

Implementing Caring Campus With Nonacademic Staff Lessons From Participating Colleges

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When students enroll in community college, they interact with a range of individuals who help shape their college experiences. The role that faculty can play in creating a welcoming and inclusive campus environment has been well-documented (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Komarraju et al., 2010; Rendón, 2002). However, researchers and reformers have focused less on the role *college staff* can play in promoting a positive environment and contributing to student persistence and retention. College employees in non-faculty positions, whom we refer to as nonacademic staff, have not typically been engaged as leaders or sometimes even as participants in student success efforts.

Yet personnel in student services divisions like financial aid, enrollment management, advising, counseling, and the registrar are key resources in helping students navigate college. Students are likely to seek out these individuals when they encounter challenges related to academic performance, paying for college, or understanding college policies. And staff in other student-facing units like the bookstore, public safety, and facilities and grounds often function as “the face” of the college for students. For students from groups historically underrepresented in higher education—including Black, Latinx, Native American, and first-generation students—positive interactions with college personnel of all kinds that affirm their connectedness, importance, and belonging may be especially powerful (Booker, 2016; Guiffrida, 2005; Strayhorn, 2019). Thus, opportunities to improve these interactions, particularly with the goal of creating an inclusive college environment, may be critical to improving retention and equitable student outcomes.

In this report, we describe findings from a study of Caring Campus, a program developed and administered by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC)¹ to engage both academic and nonacademic staff in improving interactions with students and creating a culture of caring at community colleges. IEBC initiated the program in 2018. It conducts two related Caring Campus initiatives: one that is focused on faculty and one that is focused on nonacademic staff (which we call Caring Campus/Staff). IEBC provides coaching to community colleges to engage



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both these groups in implementing behaviors to increase student connectedness. Nearly 60 community colleges are participating in Caring Campus/Staff.² This report serves as a companion piece to *Caring Campus: An Initiative to Involve Community College Staff in Increasing Students Success* (Bickerstaff et al., 2021), which introduced the Caring Campus/Staff model and its theory of change along with early observations from the research.

We draw on data collected by CCRC researchers in 2020 and 2021 to inform this study. At four community colleges, selected for being well along in their implementation of Caring Campus/Staff, the research team conducted in-depth site visits, speaking with administrators, staff, and students. At two of these colleges and at two additional colleges, surveys with both staff and students were conducted. In addition to data collected at these six colleges, the research team interviewed Caring Campus liaisons (those who coordinate implementation at each college) and reviewed coaching reports and other artifacts from an additional 14 community colleges.³ Study interviews were typically an hour in length and were recorded and transcribed. We analyzed interview transcriptions for themes related to colleges' experiences with Caring Campus, factors that have facilitated and hindered implementation, the initiative's potential to positively impact college culture and student outcomes, and lessons learned that may be of value to other colleges. These topics are the focus of this report.

Implementing Caring Campus/Staff

The goal of Caring Campus is to support staff in choosing and implementing at scale behaviors that contribute to a caring and welcoming campus environment. Trained IEBC coaches guide a team of nonacademic staff as they select these behaviors and develop plans for implementation, communication, and monitoring at each college. College leaders and staff supervisors are engaged strategically during and after coaching to support the staff leading the effort. It is important to note that Caring Campus at the colleges we studied was undertaken during the COVID pandemic, presenting challenges to implementation. Yet it is also the case that Caring Campus had the potential to be uniquely helpful in a time when many students felt a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Role of the liaison. When colleges join Caring Campus/Staff, IEBC works with college leadership to identify a liaison who will facilitate the initiative at the college and serve as the point of contact with IEBC and the coach. Liaisons attend coaching sessions and manage work plans and other administrative tasks related to implementing Caring Campus after the coaching ends. Liaisons also play the important

Caring Campus/Staff Theory of Change

Caring Campus is intended to have positive impacts in two ways. First, because students feel welcomed and cared about by college staff and because they have their college-related questions and needs met quickly, they are more likely to stay enrolled in college. Second, because staff work collaboratively as leaders of the initiative and because they have positive interactions with one another and with students, they contribute to a college culture that is student-centered, warm, and caring. To realize these positive outcomes, college leaders support staff throughout Caring Campus coaching and implementation, aiming for the initiative to be sustainable over time. For a detailed description of the Caring Campus/Staff theory of change and coaching model, see Bickerstaff et al. (2021).

role of keeping college leadership informed about Caring Campus coaching and implementation. At the colleges in our study, individuals in a range of roles served as liaisons. Frequently, the vice president for student services served as the liaison, but some colleges had liaisons who were staff members rather than administrators. Some stakeholders pointed to advantages of having an administrator actively involved in the coaching and implementation process.

