

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Caring Campus An Initiative to Involve Community College Staff in Increasing Student Success

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College students' interactions with faculty, fellow students, and staff shape their perceptions of the college experience (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Rendón, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Interactions with others can influence students' sense of belonging and their academic self-concept and motivation, all of which can affect their chances of success in college (Komarraju et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2012; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). At community colleges and other commuter institutions, interaction with faculty and staff is a particularly important contributor to students' sense of belonging on campus (Karp et al., 2010; Whitten et al., 2017). Yet many community college reform models aimed at improving student success focus largely on structural changes, with comparatively little direct attention paid to interpersonal interactions. As community colleges seek to increase student persistence rates and reduce gaps in attainment by race/ethnicity and social class, initiatives that focus on improving student connectedness to college may be especially important. Research on racially minoritized and first-generation college students suggests that investing in programs to improve students' interpersonal experiences on campus may be a key strategy in closing gaps in opportunity and outcomes by race/ethnicity and class (Booker, 2016; Guiffrida, 2005).

Caring Campus is a program developed and administered by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) to engage both faculty and nonfaculty (or nonacademic) staff in improving interactions with students and creating a culture of caring at community colleges. In this brief, we introduce research we are conducting on the *staff-focused* Caring Campus initiative. First, we discuss the importance of nonacademic staff to the postsecondary student experience. We then present a theory of change for the Caring Campus approach in working with staff. Next, drawing on observations of Caring Campus activities at six colleges and on interviews conducted with 20 representatives from nine colleges and IEBC staff, we describe the model and present two initial findings about the initiative, which are related to the potential for Caring Campus to affect college culture and ground further change efforts. We collected data discussed in this brief in the first year of a three-year CCRC project to study both the staff-focused and faculty-focused Caring Campus initiatives; additional findings will be shared in future publications.



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The Importance of Nonacademic College Staff to the Student Experience

An emerging body of research points to the ways in which nonacademic staff play a crucial role in student success in higher education (e.g., Bossu & Brown, 2018; Rose et al., 2016). These staff include individuals in student services divisions like financial aid, enrollment management, advising, counseling, and the registrar; individuals in student-facing campus units like the bookstore and public safety; and facilities and grounds staff and administrative personnel, who may have significant interactions with students even if their primary work responsibilities are not directly related to student support. The resolution to challenges that students encounter on campus—from the mundane (e.g., getting lost) to the profound (e.g., failing a class)—is often mediated by nonacademic staff members. While much has been written about how positive faculty-student interactions may contribute to improved psychological and academic outcomes (Komarraju et al., 2010; Rendón, 2002), the role that college staff play in contributing to student success has received less attention (Whitchurch, 2009).

Karp (2011) identified four nonacademic support mechanisms that encourage positive student outcomes in community colleges: (1) creating social relationships; (2) clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment; (3) developing college know-how; and (4) addressing conflicting demands of work, family, and college to attend to the nonacademic needs of students. College staff have the opportunity to become involved in all of these mechanisms. Staff members can also support students by communicating that students are cared about and respected, which may contribute to students' sense of belonging on campus.

Unlike faculty and advisors, who have been deeply engaged in some of the most prominent community college reform efforts in recent years, other nonacademic college staff have typically not been included in large-scale student success initiatives. As one IEBC coach said, “[Staff] are used to being told what to do. They’re not asked to be a leader.” The Caring Campus initiative is unique in that it envisions college staff as leaders in developing and implementing student success strategies. The initiative may be viewed as complementary to other student success reforms that focus more on college structures and practices.

