

# Social Distancing Does Not Mean Social Isolation: The Need for Caring Campuses Now

[Brad Phillips | President and CEO, Institute for Evidence-Based Change](#) [Jordan Horowitz | Chief Operating Officer, Institute for Evidence-Based Change](#)



It's

vital for faculty, staff and students to stay in communication with one another, to offer empathy and support for the various difficulties and find solutions together.

Colleges are working hard to transfer their courses to an online environment during the COVID-19 crisis. Some colleges are doing this seamlessly; others are struggling. Unfortunately, the same amount of attention is not being paid to student support and administrative services. This imbalance is understandable because our community colleges have a long history of providing online courses, but professional staff have not needed to access similar roadmaps for providing services in a virtual environment.

In these extraordinary times, as professional staff members are working hard to connect with students to support them, new and effective means of communication must be developed and implemented to allow staff and students to connect in a virtual environment. If we want students to remain engaged with our institutions, we must take greater advantage of the virtual platforms available to us. As we physically isolate, we need not socially isolate.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross's stages of grief are an apt model for our reactions to the pandemic. Most of us are past the initial stage of denying the new reality we face. Denial helps us minimize the overwhelming pain of loss—our loss in this context being a loss of normality and familiarity in our professional educational environment. Some of us are still experiencing anger, the next phase. Characterized by our fight-or-flight reflex, we process change by getting angry at it (in this case the virus), our colleagues and students who are managing it the best they can, and ourselves. Anger requires a great deal of energy and, as a result, we feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

To deal with the feeling of being overwhelmed, we enter into the stage of bargaining. For example, we can weigh just how much social distancing we think is needed: "If I'm only on campus for a few minutes, I go into my office to pick up materials, right?" Next comes depression, the stage wherein we are most likely to succumb to the emotional drain we experience and are finally ready to give into it. Finally, we reach acceptance and are ready to move forward effectively in a new environment.

So how can we take advantage of these stages to maintain and improve our educational practice? First, knowing the stages and recognizing that each of us moves through them at our own pace will help us to be empathetic with each other (and ourselves). Each stage also suggests different opportunities, and these opportunities must be grounded in finding new ways to connect with each other—staff and student alike—and care for each other in the virtual environment.

IEBC's Caring Campus for Staff initiative helps ensure students feel welcome and cared for by their institution. Research by Vincent Tinto and others, confirms that students go where they feel welcome and stay where they feel cared about. Students who feel connected to their college are more likely to succeed in their courses, persist and attain their educational goals. Caring Campus coaches work with staff to develop behaviors to improve students' sense of belonging at the institution. In the past, these interactions have occurred in a face-to-face environment, but what might they look like in a virtual format?

Two of the most popular behaviors Caring Campus colleges have adopted include the *ten-foot rule* and *warm referrals*. Both can be adapted to the virtual educational environment and can support students and staff.

The *ten-foot rule* states that whenever a staff member is within 10 feet of a student, they smile, say hello and ask, "Is there anything I can help you with?" This is an example of active behavior. During this crisis, colleges are sending notes to students, identifying resources and directing students to websites and phone services for assistance. From a Caring Campus perspective we suggest that every college take a much more active approach to the virtual environment: reach out to every student and attempt to speak to them personally. Students are scared and isolated, and more than ever, they may feel confusion about how to move forward with their education.

We acknowledge the potential obstacles in proactively contacting students, such as phone availability, concerns about caller ID, the large volume of students who may need to be contacted, and personal obligations and responsibilities while based at home. These technical and personal issues are not insurmountable. However, if we do not activate our best efforts to engage

our students, our institutions are likely to lose a large percentage of enrollment, delaying course or degree completion and creating a subsequent loss of revenue and student accomplishment.

*Warm referrals* involve more than simply telling a student where to call to get the answers they need. First, take a cue from healthcare offices and ask right away for the student's name and phone number in case your call is disconnected. Then, when you need to refer them to someone else or to another office, tell them who you're referring them to, provide that staffer's contact information, and tell them that you'll be requesting a call back on their behalf. These steps ensure that the student doesn't give up because of a too-high number of calls to make (we've all been there), and they ensure that the student's issue is communicated clearly. Finally, check back with the student after the fact to ensure their needs were met.

Given that we are suggesting that staff put in extra effort to engage students, it behooves us to remember that staff are going through the grief cycle themselves. Many may have additional responsibilities at home, and it could be difficult for them to continue their work normally. Therefore, it is critical for staff and their supervisors to have regular calls to emphasize their support for one another and to continue the conversation about adjusting to this new paradigm. These conference calls should be scheduled at least twice a week, and we should take advantage of the many virtual communication tools available.

It is clear that we have a new normal for a while. Being able to expand our repertoire of means of communication with students, who are likely already well into the grief cycle, is a positive step toward ensuring they remain connected to us. Taking care of each other ensures that when we return, we will be prepared to re-engage successfully and move forward effectively.

For more Caring Campus tips in a socially distant, but not socially isolated, educational world, visit [www.IEBCnow.org](http://www.IEBCnow.org).

*Editor's note: This article was submitted on March 24, 2020.*