It was helpful as a liaison to make certain our coach was able to connect with the president when things came up that were more appropriate for the president's direction and decision.

—College liaison⁴

At colleges without consistent engagement from an administrator, planning and implementation efforts were vulnerable to delays as the team awaited guidance or sign-off from college leadership. On the other hand, having a staff member serving as the liaison had the benefit of creating a truly staff-led initiative. At one California college, the president of the classified staff senate⁵ served as a liaison, providing an opportunity for Caring Campus to be folded into existing leadership and organizing structures for college staff. Alternatively, some colleges had two liaisons—one administrator and one staff member.

Identifying staff for coaching. Among colleges we studied, college leadership, liaisons, and staff supervisors typically worked together to identify a group of 20–50 nonsupervisory nonacademic staff to attend coaching sessions. At some small colleges, a majority of staff participated in the coaching. At medium-sized and large colleges, staff were selected strategically to reflect a range of departments and roles. At colleges with existing staff leadership/participation entities (such as staff engagement committees or a staff senate), employees who were members of those entities were often involved. In many cases, supervisors nominated staff who they thought might be good candidates for participation. Interviewees reported a range of desired attributes for staff nominated for participation in coaching. Nominated staff were usually enthusiastic and seen as leaders among their peers.

We were looking for individuals who would be engaging with the workshops and then also who could go back and explain it to the other employees in that department—so someone that, not necessarily a leader, but someone who could assume that role in that fashion.

—College liaison

Membership of One Caring Campus College Team

DEPARTMENT	JOB TITLE
Academic Advising	Academic Advisor
Accounting	Cashier
Admissions	Enrollment Services Specialist
Athletics	Administrator
College Police Department	Sergeant
Communication Programs	Department Assistant
Continuing Ed & Workforce	Allied Health Coordinator
DFW Education	Enrollment Services Specialist
Dual Credit	Associate Dean
Facilities	Assistant Director of Operations
Financial Aid	College Financial Aid Advisor
Health Services	Nurse
Human Resources	HR Specialist II
IT	Managing Director
Library	Circulation Supervisor
Marketing	Web Writer-Editor
MASC	Manager
North & South Campuses	Assistant Director
Outreach/Recruitment	O & R Specialist
Student Engagement	Academic Advisor
Student Life	Student Programs Development Coordinator
TRIO SSS	Program Services Coordinator
TRIO Upward Bound	Program Services Specialist
Veterans Affairs	Interim Director
VPBS	Senior Administrative Specialist
VPSSEM	Administrative Assistant II
Welcome Desk	Enrollment Services Generalist
Wildfire	Staff Development Manager

College coaching. Coaching unfolds over a series of five interactive meetings, typically completed during one semester. The colleges discussed in this study participated in the coaching virtually, via Zoom meetings, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. IEBC provides a detailed coaching curriculum to guide each session. Participants are helped to understand the reasons why Caring Campus is worth investing time in before developing implementation plans. Caring Campus is differentiated from simply providing good customer service to students; it is presented as a deliberate, sustainable, and well-structured approach for improved interactions with students that involves staff from across the campus.

The approach and the curriculum are frequently updated by IEBC. In 2020, the organization convened a Racial Equity Advisory Council to inform revisions to their organizational processes and the coaching model. Based on the council's recommendations, IEBC (1) refined the coaching curriculum to encourage participants' reflection on the needs of different student groups found at particular campuses; (2) expanded efforts to involve college diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders; and (3) offered additional training to their coaches.

Behavioral commitments. During the coaching sessions, coaches provide examples of behavioral commitments, the actions staff might take to create a caring environment at the college. Staff are then guided to select from among these examples or generate alternative behaviors, choosing those that they think would have the greatest impact at their colleges. The colleges we studied generally identified three face-to-face and three virtual commitments.