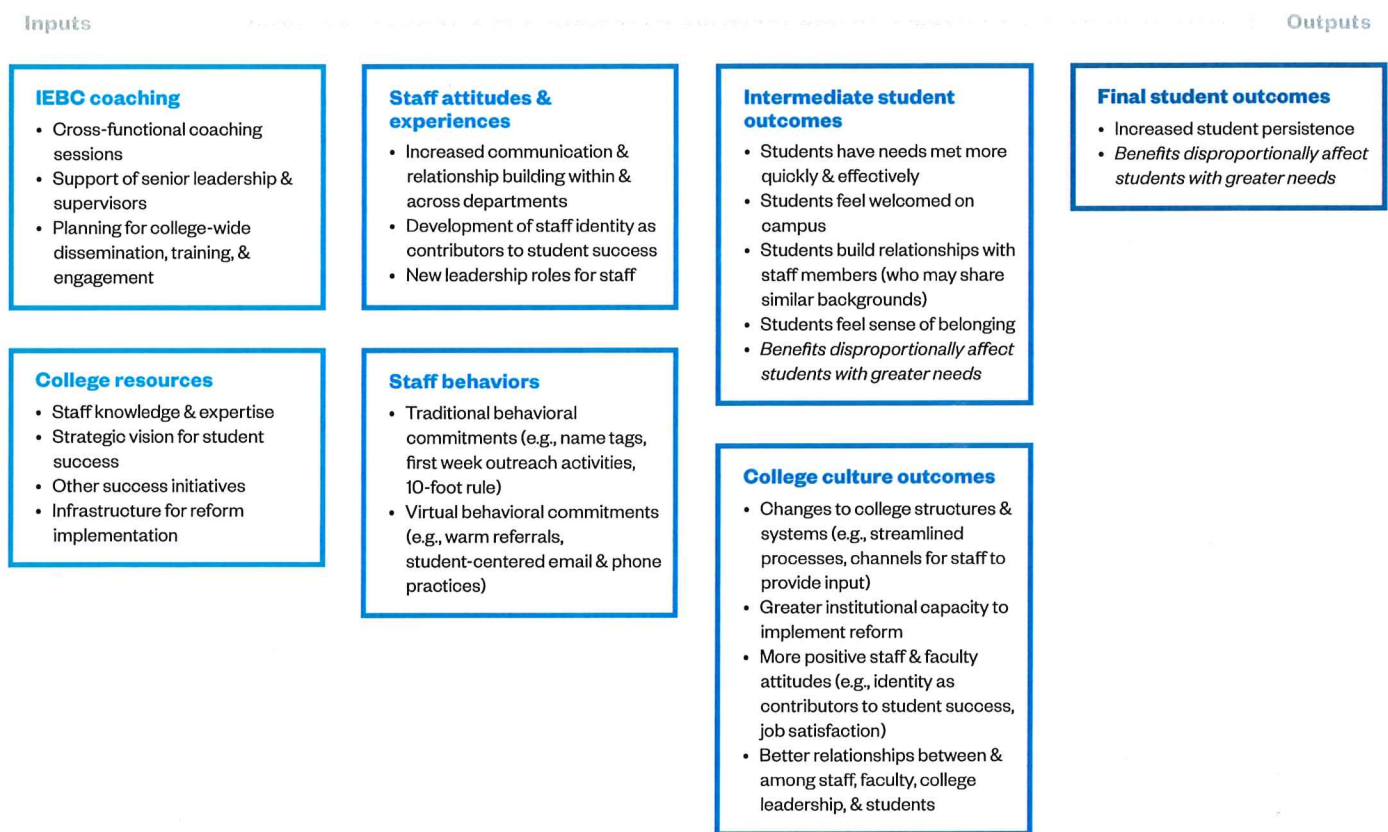
IEBC’s Caring Campus Initiative for Nonacademic Staff

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. Among IEBC’s most prominent programs is the Caring Campus, which it has been implementing at community colleges across the United States since 2018. As of January 2021, 56 colleges have participated in the staff-focused initiative, and 14 colleges have participated in the faculty-focused initiative.

