Summary of Community Focus Group Feedback

Introduction

As part of Cuyahoga Community College's (Tri-C) Vision 2030 Strategic Transformation Planning process, a series of targeted community focus groups were convened to provide critical feedback on early drafts of the College's emerging strategic vision. These focus groups built upon the robust foundation established during the initial phase of the planning process, which included 22 collegewide listening sessions and a comprehensive analysis of internal and external data. While the listening sessions helped surface broad institutional themes, the community focus groups were designed to deepen understanding of the needs, aspirations, and lived experiences of key stakeholder communities across Greater Cleveland. By engaging diverse voices, including those of cultural communities, justice-impacted individuals, and business leaders, Tri-C sought to ensure that the evolving strategic plan would be grounded in both inclusivity and real-world relevance. This summary reflects the unique insights offered by each community and provides actionable guidance as the College refines and finalizes its strategic direction.

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1. Jewish Community

- **Calendar Sensitivity**
  Tri-C should improve its awareness of major Jewish holidays to avoid scheduling exams, mandatory events, or key deadlines that may conflict with religious observances.

- **Perception of Academic Quality**
  The College needs to better communicate to Jewish families, particularly parents and grandparents, that Tri-C offers a high-quality education that can successfully transfer to competitive four-year universities.

- **Cultural Competence Training**
  Faculty and staff would benefit from training on Jewish cultural practices and religious observances to foster inclusion and avoid unintentional bias or exclusion.

- **Mentorship and Faculty Relationships**
  Participants noted that Jewish students highly value strong faculty mentorship. Tri-C should further elevate these relationships as a key differentiator.

- **Intercultural Opportunities**
  A unique opportunity exists to foster community between Jewish and Muslim students around shared needs such as kosher and halal food offerings.

- **Partnerships with Jewish Institutions**
  Tri-C should proactively engage synagogues, Jewish community centers, and service organizations to share offerings, build trust, and increase visibility.

- **Intergenerational Messaging**
  Grandparents play a key role in educational decisions; Tri-C marketing should target older generations with messages of quality, affordability, and transferability.

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2. Middle Eastern / Asian American Pacific Islander (ME/AAPI) Community

- **Disaggregated Data and Recognition**
  Participants feel ME/AAPI students are rendered invisible when lumped together as "Other" in data and programming. Tri-C should collect disaggregated data and design community-specific outreach.

- **Culturally Inclusive Student Services**
  Participants emphasized the need for more culturally competent mental health services, language support, and advising that reflects the diversity of immigrant backgrounds.

- **Safe Spaces and Cultural Centers**
  Tri-C should consider dedicated cultural spaces or resource centers where ME/AAPI students can feel safe, seen, and celebrated.

- **First-Generation Support**
  Many ME/AAPI students are first-generation college attendees. Targeted services should address their navigation challenges, including support for families unfamiliar with higher education systems.

- **Diverse Faculty and Role Models**
  Representation matters—participants want to see more ME/AAPI individuals in leadership, advising, and faculty roles.

- **Faith and Identity Acknowledgment**
  Tri-C should acknowledge the role that faith plays in identity formation for many ME and AAPI students (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), and ensure inclusivity in campus policies.

- **Community Outreach and Partnerships**
  Tri-C should strengthen partnerships with cultural organizations, local mosques, temples, and businesses to build trusted bridges and increase enrollment.

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3. Hispanic/Latinx Community

- **Bilingual Services**
  Students and families need access to all enrollment, financial aid, and advising services in Spanish. Clear and culturally relevant communication is essential.

- **Wraparound Services**
  Transportation, childcare, and housing assistance are critical to helping Hispanic/Latinx adult learners succeed. Tri-C should invest in holistic student support.

- **Flexible Scheduling**
  Many Hispanic/Latinx students work full-time and support families. Evening, weekend, and hybrid classes are vital to enabling degree completion.

- **Family-Oriented Programming**
  Participants suggested that Tri-C offer educational programs that engage the entire family, including ESL classes for parents and dual-enrollment programs for teens.

- **Representation in Faculty and Staff**
  Students want to see more Hispanic/Latinx representation in both academic and student services roles, particularly bilingual advisors and culturally competent counselors.

- **Trust-Building in the Community**
  Tri-C must continue building trust through community presence at churches, festivals, and cultural events, not just through digital marketing or brochures.

