

Caring Campus Faculty: Improving Student Connectedness

If students don't feel connected to the college they attend, they are far less likely to return next term, regardless of the academic interventions and support services the college has provided.

Community colleges are working hard to implement research-based interventions and supports that have been demonstrated to increase educational outcomes. Yet, the needle on student success is not moving in a meaningful way. It's time to look beyond academic and student services support solutions to explore other aspects of the student experience that contribute to success. It's time to focus on connectedness.

Throughout our community college work, students tell us they want to feel cared about. They want to connect with an educator who looks like them. But barring that, they want someone who “gets” them. This is particularly salient as community college students are more diverse than ever and our current ranks of faculty have yet to catch up. This means that community college educators must do all they can to demonstrate they understand the lives of their students. And making connections are powerful motivators for students to succeed. As the Aspen Institute notes, “A culture of caring has become a hallmark of excellent community colleges.”

IEBC's Caring Campus

IEBC has a proven method for engaging with faculty to create a Caring Campus that ensures they are deeply involved in student success in ways that support and enhance student learning. It is beyond, but complementary to, the traditional professional development model. Furthermore, it is not dependent upon, nor does it drive, pedagogy.

This is not traditional customer service training. IEBC assigns a trained Caring Campus coach, who has experience at community colleges, to work with each campus. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a coach instructs in the fundamentals and directs strategy. That is what IEBC's Caring Campus coaches do. 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 behavioral commitments, that they can easily implement campus-wide.

Furthermore, Caring Campus is not a deficit-driven model of professional development. We begin by identifying faculty members at the college with strong and consistent histories of high student retention and success in their classes. We explore and explicate the non-instructional behaviors they employ in their classes. This group then develops plans to work peer-to-peer with their colleagues to make these behaviors intentional and campus-wide, encouraging faculty to commit to these behaviors. These behavioral commitments include:

- Welcoming students to the course on or before the first day of class to establish a sense of community

- Learning student’s names the first couple weeks of class
- Meeting with each student outside of class to get to know them—*Moments that Matter*
- Clear and detailed syllabi
- Assessing early and often to ensure students know where they stand
- Being *Situationally Fair*—understanding that students’ off-campus lives are full and complex and how to moderate these with instructional behavior.

As a result of this work, faculty campus-wide become deeply engaged with students intentionally and 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), and in the well-researched book, *Relationship Rich Education* (2020), students leave because they do not feel connected to the institution; but that can be successfully addressed.

Creating Caring Campuses: The Faculty Process

The Caring Campus process provides new support for faculty involvement in student success efforts. The six parts of Caring Campus work are: leadership orientation, faculty identification and interviews, coaching sessions, orient department chairs and deans, institutionalization activities and sustainability planning, and follow-up. IEBC Caring Campus coaches provide ongoing support throughout the process. Coaches give 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 Orientation

IEBC meets with college leadership to ensure they are aware of Caring Campus and have the knowledge required to implement and support the process from identifying faculty through institutionalization. Meetings typically include presidents, vice presidents for instruction, and institutional researchers.

Faculty Member Identification and Interviews

IEBC works with the college’s institutional research department to identify faculty members with high rates of course retention and success. These faculty members are interviewed by designated college leadership using an IEBC protocol to explicate their non-instructional behaviors that promote student connectedness and success. A group of these faculty are invited to participate in the coaching sessions.

Coaching Sessions

IEBC's coach meets with the team three times. This is a measured process designed to set Caring Campus up for success. In the first coaching session Caring Campus faculty are oriented to Caring Campus—history, research, and process; learn about other colleges' success; understand the retention and success data at their college; and are introduced to the behavioral commitments. In the second coaching session the coach works with the team make the behaviors their own, and create implementation plans for each of the behavioral commitments. In the third coaching session the team creates a plan, grounded in successful strategies for their college, to roll out Caring Campus and the behavioral commitments campus-wide. They also plan for the joint session.

Orient department chairs and deans

This session opens with an orientation to Caring Campus for leadership. Then, faculty who participated in the coaching present their plans for implementing the six behavioral commitments to their department chairs and deans. These leaders, in turn, identify behaviors they can commit to that will support implementation, communication, and monitoring.

Working Group

The core group of faculty who participated in the coaching sessions meet monthly to implement and monitor their plans. They review their drafts and modify, as needed. Representatives from leadership participate in the meetings to provide support and commit necessary resources. The group also strategizes about how to link to other groups on campus and increase representation from their colleagues.

Institutionalization and Sustainability

IEBC follows up with the college to support institutionalization and monitor impact on student persistence and success, impact on faculty, and the college culture. We also remain available to coach colleges to address sustainability of Caring Campus. IEBC convenes occasional virtual roundtables for liaisons and presidents so colleges can learn from each other. We also maintain a library of artifacts—examples from communities of practice, videos, newsletters, etc.—so colleges can build on what others already have successfully implemented.

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