The theory of action of the Caring Campus staff-focused initiative (see Figure 1) can be summarized as follows: (1) Colleges have a strategic vision that drives their student success initiatives, but college staff are an underutilized resource in these efforts. (2) IEBC provides

coaching for a team of college staff who represent student-facing departments like financial aid and student enrollment as well as facilities, public safety, and other areas of the college where staff have contact with students. This is an opportunity for staff to identify behavioral commitments. The participating staff, with support from leadership, develop implementation, communication, and monitoring plans for adherence to these commitments among staff campus-wide. (3) The new behavioral commitments help students feel welcomed and cared about by adults who have authority on campus. They also get their questions answered and other needs met more quickly and effectively. As a result, students feel a sense of belonging and care that leads to stronger student outcomes, especially related to persistence in college. (4) For staff, the experience of learning, working collaboratively, and positively interacting with students affects the college culture and increases the college’s ability to take on other student success initiatives.

Figure 1.
Caring Campus Staff Initiative Theory of Change



It is important to note that the Caring Campus theory of change is intended to result in more equitable student outcomes. This is based on research indicating that traditionally underserved students are particularly influenced by an increased sense of belonging and that this is associated with better student outcomes, such as persistence in college (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

A Caring Faculty Initiative

In addition to the initiative for nonacademic college staff discussed in this brief, IEBC runs a complementary program for faculty. Colleges participating in this effort use institutional data to identify faculty with high rates of course retention and success and invite them to participate in a series of coaching sessions. Similar to the IEBC coaching that is included in the staff-focused initiative, the coaching sessions in the faculty-focused initiative guide instructors as they identify behaviors that promote student belonging, engagement, and achievement and then make a plan for engaging other faculty in enacting those behaviors across the college. Examples of faculty behavioral commitments include learning and regularly using students' names and meeting one-on-one with each student at the beginning of the semester.

The Caring Campus Coaching Experience

At the center of the Caring Campus initiative is a facilitated coaching model to help college staff work collaboratively to identify specific actions, known as behavioral commitments, aimed at increased student connectedness and, eventually, student success. Each college is assigned an IEBC coach to work with a team of college staff members. IEBC coaches are higher education professionals with experience leading change initiatives and deep knowledge of community colleges or broad-access institutions; many are retired college leaders. The Caring Campus staff coaching experience is designed to be completed in approximately one semester. All of the IEBC coaching sessions are designed to be interactive. Coaches often ask staff to draw on their personal experiences with being on the receiving end of support and care. A considerable amount of time is spent planning and strategizing in small groups. In the spring of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, IEBC adjusted its approach so that all coaching activities could be conducted virtually. In the virtual Zoom sessions, coaches rely heavily on the breakout group function to allow staff time to work in smaller groups to complete their tasks. The four stages of the Caring Campus coaching experience are described below.

Leadership kickoff. To begin the Caring Campus coaching process, the IEBC coach meets with college leadership and staff supervisors for an orientation session. The goal of this meeting is to ensure that the president, senior leaders, and leaders and managers of nonacademic departments understand the Caring Campus vision and process, the expectations for staff participation, and the resources required for implementation and institutionalization. The coach aims to generate enthusiasm for the initiative among leadership and ensure that department leaders are well informed about the process their staff members are about to undertake. After the kickoff, department leaders nominate staff to participate in four team coaching sessions and a final follow-up meeting with college leadership. While colleges have discretion in staff selection for the team, depending on the size of the college, IEBC recommends that they identify a group of about 20–40 nonmanagerial staff members, including representation from all departments that interact with students.

Selecting behavioral commitments. During the coaching sessions, participating staff first must choose a set of behavioral commitments. The coach provides examples of the kinds of behavioral commitments that can improve students' sense of welcome and belonging. Using the sample commitments as a guide, staff identify specific commitments that meet the needs of their college. For example, one suggested behavioral commitment is the 10-foot rule: Whenever a student is within 10 feet of a staff member, the staff member takes the initiative to say hello, smile, and offer help if the student seems to need it.

