



STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF BELONGING AND INCLUSION

Hanover College 2022

Abstract

To learn about student perceptions and experiences of our campus culture, we conducted a series of focus groups with Hanover College students in May 2022. We asked 53 intentionally recruited undergraduate students who represented diverse identities to talk with one another about their experiences of belonging and inclusion. In our discussions, students reflected on the ways they felt under-supported or invisible when decision-makers and campus policies were not inclusive of all students and the report concludes with recommendations from students to amplify student voices and improve communication, health access, and staff training.

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Study Aims

The aim and purpose of the study is to summarize Hanover College student experiences and perspectives with equity and inclusion, belonging, and support for persistence toward graduation. The second goal of the study is to discuss the ways campus initiatives can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive campus for all students, with a special focus on students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Methods

A series of twelve student conversation focus groups were held in May, 2022 on campus to collect student feedback and conversations in line with the study aims. Qualitative data from each focus group was analyzed using thematic analysis by the three study authors. The following research report includes de-identified student perspectives and recommendations for improving student experiences.

Procedure

The focus group question prompts and protocol were approved by the Institutional Review Board (Approval 2022-0272). The topics and probe questions were edited in consultation with faculty members with expertise in diversity education and research methods. The co-moderators of the focus groups (the three authors) were one faculty member (White, cisgender female), one student (Black, cisgender female), and one student (Black, cisgender male). Focus group moderators recruited all student participants to participate in discussions during a two-week period at the end of the academic school year, in May 2022. Participants were recruited through emails and personal invitations of individuals and clubs or organizations on campus, with emails directed towards organizational leaders and members of clubs that capture a diverse array of student interests. In addition to recruiting participants from established campus organizations, at the end of each focus group, participants were encouraged to share the research invitation with “any student on campus who wants their voice heard” regarding the issues of campus diversity and inclusion. In most focus groups, the participants were intentionally scheduled to include individuals with similar backgrounds or experiences (e.g., students of color, LGBTQ students, athletes) because previous focus group research indicates that participants are more likely to feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics when they perceive similarity in other focus group members (Liamputtong, 2011¹). The location for all focus groups was a neutral, lounge seating area around a coffee table of the student HAQ center for diverse clubs on campus, with all sessions audio-recorded for transcription with participant consent. Each group discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes. Students received \$10 for their participation.

¹ Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practice*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Two or three co-moderators were present at each focus group session. First, moderators handed out a blank, anonymous hard copy of the demographic question survey, discussed below. The moderators began the discussion by asking questions regarding the campus climate, including questions about campus diversity, feelings of inclusion in social and educational campus events and groups, experiences with members of the campus community, and a variety of probing questions, which allowed a free-flowing conversation. Co-moderators regularly kept the conversation on important issues, asked for clarification, and encouraged participants to contribute equitably and honestly by using verbal and nonverbal response feedback. Throughout the process, the researcher-moderators were aware of bias and perceptions inherent in their organizational roles (as a member of the faculty and a White woman, and as a Black female student and campus organization leader, as a Black male student and member of athletic team). The co-moderators attempted to mitigate the influence of bias by discussing questions and responses before and after focus groups to ensure a consistent and comfortable experience for participants and encourage honest dialogue in each group. In addition to the audio recordings, each moderator kept individual notes of each session. Reflexivity was employed through conversations about notes following each session and throughout the research process.

Participant Demographics

There were 53 participants in 12 focus groups with 3-8 individuals per group. Participants included 17 cisgender males, 25 cisgender females, and 8 other/nonbinary individuals. Participants ages ranged from 18-22 with a mode age of 19 years old. There were 14 seniors, 11 juniors, 9 sophomores, and 17 first year students.

Of the students in our focus groups, 18 (34%) were Pell Grant recipients, 20 (38%) were not, and another 13 (25%) were unsure of Pell status. Students recalled their own GPA: 10 were between 3.5-4.0, 17 between 3.0-3.5, 14 between 2.5-3.0, 5 between 2.0-2.5, 3 below 2.0, and 3 were unsure. Half of the participants (27) were not NCAA athletes; 8 were former athletes, and 13 were current NCAA athletes. Half (26) were not involved in Greek life; 4 were formerly involved, and 10 were current Greek organization members.

