

This Month's Topic: Student Voices on Belonging, Barriers, and Support at CHC

In support of Crafton Hills College's efforts to better understand and support students' lived experiences related to belonging, barriers, and persistence, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Planning (OIERP) Student Research Scholars conducted four focus groups in April 2025. The goal of this study was to better understand student experiences, barriers, and provide recommendations to improve equity and student success.

Methodology and Targeted Sample

This participatory qualitative study used open-ended, student-centered methods to better understand the experiences of disproportionately impacted Black/African American and Hispanic students. Through visual and verbal activities, students shared their perspectives on belonging, barriers, and support needs in their own words. This approach empowered students as active collaborators, revealing insights into institutional structures and unmet needs.

This study included 42 CHC students (current, former, and dual enrollment) who identified as Black/African American or Hispanic and who met one or more of the following criteria during the 2023–2024 academic year: Did not complete transfer-level math and English in their first year, did not persist from Fall 2023 to Spring 2024, did not earn a degree or certificate, or did not transfer to a four-year institution. The targeted sample therefore represented the intended population as per our [college's equity plan](#), which focuses on closing equity gaps for disproportionately impacted student groups. Three open-ended prompts guided student responses related to their sense of belonging at Crafton Hills College, academic, personal, and financial barriers that impacted their ability to continue their education, and the types of support or resources that would help them stay on track toward earning a degree, certificate, or transfer.

Findings

Three primary themes emerged from participant responses: (a) Belonging through relationships and campus culture, (b) high-impact support that enables persistence, and (c) structural and life barriers that threaten persistence.

Based on these findings, the following strengths were identified in relation to themes 1 (Belonging) and 2 (High-impact support):

- A welcoming and supportive campus environment that makes students feel valued.
- Caring and approachable counselors who provide genuine support.
- Abundant opportunities for involvement and growth.
- An easy-to-navigate campus that enhances the student experience.
- Helpful and dedicated staff committed to student success.

In addition to strengths, some challenges were also identified in relation to theme 3 (Barriers):

- Limited course access such as evening/in-person options; scheduling frustrations.
- Unresponsive or unprofessional behavior reported from faculty.
- Time management and class scheduling along with being employed; stress management.
- Confusing FAFSA process; lack of guidance when it comes to completing it.
- Textbook costs, transportation, food, housing challenges, and other financial burdens.

Recommendations

Recommendations include increasing visibility of campus resources through student-centered communication strategies, reducing financial barriers through textbook support and FAFSA assistance, strengthening relationship-based engagement, and investing in high-impact academic and relational supports. Collectively, these findings suggest that improving student persistence requires intentional efforts to build belonging, reduce structural and life barriers, and ensure students are aware of and connected to high-impact support systems that meet their academic and personal needs.

Next Steps

Student Research Scholars and OIERP staff will present findings from this work at UCR's 2nd Annual Student-Led Research Symposium in June 2026 and the Research and Planning Group's Strengthening Student Success Conference in October 2026. Such findings will also be shared with the Student Equity and Achievement Committee along with other campus committees.

In the Spring of 2026, Student Research Scholars also conducted focus groups related to college communications with students. The OIERP plans to conduct additional focus groups in Fall 2026 to gather additional student feedback and inform improvements to institutional communication strategies while identifying practices that are working well.

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