Since the onset of remote work and learning due to COVID-19, these sample commitments include some behaviors that apply to in-person interaction and others that can be enacted virtually, both

of which must be reflected in the team's chosen commitments. Some commitments can be used for either virtual or in-person interactions, such as a warm referral: When a staff member needs to refer a student to another department, they contact that department directly to explain the student's needs. In addition to campus-wide commitments, staff may also develop department-specific commitments that reflect their particular needs and practices.

Table 1.

Most Common Behavioral Commitments (from IEBC)

| Face-to-Face Environment | Virtual Environment |
|---|--|
| <p>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.</p> | <p>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.</p> |
| <p>Wear name tags: Wear name badges or lanyards with the college name on them so that students will know who to approach with questions.</p> | <p>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.</p> |
| <p>Develop cross-departmental awareness: Learn about other departments so you know where to send students. Maintain accurate and up-to-date detailed directories.</p> | <p>Develop cross-departmental awareness: Learn about other departments so you know where to refer students. Maintain accurate and up-to-date detailed directories.</p> |
| <p>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.</p> | <p>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.</p> |
| <p>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.</p> | <p>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.</p> |

Planning for implementation, communication, and monitoring. Once behavioral commitments are chosen, coaches guide the team of staff members to create implementation, communication, and monitoring plans. Specifically, coaches support the team in identifying the training and resources needed to help the broader college staff to understand and begin enacting the commitments, creating a timeline for conducting the training, and developing a plan to monitor implementation. Coaches emphasize the importance of the messaging around the Caring Campus initiative and help the team consider the most effective ways to talk to colleagues about the importance of the commitments. Colleges are encouraged to identify rollout plans that will work in their context, and coaches provide examples of potentially effective strategies for implementing and managing the initiative, such as:

- Unveiling the Caring Campus initiative and the selected commitments at a college-wide in-service or convocation day, with a presentation from involved staff members to their peers;
- Creating short videos that illustrate the commitments and highlight the rationale behind them;
- Adding a Caring Campus initiative check-in as a standing agenda item in department and division meetings to reinforce its importance and maintain momentum over time (called “agendizing”);

- Conducting point-of-service surveys with students to document whether they are experiencing the behavioral commitments from staff and how they are reacting to them; and
- Developing a system to recognize and reward staff for implementing behavioral commitments.

In between coaching sessions, staff gather feedback on their draft behavioral commitments and implementation, communication, and monitoring plans from colleagues in their departments to ensure that the plans they develop will be accepted by the broader college staff.

Following up with leadership. The engagement of leaders and supervisors has been identified by IEBC as key to the success of Caring Campus implementation. Many of the strategies for implementation described above will likely be successful only with support from supervisors and leaders, beyond their initial engagement in the kickoff phase. In a final meeting facilitated by the coach, the staff team presents their selected behavioral commitments to college executive-level leaders as well as deans and staff supervisors. The staff describe their implementation, communication, and monitoring plans and how the leaders and supervisors can provide support to roll out the initiative. Leadership, in turn, identify actions (often also called commitments) that they plan to take to bolster, monitor, and celebrate the Caring Campus initiative, with a focus on institutionalization and sustainability. This final session also serves as a celebration of all that the staff team has accomplished over the semester.

Implementing and Sustaining the Caring Campus Initiative

Once the coaching sessions are complete (usually within a semester), the college moves forward to implement the initiative. To prepare for this, the IEBC coach works closely—before, during, and after coaching—with a designated college liaison who is responsible for ensuring that the initiative progresses smoothly. While colleges differ in who they select as liaisons, many choose deans or vice presidents for student services (or their administrative aides). In addition to managing the logistical aspects of the coaching process and serving as an advocate for the initiative on campus, the liaison communicates with college leadership throughout the coaching process and beyond to keep them updated on the initiative’s progress.

