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Research Partnership Seeks Understanding to Advance IEBC's Work

Defying the stereotype of an office-bound number cruncher, Community College Research Center (CCRC) Director Thomas Brock says research comes alive when he engages directly with college faculty, staff, and students in the field.

“I always leave field visits with a deeper understanding of a problem or opportunity than before I went,” said Brock. “As a researcher, one of my primary objectives is then try to amplify those stories so others understand.”



IEBC's latest grant funding from Ascendium Education Group creates a new partnership between the Columbia University-based CCRC and IEBC for research of the “Caring Campus” initiative. Brock says the partnership provides a rare opportunity to gain a better understanding how the initiative works to change college culture and improve student outcomes.

“All of us at CCRC are very excited about this initiative and pleased to be a partner working with IEBC,” said Brock. “There’s been a lot of interest at the K-12 level in this area of social/emotional learning, and understanding how students need to feel safe and well supported, need to be motivated, and be at a point emotionally where they are ready to learn to succeed at any level of education.

“Those concerns don’t go away when people become adults but these issues haven’t been explored nearly as much in depth at the college level,” explained Brock. “This study allows us to delve into these issues... Many of the underlying elements that lead to those outcomes have been overlooked. I’m glad with this project we’ll get to place more of a spotlight there,” said Brock.

Brock said CCRC approaches its applied research work firmly focused on its partnerships, as it will with IEBC and its Caring Campus initiative.

“First of all, we are driven by doing research that matters, that answers questions the practitioners including teachers and student services workers are asking, and providing answers they need to know,” explained Brock. “I’m very much of the idea

the best ideas come from the field. As a researcher, being in close contact with people who see new opportunities emerging, who have new ideas about serving students; that's where I want to be.

"I want to understand their experiences, their challenges, the successes they experience. We then design and develop research that advances their work, and can help to illuminate for the field what promising strategies there are, and learn from the innovators," said Brock.

Based on 25 years of experience in education and social welfare research including six years as commissioner of the National Center for Education Research (NCER) at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) before coming to CCRC in 2018, Brock says his aim is to implement research designs allowing CCRC and its partners to determine whether or not the changes we observe are real and meaningful.

"More than statistically significant, are the changes substantially significant; enough to warrant large scale change in practices," added Brock.

Brock says during the two-year IEBC project focusing on Caring Campus faculty initiatives at newly participating colleges, CCRC will construct research designed to understand early implementation efforts, and understand what processes IEBC uses with each participating college.

"In the early stages, we look at quality of implementation and ask, 'are colleges able to take to this model?' Is there any resistance at the college, for what reasons? If there is an embracing of the model, what strategies are used by leadership to get buy in and support? We will try to understand those factors that help or hinder implementation," said Brock. "As the Caring Campus initiative gets more deeply rooted at each college, we will look at administrative data both before and after the initiative to try and understand the quality or the level of implementation."

Brock says there is a distinct advantage from a researcher's perspective in exploring IEBC's rollout to new college participants. "One of the advantage of the project is there are multiple sites. We can compare across sites. We would expect where we see early implementation, we see better results, and perhaps more results."

Brock says CCRC's research strategy involves a mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

"The emotional response, if you will, from faculty and staff who are the change agents may be hard to measure. There are surveys we can think about, but I expect it will be more the lived experience of those people we will understand through in-person interviews, focus groups, and some observation work. Part of our work is to put these two pieces together, looking at student outcomes and whether or how these change."

Brock said the study allows CCRC and IEBC to delve into issues surrounding the concept of "connectedness" and emotional readiness, giving credence to the need by

students to feel safe, knowing there are people who value them as individuals, who they can confide in as they have difficulties. “We can be too hard nosed at times, and deal only with the ultimate hard outcomes of persistence and completion. Many of the underlying elements that lead to those outcomes have been overlooked. I’m glad with this project we’ll get to place more of a spotlight there.”

Brock sees CCRC’s role in the Ascendium grant funded project as an important responsibility. “It’s a rather privileged position to visit colleges, and have them open their doors to us. Not everyone can do it, whether funders or policy makers, to make decisions whether to support these efforts.

“It is critically important to bring this information together and make it real and tangible in a way to these key participants to make informed decisions,” said Brock.

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About Community College Research Center (CCRC) CCRC studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations. CCRC is based at Teachers College, Columbia University. To learn more, visit <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>

About the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) The Institute for Evidence-Based Change is a nationally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to helping education stakeholders – community colleges, universities, K-12 school systems employers, and others – use evidence-based 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.