Most Common Behavioral Commitments

FACE-TO-FACE ENVIRONMENT	VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT
Use the 10-foot rule: Whenever a student is within 10 feet and seems to need assistance, take the initiative to approach them. Say hello, smile, and use a positive tone.	Reach out: If your college allows, reach out to students via phone, email, and text to let them know you are available to answer questions, respond to concerns, etc.
Wear name tags: Wear name badges or lanyards with the college name on them so that students will know who to approach with questions.	Give your information up front: Start each contact with your name and department. Ask for a student's name and contact information in case you get disconnected.
Develop cross-departmental awareness: Learn about other departments so you know where to send students. Maintain accurate and up-to-date detailed directories.	Develop cross-departmental awareness: Learn about other departments so you know where to refer students. Maintain accurate and up-to-date detailed directories.
Use warm referrals: When a student needs to be referred to another department, call ahead or walk the student to the office they need to get to. Follow up to ensure the student got there.	Use warm referrals: When a student needs to be referred to another department, call the receiving office, make the connection on the student's behalf, and ask them to contact the student. Follow up to ensure the student was contacted.
Implement first-week greetings: During the first week of classes, set up information tables and meet students in the parking lot, welcoming them to the college.	Reach out to students at key times: Contact students at key times, such as the first week of classes and as course drop dates and filing-for-degrees deadlines approach. Pay particular attention to first-time college students to ensure that they have the information they need.

Source: Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC).

One of the most popular behavioral commitments we heard about—*Develop cross-departmental awareness*—focuses on increasing staff knowledge about departments and resources on campus to make it easier to direct students to where they can get needed help. It was noted that students frequently come to one office with a question that another office is better positioned to respond to. Colleges often addressed this need by conducting workshops or training sessions introducing the services provided by different college units and by creating contact and reference guides for staff. These efforts focused not only on developing awareness of the roles and responsibilities of different campus offices but also on building personal relationships among individuals working in different departments. Two liaisons noted that Caring Campus helped establish a sense of connectedness and common purpose:

I think that working across areas helps break down those silos and helps us get to know each other in different ways than we didn't before. This will help us work more together as a team for student success. I think it will also help others see the role of all the areas of the college in supporting students.

—College liaison

And we really stress that, even though we're doing this to build connections and relationships with our students, it's just as important to do that with our coworkers. And so that came up from day one and from meeting with our coach—you can't only worry about being responsive to students, because your coworker may need information from you to also help a student, and you've got to maintain that same commitment with them.

—College liaison

Stakeholders reported that deep knowledge of college functions, including names of colleagues working in other areas, is also integral to a second popular commitment: *Use warm referrals*. A staff member who makes a warm referral (sometimes called a warm handoff) directs students to another office on campus in a caring and effective manner.

So our first option is always to walk with the student or call ahead and tell their story so students don't have to repeat themselves. But in the instance that you're not able to do that or the person that you're going to is not available, we are going to use warm referral note cards that say: "Here's the student, here's who they're seeing, here's their story."

—College liaison

A third common commitment focuses on the quality of staff interactions with students. One college identified the following as a commitment: *Listen to students' questions and concerns with a positive attitude. Make meaningful connections with students.* Another prioritized improving virtual interactions: *Respond to students' calls and emails in a timely manner.* One staff member explained that Caring Campus is intended to build on current good customer service practices in a more systematic and intentional way. For some this may mean asking for a student's name and providing one's own at the beginning of each interaction. Another explained,

“Even though you have your work responsibilities, it’s about putting that on the back burner if there’s a student in front of you.” Interviewees were hopeful that these positive experiences would be meaningful for currently enrolled students and would help burnish the college’s reputation and thus attract new students.

Rollout strategies. Once the behavioral commitments are selected, staff work to share them with colleagues toward the goal of full-scale implementation. Most colleges we studied created standing committees or working groups charged with managing Caring Campus and continuing to find opportunities to promote the commitments. Colleges often held a campus-wide kickoff event to introduce the commitments to all staff, either at convocation or on a staff development day. Some colleges followed up with commitment-related workshops or trainings for staff.