At many colleges, the liaison and other staff create a working group to sustain the Caring Campus initiative once coaching is completed. This group may comprise the staff members who attended coaching, but other approaches may be preferred. Not uncommonly, liaisons leverage existing college working groups to oversee implementation, such as college staff groups (e.g., a staff senate) or groups implementing other initiatives (e.g., “guided pathways” reforms). Ideally, the work of this group is closely monitored and supported by leadership to make sure that the initiative is prioritized and moves forward.

In addition, to help the Caring Campus initiative flourish campus-wide, colleges develop systems of staff accountability and appreciation. For this initiative to make a difference in students’ sense of belonging and success, the behavioral commitments selected by the staff team need to be widely practiced, including by staff members who were not involved in coaching sessions. IEBC has found that this requires the presence of systems of expectations and incentives. While staff attitudes, discussed below, are key to achieving buy-in for the implementation of the behavioral commitments, campus-wide implementation is much more likely to be successful when:

- Earlier on in the planning stages, the staff team considers incentives and opportunities to show appreciation for other staff who perform the behavioral commitments;
- Supervisors expect their staff to adopt these behaviors and support them in doing so by altering departmental processes, if necessary;
- There are systems that allow both peers and supervisors to monitor behavioral commitment use; and
- Rewards for practicing these behaviors are frequent and visible.

While colleges may incur initial costs to join Caring Campus (which may be covered by grant funding), there are few ongoing costs associated with implementation. The main cost is personnel time—liaisons interviewed estimated that they spent between 6 and 10 hours per month coordinating the Caring Campus effort. Adherence to the behavioral commitments by staff campus-wide was not viewed by college leaders to require extra staff time; rather, these behaviors were seen as integral to providing high-quality support to students and a part of ongoing staff responsibilities.

Implementing Caring Campus During the Pandemic

In spring 2020, a cohort of colleges were partway through their coaching experiences when COVID-19 forced them to move to remote learning and work. Both IEBC and participating colleges adapted quickly to this disruption. IEBC reworked its coaching curriculum, and coaches received training to successfully facilitate virtual coaching sessions. IEBC also modified the coaching schedule to include shorter and more frequent meetings and developed new options for virtual behavioral commitments. All participating colleges were asked to identify both virtual and traditional behavioral commitments so that they would be prepared for fully remote, hybrid, and in-person learning scenarios during the 2020–2021 academic year.

Some Caring Campus liaisons credited their coaching experience with keeping them connected and productive during remote work. One college described how its experience with Caring Campus sharpened its approach to supporting students at the beginning of the pandemic. With the transition to remote teaching and learning, staff at this college assigned themselves students to check in with and to ask what support they needed right away. Similarly, staff at another college showed their dedication to cultivating caring relationships with each other even while working remotely through “Caring Campus Wednesdays.” Each week, a member of the Caring Campus working group sent out a video or PowerPoint slide to all college staff members that shared something personal or something that showed their care toward the campus community.

Initial Findings About the Caring Campus Staff Initiative

While our research on the Caring Campus staff initiative is still in an early stage, we have identified two broad trends that have implications for its impact on students and the college as a whole. The first relates to how participating in the Caring Campus initiative can affect college culture. The second has to do with elements of the Caring Campus work that may ground further change efforts at the college.

How Caring Campus Affects College Culture

Caring Campus is explicitly concerned with changing the way that staff members interact with students in order to influence students' experiences and their outcomes. However, as an initiative that is led by nonacademic staff and intended to permeate the entire college, Caring Campus may have additional effects beyond its explicit goals, shaping the college environment and culture in a way that can positively affect both staff and students. In this section, we draw on our interview data to describe three ways that the initiative may lead to positive institutional changes beyond the intended impact on student success.