Participants were intentionally recruited to represent cultural and ethnic diversity. Forty-one students were U.S citizens and eleven were either international students or non-US resident. In terms of race and ethnicity, 24 students identified their ethnicity as African American, 11 White, 6 Hispanic/Latino, 6 African, 3 Asian, and two students identified their race as multiple. Sexual orientation and identity varied as well: 31 students identified their sexual orientation as straight/heterosexual, 7 Bisexual, 3 Gay, 2 Pansexual, 2 Queer, 1 Lesbian, and 1 Questioning. Eight students stated they had physical or mental impairments that limited their daily activity. Nine students received disability learning accommodations from Hanover College; 6 of those 9 reported using accommodation services. In terms of spiritual and religious orientations, 16 students stated that they were Christian, 11 were spiritual but not religious, 6 atheist, 4 Roman Catholic, 3 Hindu, 2 Protestant, 1 Muslim, and 1 Jewish.

Students were asked to report on their political views, in general: 16 were not sure, 10 very liberal, 7 slightly liberal, 6 liberal, 7 moderate, 1 slightly conservative, 1 conservative, and 3 very conservative. Participants reported their most educated parent: 1 did not finish high school, 16 at high school graduate/GED, 6 some college and did not finish, 5 associate's degrees, 12 bachelor's degree, 6 master's degree, 2 doctoral or equivalent degree.

We also asked students to reflect on their socio-cultural environments. We asked participants about their high school racial and ethnic minority percentages. Some (9) people said that they did not know, while 15 people went to a high school with 10% or fewer racial minority students, 11 with 10-25%, 7 with 25-50%, and 6 with 50% percent or higher. Students reported the environments they lived in during high school was: suburban areas (21), city/urban (17), and rural area (7). We asked how many of their close friends were of a different racial or ethnic background as they were: 6 had no friends from different racial backgrounds, 1 had 1 close friend of a different racial background, 23 said they had a few friends from different backgrounds, 17 said most of their friends were from different backgrounds, and 1 participant said that all of their close friends were from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Of close friends who had a different sexual orientation, 5 people said all their friends were the same sexual orientation as they were, 4 said they had 1 friend of a different sexual orientation, 16 said a few of their friends were different sexual orientations, 14 said most close friends were different sexual orientations than they were, and 8 said all of their close friends had different sexual orientations from their own. Regarding religion and spirituality, 8 people said none of their friends had a different religious orientation, 3 said one friend, 23 said a few friends, 11 said most friends had different religions from them, and 3 said that all their friends had different religious beliefs from them.

Lastly, we asked a question about how often each person thought about leaving (transferring or quitting) Hanover College and the reason(s) why they decided to attend Hanover College. Nine participants said they had never thought of leaving, 9 thought rarely of leaving, 15 thought sometimes about leaving Hanover, 7 thought often of leaving, and 7 thought very often about leaving Hanover. Of the open-ended responses about why they decided to attend Hanover, the top reason given by 14 participants was because of financial aid / academic scholarship support offered. The second most common reason involved athletic participation (mentioned by 11 people). Other reasons mentioned once or twice included class size, campus, available activities, employment, LGBTQ, academic major, family/parent, or personal issues.

Focus Group Analysis

The two student moderators transcribed the audio recordings from all twelve focus groups. After every three focus groups the moderators compared notes and analyzed the data for what topics continuously popped up in the focus groups across the board, looking for unique experiences and probing questions based on previous focus groups. The moderators also saved information that about student recommendations for change and improvement. At the end of the focus groups the moderators met up to thematically analyze the qualitative data using the

constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967²), and to prepare the final report and direct quotations from students with their experiences.

Findings

Student experience is an important first step in understanding the climate of inclusivity at Hanover College. This study's secondary aim, the discussion of campus environment explored and proposed changes to the campus community. The findings of the focus groups were grouped thematically into four primary themes, with varying subthemes. The themes included: 1) Campus Image 2) Intersectional Identities, 3) Lack of Support, and 4) "Bad news travels fast."

Campus Image

In each focus group, the discussion began with the same prompted question by one moderator, "Let's start by talking about the campus climate and how you feel supported as a student. Describe what it means to be a successful student at Hanover? How have you found success or a place to fit in?" with follow-up questions regarding ways in which support is and can be equitably spread across campus. In several discussions, there was mutual agreement that it seems that administration is more concerned with image than with student experience or success. Students agreed that rather than feeling like students, they often feel "nickled and dimed" by the College, with students of color highlighting the "fake diversity Hanover blankets itself under."

Money Over Education. Many participants noted that the institution often values the money from students over their education. Citing that while money is often a reason why people stay it is also a contributing factor for students to leave as well, with one international student saying, "I know a lot of people who can't come here because it is so expensive," and he said he will be leaving next year because of the cost. On the other hand, many domestic students stated that they are "only here because Hanover gave me (them) the most money" compared to other schools.