To encourage and reinforce staff participation, several colleges created branded Caring Campus items such as shirts, tent cards, lapel pins, stickers, and masks. Other colleges developed systems to recognize staff who regularly practiced the behavioral commitments. One college recognizes and rewards staff who are “caught in the act of caring.” Another college is adding the behavioral commitments to job descriptions to make it clear that they are an expected part of job duties.

Facilitators to Implementation

Interviewees pointed to a number of factors that they believed facilitated the implementation of Caring Campus at their colleges, such as strong leadership support, relative ease of implementation, an existing positive college culture, and opportunities to integrate this work with existing initiatives and reforms.

Strong leadership support. Across many different initiatives, leadership support has been observed to influence behavior (Kezar, 2014, 2019). Not surprisingly, leaders who actively prioritized and elevated Caring Campus were viewed as important to successful implementation. In these cases, leaders



The logo for Hinds Community College Caring Campus features a circular design. The outer ring contains the text "HINDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE" at the top and "Caring Campus" at the bottom, with a small tagline "Make a Meaningful Connection" curved along the bottom. The inner circle contains the word "Caring" in a large, stylized font, with "Campus" written below it in a smaller font.

General Behavior Commitment #2

When you see a student out and about campus...

Make a sincere effort to help the lost or discouraged student.

Don’t always wait for the student to come to you. Be aware of your surroundings... if the student is visibly lost or looks discouraged, offer them assistance.

“Hey, can I help you find anything today?”

“Are there any questions I might help you answer today?”

Explanation of
a behavioral
commitment for staff
from Hinds Community
College (Raymond,
Mississippi).

demonstrated support by communicating the reasons why Caring Campus is important and by supporting and attending key events. They assigned key leaders to oversee the initiative and followed the progress of the work by “agendizing” Caring Campus in leadership meetings. In a number of instances, Caring Campus was identified as an element in strategic plans and/or in accreditation proceedings. As one interviewee said:

It all stems from the top; it trickles down to employees. When I first heard about Caring Campus, I didn’t anticipate it would stick around this long. It is becoming the culture of the campus.

—College staff member

Results from a staff survey administered by CCRC at four Caring Campus colleges in spring 2021 found that 83% of staff agreed that “college leadership has supported the implementation of our selected behavioral commitments.” Leadership provided by classified staff senates in California has also been key. At several colleges, the classified senate took charge of organizing and implementing Caring Campus, with full leadership backing. In a number of cases, senate members have appreciated the chance to take a more active role in student success initiatives, rather than being on the sidelines.

Easy and low-cost implementation. Caring Campus was perceived by interviewees as relatively easy to implement as well as low in cost. The behavioral commitments were generally considered to be a way of strengthening job performance rather than adding extra responsibilities. When colleges were operating remotely, the behavioral commitments were seen to be feasible to implement in the virtual environment. Participating staff time investments were largely limited to time away from regular duties during coaching. However, Caring Campus liaisons often spent extra time on coordination, an added job responsibility. In some settings, there were modest expenditures for items such as staff name tags, food for special



Caring Campus events and advertising from Irvine Valley College (Irvine, California).

events, and swag for participants in workshops. The relative ease of implementation of Caring Campus/Staff is aligned with a key feature of projects that research suggests can scale up easily (Rogers, 1995)—low complexity.⁶

Positive pre-initiative college culture. Many interviewees viewed their existing college culture as positive, which they felt provided a good foundation for the implementation of the behavioral commitments. When asked about the culture of the college, staff and students alike often used descriptors such as collaborative, friendly, and family-like. An environment of this kind may facilitate implementation of Caring Campus practices/behaviors. One interviewee thought that Caring Campus would be easy to implement, given the college's culture:

My colleagues are a close-knit group of people who are united, productive, and always trying to figure out what else they can do to serve our students.

—College liaison

Integration with existing initiatives. In several cases, Caring Campus was intentionally integrated with other high-priority initiatives at colleges. The most frequently mentioned of these were efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the undertaking of guided pathways reforms.⁷ Caring Campus provided an avenue for staff to become more involved in ways that would allow them a larger leadership role while also strengthening these efforts.