Positioning staff as respected changemakers. Participating in Caring Campus coaching makes nonmanagerial staff members feel valued and respected in the college community. As one liaison said, nonacademic college staff “are such an important, vital contributor to the ecosystem of the college, but oftentimes there are not places or opportunities where they can be those creative forces.” Many nonacademic staff members provide essential services—answering phones, serving food, caring for college buildings—and, as a result, they have limited time or flexibility to serve on committees or take on leadership roles. Caring Campus is explicitly structured to provide that opportunity. In many cases, simply being chosen to participate in coaching sessions or serve in a Caring Campus working group was meaningful to participating staff. Almost every liaison stated that staff were “honored” to participate and energized by the experience. One liaison shared:

One of the really nice things that's come from it is that we've been able to see how we can still help the students even if we're not in student services. The 10-foot rule for example. ... So, I think it has excited people who normally don't really think about students much. It's got them thinking about the students more.

Cultivating a sense of unity. It is not uncommon for there to be silos on college campuses, or even a sense of mistrust, that can make cooperation across departments difficult. By engaging staff from across departments in an intensive period of planning and implementation, Caring Campus contributed to an increased sense of campus unity. In many cases, staff members who had not interacted in the past got to know each other through participating in Caring Campus. One liaison shared that the coaching sessions allowed staff to “sit down with [their] colleagues that [they] don't normally have a chance to get to know ... and throw around ideas and brainstorm. They really love it.” Another liaison stated:

I felt ... some collaboration in areas that maybe didn't exist consistently before. There's always the feeling of divide between faculty and staff. We've got four campuses, and there have been times when that felt more competitive than “we're all in this together.” In March, the faculty assembly voted and did a proclamation thanking staff for the service that they do to help students. And that had never been done before.

In another example, nonacademic staff participated collectively in off-campus service projects for a “Cares Day” as part of their Caring Campus implementation. This kind of opportunity for collaboration was seen as having the potential to improve college unity.

Enhancing staff knowledge. Participating in the Caring Campus initiative may require staff to increase their understanding of how the college functions and of how other people are involved in campus life. For example, the warm referral is designed to avoid a situation where a student is turned away from a department without their question resolved. Rather than providing a vague directive—e.g., “You'll need to go back to enrollment services”—staff are asked to direct students

to a specific individual, call ahead to alert the department that the student is coming, or walk the student to their destination. For this particular behavioral commitment, both college liaisons and IEBC coaches reported that staff benefit from increased information about the functions of other offices on campus and the individuals working in them. As one coach stated, “Staff are getting to talk with each other, and, during [the coaching] process, they realize they don’t know enough about other departments.” Some colleges made increasing staff knowledge one of their behavioral commitments, creating documents that help staff find campus resources or offering information-sharing sessions.

Positioning staff as changemakers, breaking down silos, and improving staff knowledge have the potential to advance new reforms as college staff notice ways to improve student experiences and feel empowered to communicate these concerns and potential solutions to others. For example, a staff member at one college noticed that students were experiencing frustration and were even blocked from registering when small payments such as library or parking fines were due. During Caring Campus coaching, they were able to bring this issue to the attention of leadership, who realized the importance of reducing barriers to enrollment, and the college policy was changed as a result.

How Caring Campus Can Strengthen College Capacity for Reform

To implement any initiative, a set of enabling structures and systems are needed. Before engaging with a college, IEBC asks college leaders to complete a self-assessment that focuses on the areas that indicate readiness to undertake this work, such as the presence of: (1) past efforts to improve student success, (2) financial resources available to support the initiative, (3) systems for monitoring student experiences and outcomes, and (4) an organized staff leadership group, such as a staff senate. The self-assessment helps IEBC to determine whether the conditions are right for Caring Campus to succeed at a college. However, the Caring Campus coaching process and the values and behaviors it espouses on campus can also help a college to strengthen its structures and practices, which has the potential to strengthen other current reforms and lay the groundwork for future reforms.

