy, and agency.

Practices to Support Self Efficacy

In addition to the basic support needs for students, it is clear that additional services will be required and implemented in Fall 2026 due to the need to train faculty and staff to provide support for students who are on the neurodiversity spectrum whether it is ADHD, dyslexia, or autism. Self-Efficacy training and Strengths’ training will be coupled to optimize the benefits for both students and staff.



In a review of the literature, the Bandura Model is one model of self-efficacy that can be coupled with measures such as Clifton StrengthsFinder to support student success. Reports indicate that the Bandura self-efficacy model helps to facilitate the belief in one's capabilities to succeed and includes four primary sources: (1) Mastery Experience that focuses on personal success; the next is (2) Vicarious Experiences that focus on modeling; (3) Verbal Persuasion is the third which focuses on encouragement; and the final of the four is (4) Physiological/Affective States that include the emotional responses.

Research reports indicate that Bandura's model of academic self-efficacy is the single strongest predictor of college student success that includes the following (gpa + grades); retention and persistence; attendance and high impact. There are other models as well to support self-efficacy to include the Self Determination Theory that focuses on human needs such as relatedness; Implicit Theories that focus on the growth mindset; Expectancy – Value Theory that focuses on two factors to include expectancy and the task value; the Attribution Theory that focuses on the internal versus the external, and the Socio-cultural Theory that focuses on the theory that learning happens first through social interaction and then internalized; and finally, the Theory of Planned Behavior that focuses on the theory that behavior is determined by intentions which are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the October 2025 article published by the American Psychological Association, the research suggests that Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory acts as a companion tool to further accelerate student self-efficacy. Post-secondary institutions on record identified as using Bandura's model are Miami Dade College, University of Prince George (Canada), California Baptist University, West Virginia University, Pennsylvania State University, and Stanford University.

All of the models listed above are described as psycho-social models that identify how an individual's environment interacts with their psyche to drive motivation and human agency. Clifton's StrengthsFinder, on the other hand is recommended and is described as a personal talent inventory that identifies individual talents and strengths as a personal adjacent talent inventory. Some of the institutions using Clifton's StrengthsFinder include the following institutions: University of Houston, Purdue University, University of Tennessee, Virginia Tech, Kansas State University, University of Nebraska

– Lincoln, Villanova University, McClennan Community College, Austin Community College, Lee College, Galveston College, Tarrant County Community College, and Southmost College. The Houston City College, formerly Houston Community College, has used Clifton's StrengthsFinder with great success.

Conclusion

As a Gallup Certified Strength's Coach, there is no intent to recommend one tool over the other. It is clear, however, that student success rates for retention, completion, and transfer are consistently high when self-efficacy, self-esteem, and knowledge of individual strengths are a part of the student support system in addition to other support services that are available. It can be hypothesized that self-efficacy and self-esteem building via the use of specific tools can also enhance students' persistence while also having a causal effect on reducing the stress levels that students experience. As colleges and universities continue to do their work, it will be essential that research is continuously conducted to measure student persistence and completion over time to identify Best Practices that will equip all students for success.



Research is Key to Student Success

Colleges and universities must **continuously** measure student **persistence and completion** to **identify best practices** that will equip all students for **success**.

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