Executive Summary and Key Findings

In Spring 2024, in alignment with RCW 28B.10.147, Bellingham Technical College's (BTC) Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), in collaboration with Institutional Planning and Assessment (IPA), conducted listening sessions for the entire campus community with the goal of gathering qualitative data from students and employees about the campus climate relating to diversity, equity and inclusion. The 2024 sessions sought to deepen understanding of what is needed to support and retain all members of the BTC community. Sessions were held for all students and employees, as well as specific to the following identity groups: Women; Black, Indigenous and People of Color; LGBTQ+; and People with Disabilities. The identity-specific sessions were held with the goal of engaging with historically marginalized members of the campus community and learning more about their experiences. The sessions were advertised as open to all students/employees (all-campus sessions) or limited to students/employees from specific underrepresented groups, but no participants were turned away based on identity; a total of 118 BTC students and 48 employees participated. All participants signed informed consent forms and were given the option to give feedback both verbally and in written form via a worksheet.

Participants in the 2024 Listening Session Series expressed appreciation for DEI initiatives on campus and the work that has been done across campus to create a welcoming, inclusive, supportive, safe, accessible and equitable campus environment for students and employees. Students were most appreciative of the support available from student services and academic support services employees; resources offered, especially for low-income students; and elements of DEI visible on campus and infused into the learning environment. Employees emphasized the importance of recent DEI-related policy changes and resources like Employee Affinity Groups (EAGs) that offer additional community and support to employees with marginalized identities. Employees also spoke to welcoming and collaborative colleagues, autonomy and flexibility in the work environment and positive shifts in institutional culture. Both student and employee participants brought up concerns and areas of growth relating to DEI and the overall campus climate. Although there was overlapping feedback, distinct themes emerged from the two groups of participants, and the overall report is structured around those themes. Below is a summary of the overall student and employee themes, key findings, and actionable items.

1.1 Student Themes

Main Student Themes:

- Student/employee interaction
- Student resources
- Barriers to academic success
- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Learning environment

Student/Employee Interaction

Student interactions with BTC employees, especially academic support and student services employees, came up very often across all student sessions; students emphasized that both positive and negative interactions with employees were very impactful for them. Students highly valued the competency, accessibility, commitment, support and kindness of student and academic support employees. Student participants also expressed concerns about negative interactions with employees, which included unclear communication around policies and procedures and unprofessional, unkind or inappropriate conduct.

Actionable item related to student/employee interaction:

- Create, implement, and assess the consistent use of standards for employee communication with students across student-facing departments.

Student Resources

Student participants expressed appreciation for the resources provided to them by the institution, especially scholarships, grants, the food pantry and free parking. They also identified areas of growth where more resources and support could make a difference in their educational experience and ability to reach their goals at BTC, including open education resources, expanded hours for campus spaces for studying, additional financial support and competency-based education.

Actionable items related to student resources:

- Continue exploring and expanding accessible instructional resources and methods such as open educational resources and competency-based education.
- Continue to focus on providing student space for studying and hands-on practice as the College moves toward reopening Campus Center – and explore increasing the hours and days during which those spaces are accessible.
- Increase support for programs that students are heavily utilizing and that support retention (e.g., Library, Tutoring, TRIO, DEI, Impact).

Barriers to Academic Success

Struggles and stresses outside of BTC came up often for student participants, many of which involved financial challenges like difficulty meeting basic needs and responsibilities like parenthood, eldercare and working full-time. Outside influences often made meeting academic goals more of a challenge; participants reported that they would benefit from additional resources that take into account larger life needs.

Actionable items related to barriers to academic success:

- Continue to support all aspects of BTC's Basic Needs Strategic Plan including addressing student needs related to housing, emergency based funding, etc.
- Increase outreach focused on facilitating student understanding of the resources available for them on campus.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Experiences with DEI initiatives and culture on campus came up often for student participants. Several participants expressed appreciation for inclusive culture on campus, support for diverse identities, all gender bathrooms, anonymous bias incident reporting, and the listening sessions themselves. Some participants expressed concern about gender disparities, feeling unwelcome and/or unsafe due to their identities in some areas of study and offices on campus.

Actionable items related to diversity, equity and inclusion:

- Work to create a culture of inclusivity that is seen through actions and culture change on campus with specific attention to standardizing the use of inclusive language (e.g., pronouns, gender identity, diverse identities).
- Increase knowledge of reporting processes and support for students who are experiencing and/or witnessing alienation through inequitable, unsupportive or inappropriate treatment by other members of the campus community.