Guided pathways is a developing process. At this point the college is in the beginning stages. They are trying to create ten different teams that will look at data and come up with ideas about what they can do. There are discussions about adding an eleventh group—a classified staff group. They are trying to figure out exactly what role this group would be playing, what data this group needs to look at.

—College staff member

There were also cases where colleges were already undertaking existing efforts to improve relationships among staff and engagement with the community that could be enhanced through a connection to Caring Campus. For example, Caring Campus was linked at one college to their existing community service days and at another to staff recognition efforts called Caught in the Act of Caring.

Barriers to Implementation

We also learned about factors that interviewees felt hindered implementation of Caring Campus. These included the COVID pandemic; college settings with a less positive culture; and staff turnover, shortages, and burnout.

Implementing during a pandemic. Not surprisingly, COVID and the resulting increase in remote learning and work made implementation more difficult. The pandemic limited the amount of attention that could be given to special projects such as Caring Campus. It also meant that virtual behavioral commitments, in

addition to in-person commitments, needed to be identified and implemented, something that had not been necessary in the past. What is more, some stakeholders worried that students would feel less cared for despite implementation efforts, because they were remote.

My true sense is the more people we can get back on campus the better we'll be able to implement. I think looking someone in the eye and sitting across from them brings a different level that we don't get through Zoom. It's a different energy.

—IEBC coach

A less positive culture. When a college or individual department's existing culture was not perceived as positive, interviewees thought it could influence the quality of Caring Campus implementation. In these cases, staff might need more encouragement or support to implement the behavioral commitments with fidelity. As one participant noted,

Some departments may not be as approachable. If that's how they are with employees, I can't even imagine how they are with students.

—College staff member

Staff turnover and staff shortages. Several colleges experienced staff turnover or shortages of staff in key positions, which affected implementation. At one college, about half of the original Caring Campus team were no longer at the college less than two years after coaching took place. In addition to problems with continuity due to turnover, it was hard to implement some of the actions planned when departments were short-staffed. According to one interviewee,

An office that is short-staffed, for instance, would have a harder time ensuring websites that keep staff informed about the location of college offices are up to date, because students' immediate needs would need to be addressed first.

—College liaison

Similarly, a staff member noted that while she values helping students holistically, in a small office with only a few workers, “you can’t build a relationship in 15 minutes. And students feel that; students know when you’re rushing them through the process.”

Staff burnout and lack of supervisory support. Burnout can take various forms. At one college, an interviewee noted that there is a tendency for the same people to do a lot of the work on Caring Campus as well as other college initiatives. Relatedly, there are colleges that undertake many different projects, leaving staff stretched thin or even cynical about being asked to engage with one more improvement initiative. Finally, staff members whose supervisors are not fully supportive of the project may find it difficult to participate in behavioral commitments that require them to take longer serving a student by, for example, walking them to another office for a warm handoff.

Potential Impact on College Culture

In our analysis, we considered several indicators of cultural change that are integral to the Caring Campus theory of action,⁸ though we recognize that estimating the extent of progress on indicators of change is very challenging. We sought evidence from our interviews with a range of stakeholders and highlight their observations here.

Improving college structures and systems and building greater institutional capacity to create change.

In many cases, Caring Campus resulted in increased opportunities for nonacademic staff to take on new leadership roles. Interviewees saw this as diversifying and as facilitating more equitably distributed leadership roles at the college. They also felt that these leadership roles encouraged staff to increase their knowledge and skills. This could have benefits to the staff as well as to the college to the extent that staff became more engaged and perhaps more likely to persist in their jobs.

Staff involvement in student success initiatives also had the potential to improve student experiences. A liaison stated that, because the Caring Campus team meets regularly, they frequently come up with ways to improve college policies and procedures, citing a decision made at her college to liberalize parking rules. She said, “It is just second nature now to look for ways to make things better for students.” An IEBC coach agreed:

Caring Campus is making everyone more focused on asking whether or not each action or decision is really about serving students.

