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RETENTION

I Don't Care What You Know Until I Know You Care: Why Caring Campuses Retain More Students

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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. Guided Pathways, co-requisite remediation, intrusive advising, and other efforts are ubiquitous and early indications are that they could be making a difference. The old models aren't working, and the new models are not enough. 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.

Today's students have far more challenges than many of us did when we went to school—just ask them. Lack of resources, family obligations, and other pressures make it difficult for students to both enroll and stay in college.

We need to understand and accept the lives they lead and not pigeonhole them into the lives we expect them to lead. They are not residential students at a highly selective university.

These pressures are exacerbated by what many students experienced in high school. We have heard countless stories from students who were disengaged from their high school experience. In fact, research confirms these interview findings, with four in 10 students saying that by 12th grade they felt disengaged (Busteed, 2013).

Throughout our community college work, students tell us they want to feel cared about. They want to connect with a faculty and staff member who looks like them. But barring that, they want a staff member who "gets" them. This is particularly salient as community college students are more diverse than ever and our current ranks of faculty and staff 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.

Recognizing the power of connections is not new, as Vincent Tinto (1993), Dick Light (2004) and others have written, but it is the rare college that has made specific behavioral commitments to enhance student engagement. And this is where the difference is. Students need to feel like they are welcome and belong at our colleges if they are to succeed and achieve their educational goals.

Now is the time to act on this and while doing so, take some cues from other industries. Banks are turning into coffeehouses, restaurants want us to feel at home, hospitals are rethinking their entry and triage procedures and building welcome centers. Businesses understand the power of human connections, the impact of feeling at ease and the benefits of the sense of belonging.

Colleges can also engender a sense of belonging with our students who may be terrified of going to college and unfamiliar with our bureaucracy and how to navigate it. They desperately want and need a knowledgeable adult in authority—the faculty and staff—to connect with them. So how can community colleges engage in this work? At the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC), we have been working to address this question through the Caring Campus initiative.

First, engagement differs by role and setting. Faculty engage with students primarily in the classroom during the academic term. Staff engage with students in offices and around campus, typically during high stress

times: when a student is having issues with enrollment or financial aid, or is simply lost and looking for a poorly named building.

So, we need to consider how to connect with students differently based on our role.

Supporting Faculty Connectiveness

When we begin this work of engagement with faculty, we start by examining data on faculty course retention and student success. In working with dozens of colleges across the United States, we've found faculty with consistently high course retention and success rates. We interview these faculty members about how they engage with their students in the classroom and elsewhere. In these interviews, we learn some not so surprising things. It has almost nothing to do with pedagogy: faculty learn student's names quickly, they have rigorous standards and, because they've gotten to know their students and know that "life happens," they act as compassionate coaches and give students the opportunity to turn in an assignment late without penalty. Faculty also have meetings, spending just a few minutes getting to know each student—what we call, "moments that matter." Finally, we find that faculty with high-performing students make their expectations clear, and monitor student progress closely, intervening when necessary and even going so far as to rename their "office hours" to "student hours."

Although we learn about a variety of supportive behaviors that improve these faculty members' connectedness to their students, these are the core behaviors we find time and again.

Once faculty have identified a set of behaviors, we work with leadership to support efforts for faculty to work with their colleagues to spread these practices to every classroom. Faculty-to-faculty professional development is far more effective than an outside expert providing a one-and-done professional workshop event or an administrator demanding culture change.

Supporting Staff Connectiveness

For staff, the process of connecting differs. Community college staff are unsung and underutilized heroes. In fact, students generally come into contact with staff before they are officially students. A staff member is often the first person with whom a potential student comes into contact when they come onto a college campus, or make that first phone call.

We bring staff together for guided discussions about interactions with students in their departments and across campus. Staff then identify general, campus-wide behavioral commitments as well as for their own departments. For example, staff who engage in this work tend to agree that all staff should wear name tags. A name tag acts as a permission slip, enabling students to know who on campus is a member of their college community, not a visitor.

Staff understand that a name tag sends a message of knowledge and competence.

Another popular staff behavioral commitment is to ensure all staff have a rudimentary understanding of what each department does: the role of specific staff members; how students might be triaged for services; and how students are processed. This results in a warm referral so when students are sent to another department, staff can be confident the student's needs will be met. At a number of colleges, staff have committed to driving around the parking lot in carts delivering water and accurate campus maps to students during the first couple weeks of each semester.

One of the most compelling attributes of this work, whether with faculty or staff, is that little to no resources are required. The investment an institution makes is in behavior change, not in a new piece of software, a new building or piece of equipment. Connecting with students and making them feel welcome is virtually free.

A Welcoming Environment Supports the Growth-Oriented College

In addition, the wonderful part about making these behavioral commitments on the part of faculty and staff is not only to humanize educators but also to show their support for students. That said, in our work with institutions that develop behavioral commitments, we find that faculty and staff satisfaction

also increases.

With enrollments predicted to decline (Grawe, 2018), we can't simply focus on academic interventions and student support interventions alone, and expect the needle to move. We must connect with, and keep, the students we have—for their sake and ours.

References

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Current Position and Past Experience

Brad Phillips is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC), a non-profit organization that helps educators to develop new and innovative ways to improve education using evidence-based solutions. He leads the organization's focus on improving educational practice and outcomes in schools, colleges and universities.

He is also the co-author of the book *Creating A Data-Informed Culture In Community Colleges*, published by Harvard Education Press. He is a frequent keynote speaker, author of numerous articles, and recipient of recognitions and honors. Dr. Phillips is the founder of both the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS) and IEBC.

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