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IEBC Guides Contra Costa College To Innovative Thinking About Data Use

California’s community colleges are in the process of undergoing a major transformation in the way their work is done. Educators must make significant decisions. Often, they turn to personal experience or anecdotal examples for guidance. Ken Sherwood, Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs at Contra Costa College, knew making these decisions informed by data instead of “guessing” what might happen was vital to his institution’s long-term success.

Sherwood brought IEBC and Dr. Brad Phillips to campus after working through the same cultural issues at his previous assignment at Oxnard College.

“This is an essential foundation to all of the work we’re going to do. When I have people sitting in these meetings saying they don’t know (what to do), there is a very simple need to be filled,” said Sherwood.



After working with IEBC at Oxnard College for two years, Sherwood saw significant improvement in delivering results. “When I left, it was commonly understood all major decisions like programs and scheduling were based on an analysis of the appropriate data,” said Sherwood.

In his new role at Contra Costa College, Sherwood is again turning to IEBC to support faculty and staff on how to use their data to be more effective. “It was further reinforced when I had conversations around campus hearing people say, ‘I don’t know what to look for, when I have it, I don’t know what I’m looking at, and I don’t know what to do with it,’” said Sherwood.

Sherwood finds this to be a common challenge throughout the California community college system. “I think it’s fairly widespread. I was a faculty member at Los Angeles City College for 18 years. We didn’t really start using data effectively or orient ourselves until the last couple of years before I left.

“There’s a little bit of fear . . . What I’ve pieced together is that there tends to be a gut reaction that when someone presents people with numbers, it’s a way of telling them they aren’t doing their job properly.”

Sherwood said it doesn't take long working with Dr. Phillips and IEBC for educators to become enthusiastic about the value of data-driven decisions.

"Watching him at Oxnard, his approach is tailored to that very resistance. He teaches people how to use data while recognizing where resistance comes from. He helps people ease in and understand it's not a threatening experience. IEBC is here to give you tools to work better."

Sherwood said a key element of Dr. Phillips' training during his first campus visit to Contra Costa helped him understand how and why institutions should be looking at leading indicators versus lagging indicators.

"In our system, we look at lagging indicators in the big outcomes like graduations and transfers," said Sherwood. "Dr. Phillips' theory is that's not what we should be looking at. We can't affect those numbers with a single action. We need to affect numbers earlier in the process ... We can't just say we only graduate six percent of students and want to graduate 20 percent instead. This begs the question, how are you going to do that?"

Oxnard College educators struggled to accept this change in their longstanding approach at first. "Folks in the beginning would walk into meetings and argue the data is bad, it couldn't possibly reflect reality," said Sherwood. After a year of training and looking at data from a different perspective with help from IEBC, "they could sit down and talk about what the numbers indicated and how to change them. That's when you have productive conversations about action," explained Sherwood.

Changes at Oxnard College included faculty innovations in instructional practices, such as teaching basic skills courses in a compressed format to make it easier for students to take more courses quickly. Data quickly showed students grades were improving under the new approach.

Sherwood said he hopes to develop similar innovations at Contra Costa College, and he says his faculty and staff are open to changes. "The response I'm getting is that I have more folks saying 'thank you for giving us some direction.' They recognize that, for no reason other than compliance, they have to be able to show the data they're using to make decisions. If not properly trained, that's doubly problematic.

"There's almost always someone who does a 180. A big part of that is bringing in experts like Brad and teaching them there's a different way to look at things. Sometimes you need an outside perspective, to introduce people to different ways of doing things." Sherwood said his previous experience with IEBC at Oxnard College gave him confidence he could achieve the same positive results at Contra Costa College.

"I really want to see exactly what I saw at Oxnard, that the institution as a whole moves from being skittish about data and not knowing how to use it, to being comfortable with data as part of their daily lives," said Sherwood.

But human beings need more than numbers. This is where Dr. Phillips brings his institutional knowledge to the forefront. "Since Brad comes from our system, he understands people's

trepidations,” said Sherwood. “He understands why and he explains things in a way that is a lot less threatening.”

Sherwood offered this testimonial from a veteran faculty leader after sitting in on a planning meeting where Dr. Phillips presented his initial overview. “He said, ‘In 22 years, that’s the best piece of training I’ve ever attended at this college.’ The response was overwhelming, I had people walking up and thanking me for days.”

Sherwood said community college faculty and staff need to be taught what to look for, and how to use the information to make improvements in education. “We need to identify the indicators and decide what to do. There’s great potential for us down the road. But nothing will change until (educators) learn to identify the data they need and understand what to do with it.”

If IEBC can help your institution or organization understand your data and use it to improve educational outcomes at any level, contact us to start a conversation.

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