Strengthening leadership development. Leadership skills in change management have been identified as key to successful implementation of college reforms (Kezar, 2018; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). IEBC staff noted the importance of having a college leader, ideally the president, with a high level of commitment and a willingness to be personally involved in the initiative. Before initiating Caring Campus, college leadership is asked to show its commitment to the initiative and agree to participate in key activities. IEBC coaches also work closely with college leadership, including the liaison, at each college to help build skills in managing and supporting the initiative. These skills may be useful for creating or strengthening other reform efforts at the college.

Caring Campus coaching also functions as a form of leadership development for staff who are not in leadership positions. Participating college staff are guided through the steps that are needed to initiate any new reform: project design, implementation planning, sustainability planning, communications, professional development, and monitoring. Having more staff who are fluent in these activities may set the foundation for future reform work.

Integrating new and existing initiatives. Incorporating new initiatives within existing frameworks can facilitate success and reduce concerns about adding “yet another” initiative. IEBC leadership noted the value of integrating Caring Campus into guided pathways reforms, which emphasize the development of clear academic plans for students and the support needed for students to make progress toward completion of credentials (Jenkins et al., 2018). The Caring Campus approach adds an element to guided pathways reforms that may be missing: strong efforts

to help students feel connected to the college. Similarly, Caring Campus can add to the effectiveness of student support initiatives, such as the co-locating of services into what are often called one-stop centers, by ensuring that staff are more attentive to students' experiences when students access services. Staff are encouraged to think about Caring Campus as complementary to other reforms that are more structural in nature, adding an element of greater humanity and caring to existing initiatives and thereby strengthening them.

Developing systems for robust staff engagement and development. Caring Campus introduces an approach to staff professional development that may not be the norm at many colleges. It encourages an approach to training that goes beyond the typical one-time workshop and expands the reach of professional learning by involving staff in teaching other staff about the new behavioral commitments. At the same time, it is worth noting that not everyone at a college may be ready to learn or adopt new behaviors. Drawing on theories from marketing, IEBC leaders talk about the 15-80-5 rule in which efforts to engage people with a new initiative are directed to the middle segment of people who are open to this kind of effort, assuming that group is larger than those who want to lead an effort (15%) and the small proportion of people who will never buy in (5%). By engaging significant proportions of staff in peer-to-peer planning and learning, including many who have not typically led college initiatives, Caring Campus may pave the way for colleges to engage their staff in future reform efforts.

Conclusion

Caring Campus is an initiative that uses a distinct, interpersonal approach to creating institutional change and influencing student outcomes. While many colleges stress "good customer service," they do not generally have systematic ways to connect staff behaviors and student outcomes. As a liaison at one college noted, "We have people who are super nice to students, but how do you make that a real initiative?" Caring Campus provides structure and guidance on how to put these good intentions into practice.

Further, few initiatives explicitly make use of nonacademic, nonmanagerial college staff, a highly underutilized resource. Caring Campus seeks to involve this group in developing a caring, unified college culture. In participating in the initiative, nonacademic college staff are able to build their leadership skills and strengthen interpersonal relationships in ways that can lay the groundwork for future innovation and student-centered practices. Importantly, positive staff and faculty interactions with students have been shown to increase a sense of belonging and connectedness to the college, which can improve student outcomes. Because a sense of belonging on campus is especially important for racially minoritized and other underserved students, Caring Campus has the potential to improve equity.

In the remaining years of this research project, CCRC plans to learn more about how colleges implement and sustain Caring Campus and the ways in which Caring Campus influences college culture and student experiences and outcomes. Future data collection efforts will include surveys of staff and students, in-depth interviews and focus groups with a range of college stakeholders, and analysis of college-level data to see trends in student outcomes that may be connected to Caring Campus implementation. In addition, the research team will collect mixed-method data on the Caring Campus faculty-focused initiative. A better understanding of both of these initiatives will be helpful for other colleges seeking ways to create a welcoming and affirming environment to enhance students' sense of connection to the college and to strengthen their success.

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