

Caring Campus: Engaging Professional Staff in Student Success Efforts

Professional staff are often the first contact students have with your college—a phone call to student services, a meeting with financial aid officers, landscape staff while walking across campus, bookstore clerks, and a wide range of other personnel. Their interaction with students can set the stage for student success. In fact, in an issues document from MDRC (2010), the editors note, “While there are no silver bullets, the research suggests that there are enhancements that can lead to better use of student services and—more important—lead to improvements in academic outcomes.” Often, professional staff are not directly included as part of the implementation of community college initiatives and (perhaps inadvertently) end up doing business as usual, which can lead to unintended negative experiences that detract from the hoped-for impact of this work.

Specifically, professional staff need to be introduced to system-changing efforts, be more engaged in the development and implementation of campus-wide interventions, and to have a clear understanding of their important role in ensuring the success of this work.

In a research brief from JFF (2014), the authors close with a number of recommendations for improving the impact of student support services on academic success. These include:

- Communicate the availability of support services to students and faculty
- Reduce barriers to student access to services
- Keep in mind the value of relationships in supporting students
- Coordinate the provision of support service offerings among entities
- Make supports an integral part of the program model

Professional staff, in addition to those working in student services, include many who are in frequent direct contact with students: groundskeepers, food services, security, and others. Staff in every area can support these initiatives if provided with the tools to do so.

IEBC’s Caring Campus Initiative

IEBC has a proven method for engaging with professional staff to create a *Caring Campus* that ensures they are deeply involved in student success. Because it is beyond, but complementary to, the traditional staff development model, it involves deep coaching of professional staff. This means working with every student service and operations department that engages with students—directly or indirectly—at every point in the student’s experience, from connection to completion. Every department identifies successful strategies and makes a series of “behavior commitments” around how they interact and engage with students.

This is not traditional customer service training. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a coach instructs in the fundamentals and directs strategy. That is what IEBC’s *Caring Campus* facilitators do with professional staff. We transmit knowledge about the fundamentals of what can be done to increase student connectedness to the college, which leads to increases in student success. We also help departments and divisions to develop a strategy, grounded in commitments, that they can easily implement campus-wide.

Next, the current practice is reviewed and discussed with an IEBC facilitator and the group agrees to develop student engagement strategies that are authentic and delivered in a caring way. After all, we are not building widgets, we are helping people improve their lives. Staff identify successful strategies for improving student engagement that are framed as behavior commitments. Examples of these commitments include:

- Commit to calling the student by name, making eye contact, smiling, saying hello, acknowledging students as people
- Commit to not letting the student leave until the issue is resolved
- Commit to recognizing good or vulnerable behavior; celebrate or intervene
- Commit to engaging with students; establishing an authentic, personal connection
- Commit to developing clear and coherent practices and processes for students, eliminating barriers

As a result of this work, professional staff become deeply engaged with students on a level that has not occurred before. The core benefit of this work is making a connection with students, many of whom have not had an adult who has cared about them in an educational system. This connection cannot be overestimated. As documented by Tinto in his seminal work on engagement *Leaving College* (1993), students leave because they do not feel connected to the institution; but that can be successfully addressed.

The *Caring Campus* process also integrates professional staff with the work of the faculty in support of student success initiatives, thus creating a true partnership among colleagues. An unanticipated benefit of this process is that, in evaluations of the initiative and its implementation at their college, staff report being happier about their work and that there is more collegiality among faculty and staff members.

Creating Caring Campuses: The Process

The *Caring Campus* process provides new support for staff involvement in student success efforts. The five parts of *Caring Campus California* work are: kickoff event, on-site coaching visits, leadership follow-up ongoing support and a final session.



Kickoff Event

IEBC meets virtually with college leadership in advance of the first coaching session to ensure the president and cabinet, department leadership, and others understand the *Caring Campus* process and their role. This helps ensure leadership supports the initiative, understands what is expected of their participating staff, and will provide the resources and support required for successful implementation and institutionalization.

On-Site Coaching Visits

Following the leadership orientation, IEBC coaches engage with staff in four virtual coaching sessions. Staff from all student-facing departments and divisions are invited to attend as well as others as the

college may decide. At the first coaching session staff are oriented to the *Caring Campus* initiative and identify the general (campus-wide) behavioral commitments they will make regarding interacting with students and strengthening their connection to the college. In the second session professional staff draft implementation plans for the agreed-upon general behavioral commitments and identify department-specific behavioral commitments and implementation plans. In the third session, staff finalize their implementation plans and create monitoring plans so they will be able to know if behaviors are being enacted. In the fourth session, staff create communication plans for four target audiences (leadership, faculty, students, and fellow staff) and plan for institutionalization and sustainability.

Ongoing Support

Staff work between meetings to finalize commitments and plans. Throughout the process, IEBC coaches are on-call to respond to questions and troubleshoot challenges via telephone, email, and internet.

Joint Session

Leadership and staff come together for a virtual joint session with their coach to review the work and plan for institutionalization and sustainability. Staff present their behavioral commitments to leadership, who identify ways to support them. Everyone works together to finalize the implementation, communication, and monitoring plans.

Final Session

IEBC develops and conducts a final session customized to the needs of the college. At some colleges we participate in convocations to roll-out the initiative campus wide. Sometimes we meet with leadership to discuss implementation challenges and strategize institutionalization efforts. At other colleges the participating staff request a fourth facilitated coaching session to work on implementation challenges as they transition from a task force who identify problems and solutions to a working group who facilitate ongoing implementation.

Continued Monitoring

IEBC continues to work with the college's institutional researcher to monitor impact on student persistence and success. We also remain available to coach colleges to address sustainability of *Caring Campus*.

IEBC is a nationally-recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to helping education stakeholders—K-12 school systems, community colleges, universities, employers, and others—use data and collaboration to make informed decisions and craft solutions that improve practice and dramatically increase student success.