In addition to the tuition costs, students often felt as though they have been monetized by the college, feeling as though Hanover values students for their tuition, room and board, and other bills they pay, rather than the other important things they bring to the College: including their academics and campus involvement. This is especially true for people of marginalized communities. In a heated moment one student expressed that Hanover needs to, "Stop capitalizing off of people who are different and show that you give a shit about the students who give you money to go here." In a different group another participant questioned, "Why are we so worried about taking student's money when we could be doing things to make this campus better?" Participants brought up many instances of Hanover doing what one participant called, "money-grabs" where the College charges students for at times uncontrollable instances and

² Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies in qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

excessive fees. Students named things like the college charging \$10 fees to unlock dorm doors, the over ticketing of student vehicles, and the seemingly overbearing room damage charges. Overall, while the price of tuition was seen as both a barrier and an access point, the fees were a point of contempt across all of the groups.

Lastly it seemed that money had become a barrier to access for many students, especially when it came to housing. In conducting groups a common topic of housing was brought up, and a couple of students from the LGBTQ community questioned why they have to pay additional fees to ensure they feel comfortable in their housing community? A prime example of this being that gender neutral housing is significantly more expensive than regular dorm housing with one male student stating, “The students have to come together and create a club and do all this stuff, like I’m wearing a skirt right now to do this event for Project Cocoon so that students can have a scholarship to live in gender neutral housing. If you go to any other school, it’s not like that.” Students felt that the housing fees could be income-based so that they could make choices about safe and supportive housing.

Fake Diversity. Many participants stated that the media and marketing people often show racial diversity as more prevalent than it is. In one group of participants, students of color discussed that they often feel tokenized by the school by social media and website photos. In a specific experience one student stated: “anytime there like more than three people of color in one spot like the marketing people make sure to get it for the school Instagram, like you know, capturing us in everyday life doesn’t mean that your school is responsible for this.” Another student stated that “they kind of put the multicultural community as tokens on the page.” While students of color feel tokenized on the social media posts and webpage photos, many participants noted the lack of support that the campus Instagram page has for social movements relating to students of color. One participant noted a certain experience that he heard in his freshman year:

“I know a student leader who told me that during COVID and the BLM things, the administration was like really shitty and awful about all of that. They were really not for people or groups showing support for the movement, they were just trying to sweep everything under the rug and keep it really quiet. They don’t ever try to see things from other perspectives. Other than okay so say that you’re White, and straight, and Christian, or your parents came to this school so you have a lot of money, and they are paying your tuition. They never try to see it from like a Black woman’s perspective, or like a trans man’s perspective, they don’t care so they don’t offer any resources for people like that.”

This lack of support felt by student extends past students of color into students apart of the LGBTQ community. In discussing the recent drag show’s lack of appearance on the Hanover Instagram one student questioned, “Our marketing and promotions people are just really concerned with the perspective of conservative students, which, I get it there’s a concern for their perspective students, but if we want to recruit the people who would be so appalled by a drag show on campus that they are not in any way required to attend, are those the people that we

want here?” Beyond the drag show discussion, students did not think that their campus organizations received the same amount of attention (shares) by the College’s official social media accounts. They wondered whether policies about social media were being equally applied to all student organizations on campus.

In addition to this, there seemed to be an overarching theme of an over representation of some student-orgs with an under-representation of others, more specifically those of marginalized groups. In one group participants discussed why certain things get promoted and others do not:

P1: Let me just tell you, not everything gets promoted on our Instagram. Like why is wiffleball being promoted? Like everybody just gets drunk and sloppy?

P2: I know right! I think it’s because it’s a frat thing,

P3: I would even agree that it’s not just a fraternity thing. I think it’s a thing that draws in a lot of positive attention that brings the school money. Because if it was about being a fraternity thing or if it was about a philanthropy thing, then the weeklong fundraiser that we just worked our asses off for would have gotten a damn bit of attention. We couldn’t even get the school to send out a schedule saying when our philanthropy events were!

Not specific to social media attention, there are other areas of the campus that represented fake diversity to students. In a couple of our focus groups made up primarily of athletes, specifically those who have been recruited from Georgia, felt a sense of “sugar coating.” It is important to note that Hanover started recruiting football players from Georgia, significantly changing the campus culture. However, Hanover’s retention of these students is lower than other student athletes. It seems that when recruited many of these players were not necessarily told everything about the culture – including academic preparation and the Whiteness- of Hanover. Participants wanted their recruiters to “not sugar coat it” if there are problem here then they would like to know:

P1: Sugarcoating things doesn’t help when you are essentially stranded ya know, being nine hours away is essentially stranded from home. So being as genuine as possible while we’re here playing for you and making sure we’re being the best versions of ourselves, just being honest with us.

M1: What are things that they could have told you?

P1: The environment, the expectations, the level of honesty because certain stuff may sound good, but when it comes down to doing what you say you’ll do, that could be put in question. It takes a big toll being away from home so every aspect of how you treat me and how you move about our relationship, you must be mindful of that. Once they have you on the roster, they don’t take into consideration certain backgrounds.

From the student discussions, there was discontent with the way that the College engaged in “performative diversity” actions, through highlighting photos and activities that were racially diverse and presenting an image of fake diversity that did not align with student experiences of inclusion and belonging.

Leaders and Decision Makers. When discussing campus culture student were often left wondering who is actually making decisions on campus? Reflecting on this question, many groups noted that decision makers do not reflect the students. In one group a football player stated that, “They [Administration] make all these committees of people that students don’t know and who don’t know the students.” In another group students noted the lack of diversity in decisionmakers:

P1: I wonder if it’s diversified at all, like do we know who’s in the Cabinet? Do we know if there are people of color?

Moderator lists names

P2: I feel like when we talk about diversity though, it’s not just in skin tone it’s also in experience and background. Those two aren’t synonymous.

Students craved people in leadership positions who would advocate for their needs and relate to them. When asked specifically, students said this was not a comment about faculty professors but about people in institutional leadership positions on the Cabinet.

Another student noted his experience as a gay man dealing with a message from an administrator that highlighted differences in perception and reality. He stated that, “an administrator, who isn’t a part of the LGBTQ community was telling me that Hanover is a gay haven. Like when I go and get called *faggot* by people off campus.” This feeling of being told that Hanover was one way when it was not aligned with their experiences contributed to distrust and anger among focus group participants.

Participants agreed that performative “wokeness” is a challenge when students or student groups are led to believe their feedback is wanted or they can change a process. However, if a person in charge is just listening to dissent with no plans to act or change the system then it is performative and missing the point. They confirm that having a “Diversity Equity and Inclusion” website and checklist represents *the start of a commitment*, but there needs to be action and practices that students can observe meaningful improvement in regard to inclusion and belonging. One student said that “I don’t think it’s necessarily because the people have discriminatory ideas in mind, I think it’s because they work in a system that just forces those discriminations.” Generally, students think that it’s the system that is broken, not necessarily Hanover’s administration. However, students do believe that Hanover could do a better job to change the system.

Focus group moderators asked students how they preferred to receive information about topics and events important to them, and most agreed that email updates from Cabinet-level administrators was best. There was a perception that key administrators should use email to update students about important issues but that the quantity of email was also problematic.

Students complained about getting numerous emails about “random things” that were not important to their experience, but that important announcements and benchmark updates on diversity and inclusion would be welcomed. “You mean the 20 emails I get a day about random shit that doesn’t matter? Instead of the actual things that are changing, and we need to know about? There’s too much that students do not know.” Students felt that the information that directly impacts students should be accompanied by student feedback – instead of just announcements of change from top-down. Frustrated with this implication one participant stated, “There have been a lot of instances when they [Administration] are making decisions or doing things that have a severe impact on people on this campus and then they just don’t consult those individuals at all. It just happens and then you deal with it.” In all, issues about distrust for Administrators and perceptions that students were informed after decisions were made was consistent in this theme about leadership and decision-making.

Intersectional Identities

Power and Privilege. Students found that they were expected to make changes but at the same time also had to beg for resources. In one interaction students recounted feeling that their work to improve Hanover was expected but not recognized or rewarded because they had tried to publicize events for a campus organization and get official Hanover College social media outlets to share the content. They felt as though the College was not proud of their work and refused to share it publicly, “The school has specifically said that they don’t publicize those things because the people who gives us money will stop giving us money, the students that we have and the lives that they live will not always bring in money at the end of the day and we specifically don’t share those things.” There seemed to be confusion in several of the focus group discussions about how some content was shared on official media outlets but that decision-making about which content would be shared was not clear to student leaders looking to publicize events on campus. This lack of clarity led to some assumptions of bias about why some content was shared and other content was not.

There was much discussion about students as campus change-agents, both positive and sometimes negative. When asked who is responsible for change on campus, most students volunteered that the people with the most power should be held responsible, but they also felt that the student leaders were the ones who ended up doing the real work to engage students and make the College more welcoming and inclusive. Students were frustrated that they worked hard to make the school better, and that their work often went unnoticed by the broader Hanover community. Rather than deny students an opportunity to enact meaningful change, students agree that “the school should work on ways to enhance student involvement that’s already happening” and another student added, “...It seems like they [Administrators] just jump on the bandwagon of what the student are doing.” While there is so much responsibility put on student leaders, generally participants determined that the labor is invisible. One student stated that “What I see my friends who are student leaders doing should be the job of someone who works here.” It should also be noted that at least one student in the focus groups simultaneously recognized the disparity between white student leaders and those of color. One white student leader noted that, “Our school cand do a better job of recognizing groups of students who do the same amount of work as me.”

Regarding recognition, members of the multicultural community recognized the efforts involved in making the HAQ Center more visible. “I mean, we asked for more visibility” said one Black Student Union (BSU) leader in regard to moving the HAQ center from the lower level of the campus center to the main level lobby area, “but it came with a price tag of our privacy” recalling how the center’s physical space and visibility now mean they get more people who enter the space or look inside during their meetings and activities. The physical space conversation did not come up in focus groups with students who were not involved in multicultural student organizations, as several mentioned they did not use the HAQ center. The conversation about visibility and campus spaces moved into a discussion of how photos of a few students or spaces sometimes made the campus look more diverse and inclusive on websites and social media.

Stereotypes and layers of disadvantage. Most participants easily identified the implicit bias and stereotyping that comes along with being a student of color on this campus. From a comment by an employee at the dining hall to a person clutching their purse as they walked by at night, students perceived instances of being judged based on their physical features. One student recalled feeling like a slave at auction when describing how other people talked about his height and physical build. There were many instances in which people’s biases in turn made a student of color uncomfortable or experiencing being “othered” and students then discussed instances of multiple types of stereotypes co-occurring.

For example, Black women in several different focus groups discussed their intersectional identities and the pressures they get as women of color, “It might have to do with gender, because like the things I’ve heard is always like [referring to] girls of color. They get told offensive stuff and it’s probably because like ‘oh what are they gonna do about it?’ They might be scared to say it to you [talking to a Black cis male focus group participant] because what if you like react differently? Girls are gonna be more like... just get upset about it, she’s not really gonna do anything...” And several women shook their heads in solidarity. Women talked about the pressures they experienced to be campus leaders, mentors to other women of color, and also to do the emotional labor of supporting others while getting an education. In one group of Black men and women, the women talked openly about the double standard of “getting tested by people” in regard to fellow students who were (sometimes playfully and sometimes not) testing the boundaries of what they could say and do around students of color. When asked to elaborate, “Black women at a PWI...” (predominantly white institution) started one woman, and a friend finished, “If we go off, then it’s like, ‘oh you a *mad* woman!’” and the men agreed that their classmates did not test them in the same ways.

Other layers of disadvantage were present in discussions about mental health and accessibility needs. Students discussed challenges to using campus-provided mental health services and student supports through the Gladish Center, discussed in the next section; and many of these layers of disadvantage came into discussions about financial aid and amid descriptions of discriminatory comments or examples of implicit bias by others on campus. In all of these circumstances implicit biases get in the way of students feeling comfortable and safe on campus.

Lack of Support

Moderators asked students about how to improve student experiences on campus. In general, participants identified people and campus offices that could be improved in support delivery for students.

Campus Offices. Most students who had interacted with Student Life stated that their needs have not always been met. There seems to be a stop – gap barrier that prevented meaningful change in student experiences. One student stated that, “I feel like every time I get really close to doing something great or just reaching a goal, there’s always some hurdle at the very end that trips me up and it’s out of my control and I don’t know why that kind of stuff keep happening here and they let it happen.” In another group a student suggested that “since the people in Student Life are all friends, they tend to take each other’s side more than student’s side.” This type of relationship then inhibits students from wanting to take further action on campus.

Students also identified that the counseling and mental health services could improve with additional staff support and expanded on-campus physical health services. Students complained that it can be hard to get appointments and that two full-time counselors was unreasonable for this many students and that “for health services, she’s out of the office, like, every other day.” One student stated that “I’m fortunate enough to pay for therapy, but there are a lot of college students who can’t, so [mental health services] should be easily accessible and it’s not.” It should be noted that many minority students feel the need to have counselors of color. In an exemplar response on student stated that

“Having counselors of color or of different backgrounds, because as a Black man or really anybody else with a different background, trying to go to counseling or talking about a specific situation and having some random person sitting across from you that supposedly cares about you but can’t relate to you in any way, that’s not something that can have you feel comfortable”

Students did not seem to remember or know a lot about the counseling interns or did not have information about how to make appointments with the intern counselors. When a moderator asked a follow-up question about virtual counseling and meeting with counselor interns of color, the students had no experience and most students in the group did not seem to know that there were interns available. Further, counselors of color were not named on the webpage and not enough details were provided for students interested in pursuing mental health experts through Hanover’s Counseling Service website.