—IEBC coach

Cultivating positive staff attitudes. We heard evidence of several ways that staff attitudes are changing as colleges engage with Caring Campus. One interviewee stated that Caring Campus encourages the belief that staff should proactively support students rather than expecting them to navigate college on their own. Active outreach has the potential to be especially helpful to first-generation and other students who may be reluctant to seek out assistance (Atherton, 2014). One college leader noted that Caring Campus has helped to create a more caring and positive culture among nonacademic staff.

When you catch others being caring and kind, it boosts that good feeling for everyone. It only promotes and supports good.

—College leader

Staff attitudes toward equity initiatives were also understood by interviewees as potentially affected by implementing Caring Campus. Some noted that staff who were reluctant to engage in self-reflection during equity trainings appeared to be more willing to embrace equity-focused activities that involve concrete actions such as the behavioral commitments. One interviewee noted, “Equity is scarier and takes introspection. Caring Campus is easier.”

Improving staff camaraderie on campus. There was a pervasive view among interviewees that Caring Campus can increase the sense of community and connectedness among college staff because it “encourages everyone to work

together instead of in their own silos.” One staff member described her reason for participating in Caring Campus:

The buy-in for me was that this was for people across departments—that diversity was appealing to me. There are a lot of great things happening within individual departments, but often not a lot of folks know what’s going on elsewhere.

—College staff member

A college leader talked about how Caring Campus has created a sense of community on campus, whether this was “intentional or a byproduct of the work.” Staff members noted that Caring Campus could play a role in unifying staff across the college because the common goal of better serving students could “bring us together and strengthen our culture.”

Potential Impact on Students

We still know little about the impact of Caring Campus on student outcomes. This is true for several reasons. First, Caring Campus is difficult to evaluate as it involves relatively small interactions with students that take place over long periods of time; these interactions and their effects are difficult to track and measure. Second, there are challenges in evaluating any full-campus initiative because it is difficult to identify a suitable comparison group of students who do not experience the intervention (Bloom, 1999). Finally, the COVID pandemic has had a major influence on student enrollments and outcomes, making it difficult to make sense of trends over time. It is therefore hard to know if, for example, a change in the rate of student persistence at a college is attributable to Caring Campus or to the ways that the pandemic has affected college students’ lives (or to some other mix of factors). Nevertheless, our interviewees described a number of ways that they believe that Caring Campus could have a positive effect on students.

Encouraging enrollment. One interviewee thought that Caring Campus can boost enrollment if a college develops its reputation as a caring and welcoming institution in the local community. Another reflected that post-pandemic, “Students will have more choice; they can leave and study remotely anywhere in the world. Colleges should be proactive in thinking about this.” Caring Campus could make a college more appealing to its traditional base of local students.

Encouraging persistence. A major reason why colleges decide to engage in Caring Campus is to encourage student persistence. Removing hurdles and providing better customer service, according to some interviewees, can improve student retention and persistence because students feel more welcome and better supported. For example, students may be more likely to seek out needed help following implementation of Caring Campus, potentially enhancing their chances of success. Staff noted they have “repeat callers” once they form a relationship with a student: “You’ve helped them in the past, and they know you can take care of them again.” Added supportive services and activities such as food drives associated with Caring Campus can also help students focus on their studies.

Increasing equity. Many persons we interviewed thought that Caring Campus would contribute to equity at the college because caring interactions may be especially valued by students of color and older students. One staff member noted that connections are even more important in a community college context because there are more students who have significant family responsibilities, work commitments, and off-campus obligations that can impede their academic progress.

*Just by showing every student and all staff that they are cared about,
Caring Campus can help with equity.*

—College staff member

The students that fall through the cracks are the students who don't have that know-how already. And these students are largely first-generation, Black and Latinx, and low-income.

—College staff member

In addition, both leadership and classified staff members at a California college saw Caring Campus as linked to and complementing DEI efforts underway there.

Lessons Learned

Interviewees were eager to share what they had learned while implementing Caring Campus with others who may undertake this work in the future. The lessons they discussed generally involve practices that had emerged as important as they rolled out Caring Campus at their colleges. Some of the lessons we describe were widely cited as important by many people we spoke with, while others were strongly emphasized by one or two interviewees.

Leadership and staffing

1. It is important to invest time in selecting the right people for coaching. Leaders should spend time screening people to make sure they are a good fit and can clearly articulate why the work is important.
2. Those coached, especially those who continue to lead the work, should be recognized by college leaders and actively supported in their efforts.
3. Staff supervisors and department leaders can demonstrate their support and commitment to Caring Campus by allocating employees' work time specifically for Caring Campus so that the work does not become an afterthought.
4. Incorporating Caring Campus into strategic plans and existing initiatives demonstrates its importance to the campus community and lays out a set of milestones to be met.

Start-up and early stages

1. Spend time on the “why.”
2. Help may be needed in the early stages of this work to clarify what makes Caring Campus different from simply being nice or from merely executing good customer service.

- 3.** Initially choosing a few commitments that are realistic works best.
- 4.** Have a realistic understanding of the time that it will take to implement Caring Campus.
- 5.** Accept that not everyone will buy into Caring Campus. Many will come on board over time.
- 6.** Branding efforts build buy-in.

Refining the work

- 1.** Including Caring Campus as a standing item on department and leadership meeting agendas helps to maintain focus on the initiative.
- 2.** It may be helpful to offer specialized training for staff on working with diverse populations and clarifying the difference between equity and equality (see, e.g., Rise, n.d.).
- 3.** Moving from start-up to institutionalization requires attention and commitment from leadership and an active lead committee.
- 4.** Incentivizing and encouraging behavioral commitments helps sustain momentum.

Conclusion

Caring Campus/Staff is off to a strong start. New colleges are continually signing on to participate in IEBC coaching in order to engage their nonacademic staff more fully in student success efforts and to create a culture that enhances life/work satisfaction for students and staff alike. Early indications are that, despite the difficulty of implementing during a pandemic, college leaders are happy with the progress made to improve their college communities and increase equity.

There is much to be learned from the colleges that are already engaged in this initiative. While Caring Campus is not overly difficult to implement, there are ways to make implementation go more smoothly. A number of ideas that are included in this report can be used to improve implementation in general and to adapt Caring Campus to the virtual interactions that have been necessary in the past couple of years.

Despite early signs that this initiative is worthwhile, there is still much to know:

- How much of a difference does implementation of Caring Campus make to student experiences and outcomes and to staff satisfaction and retention?
- What is required to sustain Caring Campus over time and to refine and carry out the behavioral commitments with fidelity?
- Does Caring Campus create fertile ground for future reform efforts?

Further implementation and additional rounds of research will allow for a better understanding of Caring Campus/Staff and for the continuous refinement of this novel approach to improving the student and staff experience.

Endnotes

1. IEBC is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping education stakeholders—K-12 school systems, community colleges, universities, employers, and others—use coaching, collaboration, and data to craft solutions that improve practice and increase student success.
2. Fifteen community colleges have participated in the faculty-focused Caring Campus initiative; of these, nine are also implementing the staff-focused initiative.
3. A total of 21 community colleges participate in Caring Campus/Staff that are funded through the Ascendium Education Group. Of these, 14 participated in some form of data collection associated with the CCRC research. They are located in the following states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Kentucky, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Texas, and West Virginia.
4. Quotations are taken from interviewer notes and may reflect approximate rather than exact words used.
5. Classified service in California public colleges includes all positions not defined by the Education Code as requiring a certificate or credential and not specifically exempted. These typically include office and clerical staff and maintenance personnel. Classified senates are organizations of these staff.
6. Rogers (1995) named four other features of innovations that diffuse or scale up readily, including relative advantage (a better solution to a problem than alternative options), compatibility with existing norms and initiatives, trialability (easily tried out before adoption), and observability (able to be observed in use in other settings). Caring Campus can arguably be considered to embody these features as well.
7. Guided pathways is a comprehensive reform approach whereby community colleges fundamentally redesign their programs and support services in ways that create clearer, more educationally coherent pathways to credentials with strong labor-market value. Colleges undertaking these reforms use data to better understand the student experience. Guided pathways is currently being implemented by hundreds of colleges across the country (CCRC, 2021).
8. There are several indicators of cultural change identified in the Caring Campus theory of action: (1) improvements to college structures and systems, (2) greater institutional capacity to create change, (3) more positive staff and faculty attitudes, and (4) better relationships on campus.

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