)I E B C(

INSTITUTE *for* EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE

Caring Campus

PROVIDING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES: A CARING CAMPUS APPROACH

GUIDE ONE

GUIDE ONE
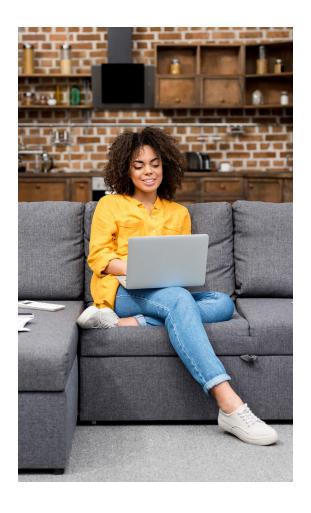## CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

This Guide is the first of a series. It is designed to provide colleges with practical ways to support professional staff as they work to ensure student services delivered virtually go beyond simply meeting student needs and foster a sense of connectedness.

It is grounded in our *Caring Campus* initiative's behavioral commitments and will help your college take a proactive approach to supporting your students.

Caring Campus is based on research that shows students who feel more connected to their college are more likely to be retained, persist from semester to semester and complete. Increasing connectedness, therefore, especially in a virtual environment, can go a long way toward increasing the likelihood your enrollment will be maintained. Professional staff play an important role in ensuring student connectedness.

But what does it mean to be a *Caring Campus* in these extraordinary times and how can staff best fulfill their role? And what structural components need to be in place to ensure students are provided with needed support services in an efficient and productive way?

This first *Caring Campus* guide from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) is designed to be useful, usable and actionable. It is not just a guide about what to do, but also includes suggestions about **how** to engage in the behaviors we are recommending. Some items might require a bit of work up front, but this will result in student support services that help students navigate the bureaucracy with less stress.

ASSUMPTIONS

We make a number of assumptions as we provide guidance to connecting professional staff with students and with each other. We assume that the college has the ability to forward calls to staff members at home. We also assume that professional staff:

are working from home most, if not all, of the time;

are at least connected by telephone, either a land line or mobile phone;

are in contact with their supervisors and other staff members;

have access to a computer and internet some of the time at home;

will likely have distractions and responsibilities working from home, such as children who are home from school, family responsibilities during this crisis, and other issues that may take them away during regular business hours; and

are willing, able, and want to continue to work with and serve students.

IEBC's *Caring Campus* team has developed, in consultation with the many colleges we work with, a series of behavioral commitments first developed in face-to-face environments. We begin with a brief description of how your college can build a structure for implementing these behavioral commitments between staff and students that supports virtual outreach and effective virtual responses to student concerns. Next, we provide suggestions for how staff can begin a conversation with a student that affirms your college's caring and support. Then we present three behavioral commitments for communicating with students that we adapted from traditional commitments to working virtually. Finally, we address some of the issues your staff might be facing as they work.

BUILDING THE STRUCTURE

Professional staff whose phone lines are connected to their desk and, therefore, cannot take their phones with them can have their numbers forwarded to their personal phones. When a student calls their desk or department, the call automatically goes to the staff member's phone.

There are some considerations though. Do staff have unlimited calling on their phones or will these calls end up incurring additional, potentially costly charges? Can home phone numbers be masked so personal phone numbers are not identified? Although it might lead to fewer answered calls, we recommend using the *67 option, which masks the calling number on most phone systems. Staff can leave a message if the call is not answered. Professional staff can text a student first, letting them know that they will shortly receive a call from the college.

Remember that your professional staff need to also feel cared for. Providing these staff with the resources they need to feel competent in their work and ensuring they have the skills required to work in a virtual way will send a message that they aren't alone in their job, even if they're alone in their homes. We recommend at least weekly conference calls so staff remain connected to leadership, are all receiving the same message, and can support each other.

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION WITH A STUDENT

The way professional staff begin the conversation has considerable impact on the student's sense of being cared for. Remember, it is more difficult to ascertain affect on the phone than in face-to-face interactions.

When professional staff are making calls, they first need to introduce themselves by name and as a member of the college. If they are receiving calls, they should answer calls with a greeting and their own name. Regardless of when professional staff are making or receiving calls, they should ask for the student's name first, and not their student identification number which can be requested after. Staff then should inquire as to the student's general sense of wellness, "How are you doing?" This begins the conversation with the message that the student is cared for. It also slows down the conversation and reduces anxiety.

Next, the staff member should provide information about the college's response to the current situation. Something along the lines of, "Before we get to your question, I just want you to know that our college is aware of the many issues students are facing while we have the campus closed. I'll do my best to help you myself or get you to the right person." This should also include any specific messages that the college wants each and every student to know. Colleges should be prepared to give students a few key messages that every staff member who talks with a student can provide.

Remember, professional staff are likely to hear the same question or issue multiple times in a day, week, or month. Yet, for the student this may be the first time they're dealing with the issue. Because staff are learning as they are chatting with students, it is important for staff members to share feedback and notes with their colleagues about the kinds of issues students are encountering.

Because students are so familiar with video calling such as FaceTime (for Mac or iPhone), iChat, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, and others, the college should consider providing these applications to staff members. It's always better to see a face than to just hear a voice.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT ONE: BE PROACTIVE

This behavioral commitment is akin to a common *Caring Campus* behavioral commitment: the ten-foot rule. This commitment states that if you are walking around campus and encounter a student within ten feet of you who seems lost, confused, or upset, you should take the initiative to approach the student, smile, introduce yourself, and ask if you can be of assistance.