In line with this, many athletes pointed out that they would appreciate counseling and mental health services specific to athletics. Several of the Black men in our focus groups were athletes and that prompted further discussions about support systems for athletes – especially those coming to Hanover from outside of the geographic region. One football player shared his opinion:

“This is more on the athletic part of it, I just think that we’re not taken care of like we should be, or we don’t have the resources like we should. We could use our coaches as

people to talk to but like sometimes when you're struggling and trying to figure shit out, you don't have that person to reach out to... most sports teams have a sports psychiatrist or somebody in that field. But we don't have that. It's very important for us because like they [points to other football players who reside out of state] said they feel like *they're stranded* sometimes ... and it's really just sports in general, not just football."

This discussion about support for athletes led to a deeper discussion about some of the challenges of playing sports and being a successful student and how many expectations students had for themselves. Many of them said they had considered leaving Hanover but were here to continue their athletic interests and that meant they needed more support in other areas (socio-emotional, academic) because of the intensity of their schedules and challenges of not being near family support. Regarding out-of-state students, "A lot of dudes come here for football. But they told me they leave because of social life. It's gonna be a hard social life if they don't have people and don't feel welcome. I mean... if you're not playing, they just feel like, not included" and that culture shock can be very stressful on a student who is transitioning to a college academic workload when they had been formerly motivated by athletic involvement.

Physical / Structural Access. While students believe Hanover is fully aware of the mobility issues that come along with this campus, students who need learning accommodations feel as though they have to fight to get them. In relation to the actual accessibility coordinator staff person one student said, "They keep changing. We had one person my freshman year, we've had a different person this year, who has now been replaced and they have not told anyone ... in every single syllabus they still have the wrong person listed. I've brought it up to my teachers and administrators and it did not get changed." The inconsistent staffing was a barrier for some students who said they qualified for accommodations but did not utilize them.

Problems with physical buildings may also inadvertently convey a lack of student support. Students had plenty of complaints about living situations, but those situations mostly seemed to impact general student populations. Some of the students waged concerns about maintenance, challenges keeping doors accessible, mold and air quality, naming specific buildings that they felt were unsatisfactory. Specific to under-represented students, in one focus group, gender-queer and nonbinary students expressed some concerns that there are some living options that are more welcoming to non-binary students, but that there may be financial barriers involved in a student's living choice. In other words, they questioned whether it was fair to ask students to pay more money to live in an environment when they felt more comfortable. And they also said that living in certain buildings with other nonbinary students does not necessarily "protect" them from comments from fellow students who also use those public spaces and housing arrangements.

Academic Help. Participants identified that there are limited options for the Gladish Learning Center. Students do however recognize the need for the Center, even though it often doesn't get used as much as it should. One student stressed that, "tutoring services need to be vastly expanded because there are some courses where you won't get shit from the professor and

it's [tutoring] by appointment only." The main problem seems to be that students seemed to want tutoring-on-demand (at all hours and times of the semester) and noted that tutors were not always readily available. In addition to the GLC, a sub theme that came up is that first-year students wanted to be shown the space, in addition to being told about Gladish. One student recalled that, "There were a lot of things that I didn't know, a lot of things that I didn't understand at all, things that I just didn't have any preparation for at all. Pretty much you come here in August, and they show you around campus and then it's like the following Monday you have three college classes thrown in your lap." And when students were referred to visit Gladish for tutoring, sometimes they did not go, thinking they could handle academic issues on their own, using support from peers and teammates.

When asked about other forms of academic help, professors and academic advisors received mixed reviews. On one hand, students recognized professors and advisors who were responsive and supportive, who went out of their way to help students with academic questions, and who answered emails promptly. On the other hand, "I've emailed professors countless times..." started one first-year student, "and sometimes they don't even respond at all... so it's kinda 50/50 for me so far." They then moved toward a discussion about how helpful professors were during office hours. "Some professors really want you to learn" and they started name-dropping people who were especially helpful.

Athletics. Most of the current and former athletes on campus noted that there is an uneven distribution of support for the different athletic teams. While some teams find that they are given both academic and athletic support, other teams find that there seems to be a push – pull tension between academics and athletics. The athletic teams felt that support staff, such as athletic trainers, were under-staffed, and there was a strong call for more mental health and counseling services for student athletes. Specifically, athletes wanted additional mental health resources and support staff with athletic experience – someone who understands the pressures of college athletics who could work specifically with athletes. In terms of academic support, it seems that the lack of balance between athletics and academics takes a toll on athlete's academic success. When focus group moderators asked about academic success and how important it was, the athletes in our focus groups usually leaned heavily on athletic experiences as an anchor for retention. When asked about why they decide to stay, athletes talked about team success (when the team is having success, athletes want to "stick it out" and keep doing well in classes), but when the individual player or team is not doing as well, students said they felt like there was little keeping them here at Hanover. One player stated that "as soon as the season was over, I was ready to leave." And football players mentioned that they often chose Hanover because of football, and "if I'm not getting playing time..." (shook his head), indicated that they thought about leaving the College. In other words, our students are less tethered to academics as the College might like. They readily talk with one another about which classes and professors to take, and which professors frown upon teams missing classes. One football player recalled that "My freshman year we all took a class and we almost all failed. We as a team had to petition. It

was because we would have to miss his class to go to games and stuff.” This experience reflected how students felt that they were not supported when they perceived conflict between their full participation in athletics and class schedules. Students did not indicate that they asked coaches or athletic team faculty mentors to be involved in these discussions with faculty.

The Bad: “Bad News Travels Fast”

When it comes to the “Hanover Bubble” it is clear that bad news travels fast through students on campus. Students readily volunteered personal experiences but even more often they discussed things they had heard happen to friends or other students. When it comes to trust-building and belongingness, transgressions were easy to identify and hard to repair.

Participants noted several instances in the past couple of years that contradicted Hanover’s inclusivity focus as “a place to belong.” When asked about instances when they felt “othered” or like outsiders, some examples that students brought up were related to specific faculty or staff interactions. Students were not very confident that reporting microaggressions, discriminatory or racist comments against faculty would result in any recourse for the faculty member involved. Some students told of “horror stories” with employees, capturing both direct and indirect messages. About half the time during these discussions, students described interactions in which they said that the employee probably meant well or certainly did not intend to harm a student but that came off as stereotyping or microaggressions. In one discussion about how out-of-state athletes adjust to academic workload, one football player said that a professor was trying to help him during office hours and said, “I like talking to you because it helps me learn how to talk to you people” and he thought the conversation was not the professor being racist but that it made sense for her to say that because she may not have had opportunities to talk individually with Black students. “She was trying to make me feel more comfortable,” he thought. But moderators asked him to explain, “I didn’t really take offense to it, but I could tell...” and another student chimed in, “you can tell that someone really didn’t mean to offend you.” And the conversation surrounded other “good intentioned-microaggressions” (a term coined by the moderator). “God bless the lunch ladies’ hearts, but I’ll ask what’s in there and they will say things like, ‘Oh don’t worry! You’ll like it, it’s chicken and watermelon’” said one student. Students said a lot of faculty members were their advocates and supporters, but a small number of faculty have bad reputations, and sometimes these example stories illustrated faculty being caught in a double bind: to be “colorblind” to students from under-represented groups meant that faculty might be accused of ignoring or not reaching out to form personal relationships with students, or worse – ignorant to systemic issues related to educational access. But to go over-board was also viewed negatively: calling on students in class can feel unevenly distributed; asking a student to meet for extra support and encouragement can make students feel singled out. One student recalled, “a certain teacher that said ... she’s harder on her student of color” and that sometimes students were stuck in difficult spots, trying to navigate a system in which the people in power (employees, and specifically faculty) may not know how or want to make an effort to find out what students need.

Some academic departments, especially in the natural sciences division, were mentioned directly when it comes to negative stories passed along through students. One student (academic

major unknown), relayed information from racial minority friends, “People in science classes, being the only ones that look like them, I’ve heard of them getting picked on, they’re going to their professor for help, and they just don’t do anything.” Whether this person’s example could be corroborated from other students or faculty may not matter: by retelling the stories about students who are not supported, the reputational damage to academic departments is done. Students complained about an over-reliance on lecture-style teaching in the sciences, which made them feel less involved and invested, plus “being nickel and dimed” by high textbook prices and lab fees (which were not exclusive to sciences).

Relevant for first-generation students and undecided majors, the process of selecting a major and scheduling classes can be a challenge, especially without a good support system. An art major who had a positive experience with advising said that, “What I’ve heard from peers in other departments, it’s more like a figure it out yourself sort of thing and that process can be very scary especially when you’re first starting out and you don’t know what you’re doing, or you don’t know what you need. You just know you’re gonna have all these CCR’s and stuff like that and all these different requirements that they give you and a lot of people don’t get help when it comes to understanding what it means or what it is that they want to do.” This speaks to the idea that students can feel like outsiders when they are confused about how to do something even when their academic advisor may have shared information with them.

Miscommunication and Misinformation. Some of the stories about student experiences in this theme surrounds the quick nature of how incorrect information spreads. Not only do students share bad news and experiences with other students quickly, but whenever there is a problem, the previous negative sentiments from a past issue seem to rise back up. When the moderators asked about belongingness and inclusion experiences, some of the discussions surrounded stories retold from several years ago. And that does not imply that the issues or experiences are irrelevant, but that students can hold on to grievances through the retelling of past errors of administrators and faculty. Some of the stories shared by students in the faculty moderator’s groups had elements of partial information or misinformation (e.g., stories in which students were not privy to information or experiences that were embellished). Because our goal was to capture student experiences, instead of trying to correct misinformation we steered the conversation as often as possible toward student’s direct experiences and areas for improvement.

Some of the ways that bad news traveled fast involved experiences with housing and Student Life; others with past injustices on campus. Students felt that their criticism of past events was met with excuses by administrators instead of a public recognition of miscommunication and meaningful, long-lasting change. When referring to an off-campus political caravan of vehicles driving through campus in 2020, students felt slighted about the administrative response compared to other past events, “When they had the whole Trump rally come through here, and administration saying that they couldn’t do anything or that ... happened and for some reason they can’t get the footage of something happening, but when some small inconvenience to administration happens on campus, they can get footage of it like that [snaps].” And as an example of how students react when they hear only one side of a story, in the case of housing, one group of women recalled a case in which they felt a friend was in a vulnerable

situation because of inaction by Student Life staff, “having a person who threatened a Black woman’s life put in the multicultural hall with mostly Black woman. They’re like, ‘that happened because the person in charge of housing was on leave,’ but that isn’t an excuse. There should be fail safes in Student Life. We shouldn’t have to live an entire semester with someone who threatened to kill a Black woman.” Students talked in general terms about anonymous social media apps and sexual assault, warning others in the focus groups that sexual assault is under-reported to campus authorities. And even though campus administrators may feel like an issue is resolved, it may carry on in the stories of students who warn others, “Most of you weren’t on campus yet but do you remember the whole Mike Pence situation? There was a portrait of him that they wanted to put up and a lot of students were like, ‘well we don’t appreciate what he stands for and you know the agenda that he pushes, and we don’t want that on our campus.’ and Administration, we had to like go back and forth with them... and I don’t even know it might be up somewhere, but it’s situations like that when your students are telling you ‘this is not what we want’ and their excuse was wanting a \$500 scholarship.” This quote illustrates both a past grievance and misinformation that students felt their voices were not heard. Unfortunately, because bad news and experiences spread quickly and distrust lingers, the College may long suffer from past errors or issues assumed to be resolved.

Conclusion and Suggested Actions

In conclusion, participants were both hopeful and skeptical of the campus climate changing. When discussing ideas for improvement many students said that they just want an open line of communication and more visibility from administration. Rather than performative, students want real action from the campus. We closed each focus group by asking about what changes they wanted and where they wanted the campus to be in five or ten years. Conversations tended to close on a light note of mutual appreciation, both for the students who shared their experiences and for focus group moderators who solicited experiences and conversation. Here, we summarize some of the overlapping areas for improvement suggested by focus group participants:

Potential Action Items

1. Amplify representation that already exists within our student body.
 - Students are already doing the groundwork for meaningful inclusive changes to the campus climate. They ask that Administration and faculty members meet them halfway in terms of access to resources, and truly listen to their needs rather than listening to correct their experiences or respond with defensiveness.
 - Use existing media channels to highlight and give credit for students who are change-agents on campus.
2. Allocate more resources to mental health and counseling support services
 - Students, especially athletes, recognized a need for additional student supports for mental health, specifically in need of licensed therapists. Athletes spoke directly to the need to have access and encouragement from coaches to meet with a person trained in sports psychology. Students of color wanted full-time licensed therapists and counselors of color to better relate to their experiences.

- Create a crisis case manager role for students who need assistance so that no matter what happens to a particular student they have someone in their corner to help them access resources and people.
- 3. Communicate clearly with students.
 - Downward communication improvements: Reduce the “noise” in the emails that come from people across campus that students do not care about. Do not send out single event announcements that are viewed as “spam” to students. Cabinet-level administrators should use their voice to communicate directly with students about issues that students are concerned with and get student feedback on decisions that directly impact students and communicate decision-making transparency involving student issues.
 - Upward communication improvements: Students should be able to give feedback for administrator evaluations (like the teaching evaluations) for staff and administrators who they interact with regularly to ensure their voices are heard.
- 4. Expand diversity training.
 - Consider expanding the reach and involving students in annual training for faculty, staff, and contracted workers.