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## Caring Campus energizes San Bernardino Valley College classified staff

Judy Rodriguez, Administrative Secretary and Classified Senate President of San Bernardino Valley College, vividly remembers stepping onto the campus nine years ago when she was first hired. She was new to the college experience alongside many of the students who attend, and she can relate to how they feel. “At that point it was a learning curve... at first it took me a while. I had no clue. I was trying to survive. When you are trying just to hang on, when you are thrown into a job... It took time for me to get to know the campus.”



Rodriguez said you aren’t sure where to go for help.

Her own experience fueled her desire to help students and colleagues who come to her office needed guidance. “You don’t know how many people they’ve tried to get help from before you. You don’t know how frustrated they are. If I don’t have the answer, I try to ask somebody. I try to find someone in their office before I send them there. We have a big campus. I want to make sure someone is there to process them before they walk all the way over and find a sign on the door saying we’re closed.

“I am a natural problem solver, I want to solve the problem if I can,” said Rodriguez.

Stepping forward with the right information to offer seems basic, but Rodriguez understands it’s a skill that needs to be taught. As she discovered when participating in IEBC’s “Caring Campus” coaching at San Bernardino Valley College, the approach demonstrates how even small efforts make a big difference – and they aren’t always intuitive.

“(Caring Campus) is about little things you might be doing already, but they have come second nature to you. Now we make the effort to make sure we’re doing it all the time,” explained Rodriguez.

In her role as Classified Senate president, Rodriguez described the power in understanding via IEBC’s data just how important classified staff are to improving education outcomes. “We have a huge impact. We are the front line. Students are meeting with us first upon arriving at campus,” notes Rodriguez.

“Having the statistics from IEBC showing evidence we are playing a major role – I like it being brought out to the light. The classroom is not the only thing that impacts (student) retention,” said Rodriguez.

As San Bernardino Valley College begins rolling out the Caring Campus program throughout its two campuses, Rodriguez expects IEBC's information to be a revelation. "Now that they hear it from someone else (IEBC), it hits home. You hear, 'Oh wow, it's true!'"

Rodriguez says classified staff feel the urgency to contribute toward improving student retention as changes in statewide funding formulas loom over community colleges. "What we've been doing all these years isn't working anymore, we have a new generation of students and we need to try something new. Classified staff are your secret weapon.

"Caring Campus will not only increase retention, it will increase morale. Higher morale increases productivity. It takes time to see results, but why not start now? We are all facing this new funding model. We've got to change our ways to produce the results we want. If there's evidence behind it, why not?" asked Rodriguez.

"Caring Campus ensures I am making the effort every day to greet students, to wear my name badge," said Rodriguez. "When students recognize your face, it's a more personal interaction. With students, if they recognize a face or remember a name, they feel a more personal connection – you took time and effort to help.

"Caring Campus gives us validation, and we know we need to keep making an effort," said Rodriguez. "You want to feel like you're making a difference. You're at work all day. You're away from your family so much. You want it to be more than a paycheck. People want to make a difference, be a part of the team. We are social beings. You want to feel like what you're doing means something."

Statistics can be impressive, but Caring Campus is about people being recognized and valued as individuals every day. Rodriguez offers a powerful reminder of the ways classified staff can change a student's future through what seems like a small act.

"When Caring Campus first started, I was getting a ride in a cart from a substitute custodian who is also a student here. She was talking with me about student stress, and how classified staff have a bigger impact than we realize.

"She told me, 'When I was first a student here, I was so lost. I didn't know where anything was.'" Rodriguez said the student was on the brink of quitting. Then a campus custodian took time to stop and interact with her, and help her. He listened to her frustrations. The pair became friends. Eventually, he encouraged her to apply for campus employment. Rodriguez said it turned a potential disaster into success.

"She told me, 'If it wasn't for this custodian, he told me "keep going, don't quit." I would have quit.' She was stressed out, and she felt alone. It's true, everyone has a story," said Rodriguez.

Rodriguez says students don't see job descriptions. They look for friendly faces and encouragement. "Students don't know what a classified employees is – they don't know the term," said Rodriguez. "We're just employees. Students can be intimidated by instructors. Sometimes they are more comfortable going to the custodian or the cafeteria worker they see every day."

Rodriguez said it doesn't have to be complicated. Caring Campus embraces small acts that add up to big improvements. "Just smiling at someone matters. It reminds me of Dale Carnegie and his book. I actually brought the book to one of my Senate meetings as an opener – how a smile means so much to the other person, and it costs you nothing to give it.

"You don't realize the impact. It helps you, too. When you smile, it does something to you, it causes you happiness and releases endorphins. It's a win-win for everyone," said Rodriguez.

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*Judy Rodriguez, an active participant in the Caring Campus work at San Bernardino Valley College, was interviewed by IEBC in June, 2019. IEBC is a nationally-recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to helping education stakeholders—K-12 school systems, community colleges, universities, employers, and others—use data and collaboration to make informed decisions and craft solutions that improve practice and dramatically increase student success.*

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