In the virtual environment, being proactive means reaching out to students before they contact your college to reassure them, ensure they are getting the information you want them to have, answer their remaining questions, and send the message that you are thinking about them. The assumption is that

most students are lost, confused, or stressed. We recommend contacting every enrolled student by phone, sending a text first to alert the student that a college staff member will be getting in touch with them. We know this may be a heavy lift. But given the staff to student ratio at your college, it is far more preferable to talk with each and every student than sending out blanket emails that students might not read or understand.

This outreach should follow a standard script similar to the method in *Beginning the Conversation* (*above*). The staff member should provide their name and department and state that they are calling from your college. Start by asking how the student is doing and that you care about them and their well-being. Then let the student know that your college is working hard to meet student needs and you are calling to see if the student requires any assistance. Also, make sure to provide any information that the college wishes to communicate to all students. If the structural components are in place, as identified in the *Building the Structure* section on page two, staff will be well prepared to respond to student needs effectively and efficiently.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT TWO: KNOW WHAT OTHER DEPARTMENTS DO

▶ *Create a resource guide to each and every department*

More than ever, professional staff need to know what each department does. This is a common *Caring Campus* behavioral commitment identified by professional staff among the many colleges we've worked with. To best serve your students, it is important for staff to know what each department does at a level beyond simply that financial aid deals with students' financial issues. This requires development of a guide originated in each department that describes the basic functions of that department. This guide is distributed to each and every staff member.

▶ *Update annotated directories*

It is important to review college directories and ensure they are current. A complete directory can be developed with staff names and college contact information—phone and email—for each and every department. If appropriate, individual staff member responsibilities can be included.

Be sure to update directories on your website as well. Make sure to include department and staff phone numbers and email contact information.

Remember, staff likely will not be able to transfer a call by simply dialing an extension.

▶ *Create a frequently asked questions document*

A Frequently Asked Questions or FAQ document can be developed for each department and disseminated to all staff. This will assist staff in responding to student questions and concerns. It also will reduce the need to transfer students with basic, fundamental questions to someone else. The fewer times a student is referred down the line, the more likely they are to follow through.

FAQ documents need to be updated regularly as additional common questions or issues posed by students are identified.

To best serve your students, it is important for staff to know what each department does at a level beyond simply that financial aid deals with students' financial issues.

Note, too, that staff are very likely to get questions from students related to instruction. In addition to providing the primary contact for each academic department, you can include brief answers to questions related to academic schedules, assignments and grading, and other instructional related topics.

▶ *Create an external referral document*

Although not typically included in this behavioral commitment, having a list of off-campus resources is another way to care for students. Providing staff with a list of food banks and food services, housing alternatives, government support websites, and other resources not provided by the college sends the message that you care for the whole student. Additionally, a number of internet service providers are offering free access to students. The Hope Center at Temple University has excellent resources for how to ensure students' basic needs are met.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT THREE: WARM TRANSFERS

A final common *Caring Campus* behavioral commitment among our colleges is to make warm transfers.

A warm transfer has meant doing more than simply telling a student they need to speak with financial aid. Instead, the student is referred to a specific person in the department. For example, the referring staff calls the recipient staff first to alert them the student will be coming. The referring staff also ensures the student knows how to frame their question or issue in a way that the recipient staff will understand. The referring staff provides the student with a map and directions or walks the student to the new location. Finally, the referring staff follows-up with the recipient staff and/or student to ensure the warm transfer was completed.

In the virtual environment, making a warm transfer takes on a different set of behaviors. Instead of providing the student with a name and number to call, staff members can take the student's name and contact information—phone and/or email. Then let the student know you will be calling someone to get back in touch with them. Then call the staff member, explain the situation, and request that they contact the student. Also, give the student the referral recipient's name and contact information, so they can follow-up if they need to.

If time permits, you can follow-up with the student to check on how they got their needs met. It is important, also, for staff to maintain a call log. The log should include the student's name and contact information, issue presented, resolution (including transfer information), and a projected follow-up date. This will make following up with a student or colleague easy. It also will make it easy to respond to a student who might call back.

By assuming responsibility for the referral you are sending the message that you are there to take care of the student.

STAFF CONSIDERATIONS

Colleges are asking a lot of staff members to participate in this kind of connection activity above and beyond their workload while at home. That said, it is important to understand that we now have a new normal. What may have seemed onerous in a face-to-face environment is now appropriate given the impact of campus closures.

Because colleges are asking a lot of staff members during these extraordinary times, it is important that staff members are encouraged to exercise self-care every day. This means that there must be time carved out in the day for staff members to connect with one another and their supervisor to check in on their well-being. We cannot give the kind of care we hope to give to students if we do not provide that care to one another and ourselves.

As noted above, we recommend at least weekly departmental conference calls. These calls allow leadership to respond to issues and concerns, ensuring all staff are receiving the same messages, updates, and instructions. These calls ensure staff remain connected to their institutions and each other. This allows staff to support each other, as well. Finally, these calls should include a time for staff to talk freely about what they're hearing from students so common experiences can be identified and resolved.

IN CONCLUSION

We at IEBC know that colleges work hard in ordinary times to ensure student success in many ways. We believe you can continue to do so in extraordinary times as well. Colleges are focusing on instructional practices because that is at the heart of what colleges do: educate. However, it is important to address student supports so your students remain connected and enrolled. Professional staff are central to this effort.

For further information about this Guide or any other services that IEBC provides, please contact:

Janet Nowell, Project Coordinator
jnowell@iebcnow.org
619-933-7489

)IEBC(

INSTITUTE *for* EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE

The Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) is a nationally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to helping education stakeholders - community colleges, universities, K-12 school systems, employers, and others - use data, collaboration, and coaching to make informed decisions and craft solutions that improve practice and dramatically increase student success through our innovative approach. Learn more about IEBC at www.iebcnow.org.

April 2020