Learning Environment

The learning environment itself and, in particular, the accessibility and equity of the learning environment, came up often for student participants. They identified aspects of the learning environment at BTC that supported them in meeting their educational goals, including the availability of hybrid and online courses. Students also spoke to the importance of flexible and helpful instructors. They also identified barriers, including scheduling issues, instructor absences, and virtual learning challenges, that made it more difficult for them to attend or meet their goals.

Actionable items related to learning environment:

- Implement additional Canvas, online teaching and learning, and DEI best practice training for instructors.
- Review current General Education course offerings and explore if there are opportunities to increase in-person options that align with more program schedules.

1.2 Employee Themes

Main Employee Themes:

- Office/campus culture
- Workload
- Transparency
- Diversity, equity and inclusion.

Office/Campus Culture

Many employee participants expressed that they strongly valued aspects of campus culture, including hybrid/remote work options, camaraderie among colleagues, overall sense of community and autonomy, that contributed to a healthy, supportive work environment. Some participants brought up concerns about difficult aspects of office and campus culture, including experiences with unhealthy boundaries, tensions around remote work, time off, supervision, and communication difficulties between departments.

Actionable items related to office/campus culture:

- Continue engaging in campus conversations related to employee remote work (which may vary by position and nature of work) and hybrid meetings.
- Continue to expect annual performance reviews of all employees (including an avenue for employees to provide feedback about their supervisors).
- Clearly communicate guidelines protocols around breaks, leave (e.g., vacation, sick time), to all employees especially those in supervisory positions, that supports an asset based community environment that supports a positive work/life balance.
- Implement additional employee training on how to support a diverse workforce and maintain appropriate and empowering workplace communications with a DEI-focused lens.

Workload

Issues with untenable, stressful workload came up in every employee session. Employee participants expressed frustration about the workload in their areas and across campus. Employees named variables like supervisors leaving and staffing levels remaining low post-covid as major factors affecting work/life balance.

Actionable items related to workload:

- Assess current workload across campus and identify steps, as needed, to improve workload parity across units.
- Prioritize filling staffing gaps when feasible.

Transparency

While some participants spoke to an improvement in transparency at BTC in the last few years, many expressed concern about a lack of transparency, especially regarding leadership level decision-making and enforcement of policies and procedures. Several participants brought forward questions about how raises, promotions, and staffing decisions are made. Overall, employees shared a desire for the institution to have a more tangible commitment to transparent decision-making.

Actionable items related to transparency:

- Create or adjust consistent protocols for sharing information with employees about leadership team-level decisions to maximize employee access and understanding.
- Create and share information with employees about how hiring and promotion decisions are made outside of the PARA process.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Many participants shared a positive view of the work of the Office of DEI and corresponding participatory governance committee. Participants spoke to a broader progressive change in campus culture around DEI (e.g., employee affinity groups, policy work, updated DEI language). Concerns were brought up by several participants about a lack of commitment from leadership and others to improvement in DEI.

Actionable items related to DEI

- Create and maintain a baseline culture of respect, acceptance and belonging in all work areas for all employees, regardless of identity (e.g. sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, class, disability status). Create safe and reliable pathways for addressing poor conduct, microaggressions, and/or discrimination – and hold employees accountable for violations.
- Review policies, procedures, and processes (related to areas such as employee onboarding, employee evaluation, bereavement leave, and budget allocation) and address any potential issues relating to diversity, equity or inclusion.
- Expand upon offerings, such as affinity groups, that are designed specifically to support diverse employees.

1.3 Next steps

BTC is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and this value is upheld through the work of this campus climate listening session report. BTC is engaged in reducing institutional barriers and harm that students and employees of historically underrepresented groups are experiencing daily. Our community is dedicated to working to define, identify, and dismantle inequitable structures of power, privilege and oppression that have hindered and continue to hinder the education of historically underrepresented peoples.

Data collected from listening sessions will help support the continued work of DEI and the DEI Strategic plan on BTC's campus. The DEI Office and the DEI participatory governance committee will work to identify areas of focus for enhanced education, programming, and professional development. Additionally, the DEI Office and IPA will use the results of these listening sessions and this report to facilitate listening sessions in Spring 2025.

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