



# Caring Campus: Engaging Professional Staff in Student Success Efforts

Professional staff are often the first contact students have with a 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.

## *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* coaches 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.

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. We like to note that students come where they feel welcome and stay where they feel cared for.

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 Staff Process***

The *Caring Campus* process provides new support for staff involvement in student success efforts. The six parts of *Caring Campus* work are: kickoff event for leadership, coaching sessions with staff, joint session with staff and leadership, a final session, institutionalization and sustainability, and follow-up. IEBC *Caring Campus* coaches provide ongoing support throughout the process. Coaches provide leadership and participating staff with their contact information—phone and email—and are available to answer questions, resolve obstacles, guide conversations between coaching sessions, share success stories, and more.



### **Leadership Kickoff**

IEBC meets in person or 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. In this session department and division managers also receive guidance about the selection of staff who will participate in the coaching sessions.

### **Coaching Sessions**

Following the leadership orientation, IEBC coaches engage with staff in coaching sessions, which may be virtual or face-to-face. Staff from all student-facing departments and divisions are invited to attend as well as others as the college may decide. Over the course of these coaching sessions, staff are oriented to the *Caring Campus* initiative and identify the behavioral commitments they will make regarding interacting with students and strengthening their connection to the college; draft implementation plans for the agreed-upon general behavioral commitments; create monitoring plans so they will be able to know if behaviors are being enacted; and create communication plans for four target audiences (leadership, faculty, students, and fellow staff) and plan for institutionalization and sustainability.

### **Joint Session**

Leadership and staff come together for a virtual or face-to-face joint session with their coach to review the work and plan for institutionalization and sustainability. Staff present their behavioral commitments to leadership, who identify behavioral commitments of their own to support, monitor, and celebrate them.

## 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 that identifies problems and solutions to a working group that facilitates ongoing implementation.

## Institutionalization and Sustainability

IEBC coaches and leadership stay in contact with the college to support institutionalization and sustainability. College leaders at the cabinet and department levels are encouraged to engage in behaviors such as agendaizing *Caring Campus* in meetings, asking staff about *Caring Campus* behaviors in informal conversations, recognizing staff engaging in *Caring Campus* behaviors, and advocating for *Caring Campus*. To support institutionalization efforts, IEBC also shares successful *Caring Campus* endeavors across colleges.

## Follow-up

IEBC follows up with the college to monitor impact on student persistence and success, impact on staff, and the college culture. We also remain available to coach colleges to address sustainability of *Caring Campus*.

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