- **Immigration-Aware Support**
  Some Hispanic/Latinx students face issues related to immigration status. Tri-C should ensure access to DACA-friendly policies, legal resources, and scholarship options.

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4. Justice-Impacted Community

- **Align Programs with Realistic Employment Outcomes**
  Tri-C should avoid guiding justice-impacted students toward fields that are not realistically accessible due to criminal background checks (e.g., healthcare careers requiring state licensing). Training should align with industries and employers known to hire returning citizens.

- **Advocate Against Systemic Hiring Barriers**
  Employers frequently engage in zip code discrimination and deny opportunities based on residence in high-poverty neighborhoods like 44103 or 44104. Tri-C should serve as an advocate, educating employer partners on the realities and strengths of justice-impacted students, and dispelling myths about recidivism and reliability.

- **Expand Pre-Release Education Access**
  Tri-C should deliver educational content via prison tablets (e.g., through Adovo), enabling students to begin their college journey before reentry. This early access could dramatically improve momentum and motivation upon release.

- **Create a Campus Affinity Group for Justice-Impacted Students**
  Create a peer-led group or student organization to provide community, reduce stigma, and create a "safe place" on campus for returning citizens. This would promote belonging and advocacy.

- **Foster Strong Employer Partnerships for Second-Chance Hiring**
  Tri-C could proactively partner with employers like MetroHealth and UH that offer second-chance hiring and build placement pathways into these organizations. Hospitals like Cleveland Clinic were noted as more restrictive.

- **Provide Transparency on Program Restrictions**
  Have honest, up-front advising about programs they may be excluded from due to convictions. Misleading recruitment into inaccessible careers can erode trust and waste precious time and resources.

- **Influence Policy and Legislators**
  Tri-C should take a public role in influencing policy at the state and federal level especially around access to Pell Grants, licensing restrictions, and second-chance employment. Strategic relationships with judges and legislators can support this.

5. Business Community – Focus Group 1 (General Employers and HR Leaders)

- **Professionalism and Workplace Readiness**
  Employers cited a gap in soft skills: punctuality, communication, problem-solving, and workplace decorum. Tri-C must embed professionalism into all programs, not just job readiness workshops.

- **Internships and Experiential Learning**
  Hands-on learning is key. Employers are far more likely to hire students who have interned or apprenticed with them during their studies.

- **Curriculum Agility**
  Employers want quicker updates to programs to reflect technological shifts. Curricula must stay aligned with real-time labor market changes.

- **Single Point of Contact**
  Business leaders were confused about how to engage with Tri-C. They recommend a centralized employer concierge model to streamline partnerships.

- **Incentives for Employer Involvement**
  Tri-C could offer recognition or tax credit navigation support for employers that provide internships or hire students.

- **Feedback Loops and Advisory Boards**
  Employers want to help shape curriculum and suggest a more regular feedback loop, including sector-specific advisory groups.

- **Workforce Pipeline Clarity**
  Employers want clearer pathways between Tri-C programs and specific in-demand occupations, with explicit competencies tied to credentials.

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6. Business Community – Focus Group 2 (Small Business and Entrepreneurs)

- **Entrepreneurship Education**
  Participants called for stronger emphasis on entrepreneurial mindset and business development skills, especially in underserved communities.

- **Microbusiness and Freelance Pathways**
  Many students are interested in freelancing or starting side businesses. Tri-C should support non-traditional career goals with relevant certificates and guidance.

- **Access to Capital and Resources**
  Entrepreneurs want Tri-C to partner with banks, CDFIs, and chambers of commerce to provide students with access to funding, co-working spaces, and mentors.

- **Inclusive Ecosystem Building**
  Tri-C can act as a hub to connect local entrepreneurs to peers, investors, and technical assistance providers across Greater Cleveland.

- **Advisory Role for Entrepreneurs**
  Small business owners want more influence in shaping business curricula and co-developing programs that reflect real-world constraints.

- **Hiring from Within the Community**
  Local business owners want to hire Tri-C graduates but report challenges in finding candidates with practical skills, reliability, and local availability.

- **Digital Skills and E-Commerce**
  Tri-C should offer short-term programs in digital marketing, e-commerce, accounting software, and business analytics critical for today's entrepreneurs.

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For any questions regarding the community focus groups or this summary, please reach out to Gregory Stoup, Vice President of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness.