



INSTITUTE *for* EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE



Caring Campus

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

GUIDE TWO
SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF

GUIDE TWO

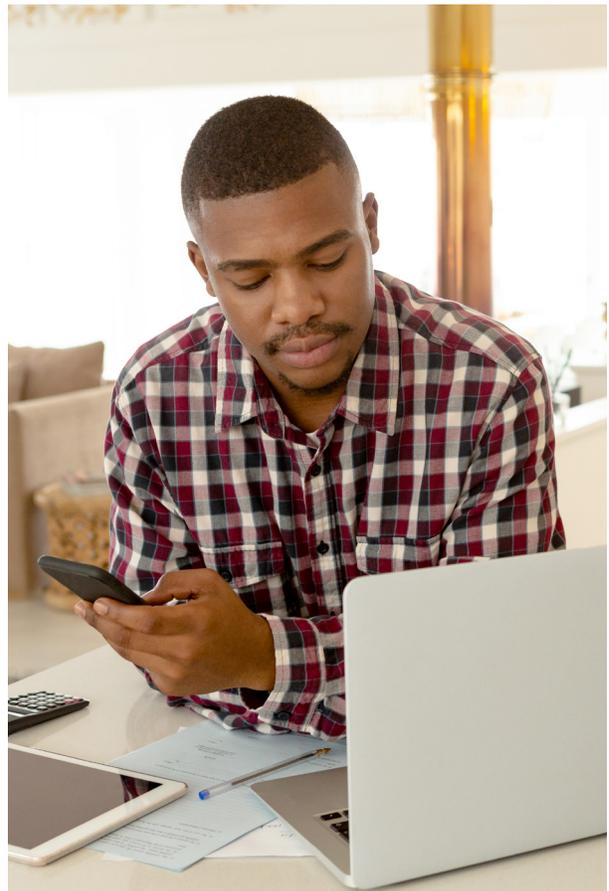
SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF

This Guide is the second in our series *Providing Student Support Services in Extraordinary Times: A Caring Campus Approach*. The first guide addressed connecting with students in a virtual environment. This guide provides colleges with practical ways to support professional staff as they work to ensure student support 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.

IEBC's *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 and student success increased.

Professional staff play an important role in ensuring student connectedness. But how do we ensure that professional staff are able to support students effectively and efficiently? What can postsecondary educational institutions do to ensure staff feel their administration supports them and ensure they are engaged in activities that support one another as well as students?

This *Caring Campus Guide Two* 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, and why, but also includes suggestions about **how** to engage in the recommended behaviors.



ASSUMPTIONS

We make a number of assumptions as we provide guidance to connecting professional staff with students and with each other. We assume that professional staff...

are primarily working at home;

are likely to have family responsibilities in addition to work responsibilities while at home that may take them away from work during normal business hours;

have contact with one another and their supervisor;

have access to a computer and telephone that they might have to share at times;

like students, have normal stressors and challenges during a shelter at home order; and

are willing and able to continue their work, doing their best to adjust to the modifications in their work environment.

Professional staff members are the unsung heroes of community colleges. Many, like their faculty and administrative colleagues, have advanced degrees. They are dedicated to the mission of the college and, most importantly, dedicated to supporting the students they serve. Many professional staff have attended the college where they now work and feel a strong, almost familial, connection to the institution. That said, everyone is working under stressful conditions today.

The very best organizations, those consistently ranked as among the top organizations to work for, have a number of things in common regarding staff supports. These factors include, but are not limited to:

- ▶ Respect the staff member – who they are and their contributions to making a difference in a student's life
- ▶ Know that quality of life is important – we spend a lot of our day at work
- ▶ Help create a sense of belonging
- ▶ Value staff as vital members of the team
- ▶ Want staff to feel that they are making a difference and working toward the mission of the organization
- ▶ Practice kindness
- ▶ Have leadership that is tuned-in to staff needs

These factors, which form the basis for behavioral commitments as we describe them, create the conditions for professional staff to create a *Caring Campus*. In this guide we present specific behaviors that lead to staff feeling more cared about, supported in their work, and, therefore, effective in supporting students at your college.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

While we want all professional staff to feel cared about, it is important to acknowledge the new stressors they are experiencing in this virtual environment.

First, the tools educators use to connect create issues of their own. For example, there is a phenomenon that is emerging often called “Zoom fatigue.” It is evidenced by users feeling exhausted after a few hours of using these tools. This means that supervisors need to understand that professional staff may be more fatigued than usual when using tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Team, WebEx and others. And the Gallery mode or multi-person views can accelerate this fatigue. There also is the stress of working with new tools and methods for communicating.

Second, professional staff have concerns when working from home that can add stress to their work tasks. They may have new or added childcare responsibilities. There may be more people and distractions around than they encounter when working in their office or at their desk. There are added stresses as professional staff worry about the broader,



general condition of their loved ones and community. They also do not have the collegial support they count on for respite in their day-to-day on-campus lives.

Third, professional staff might not have access to everything they need and are used to having in their workspace such as supplies, documents and resources at their fingertips. Staff want to do a good job and not having these readily available creates added stress.

GENERAL BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP/SUPERVISORS

There are a few general behavioral commitments that supervisors can engage in that transcend any one role or situation.

- ▶ ***Listen attentively:*** It’s essential that leadership be good listeners. Let staff say what they need to say. Just as staff have heard the same issue from hundreds of students and, yet, treat each student’s concern as fresh, it is important to listen to each staff member’s concerns as their own. Don’t get defensive if staff express anger or frustration. They likely are going through Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) and, if in the anger stage, will vent to a trusted ear. Reframe this for yourself as a positive.
- ▶ ***Overcome the need to fix a problem:*** Professional staff may simply need to express what they are going through and what they are feeling. Offer sympathy and how you can relate to their concerns with a real example. If you have an immediate solution, then offer it. But it is just as valid, and often as comforting, to respond that you will look into the issue and get back to the staff member. If you’re

going to refer the issue to another supervisor, let the staff know with whom you'll be speaking. Encourage group problem-solving. If issues arise on a group call or among a group of professional staff, ask if anyone has a solution to propose. Ask if other staff have experienced similar issues, what made them feel better, or suggestions to resolve the issue. You can make it clear that you're asking for advice that you will consider along with other factors.

- **Follow through:** If you offer to address an issue, then be sure to do so. Have your response ready when you next speak with the group. In the case of a single staff member's concern, call them back one-on-one. If a week goes by with no solution, let staff know that it's still being worked on and hasn't fallen off your list.

CARING CAMPUS BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP/SUPERVISORS

We begin here by describing specific behaviors that leadership/supervisors can engage in. Then we discuss how leadership can encourage colleague-to-colleague interaction and professional staff self-care. We share not only what the behavior should be but also **how** to conduct the behaviors. We know that every situation is different, and that the behaviors described below might need to be modified to align with the culture at your college.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 1: COLLEGE PRESIDENT HOLDS WEEKLY OPEN CHAT SESSIONS WITH THE COLLEGE STAFF

Poor information or lack of information is a problem. In times of crisis, this becomes more salient. Staff are physically isolated from the campus, management, their professional staff colleagues, and students. Rumors abound. Misinformation leads to poor practice. Therefore, it is important for the college president to regularly communicate with staff and others about the college's response in these novel times.

We recommend presidents hold an open virtual session at a regularly scheduled time each week. The session should inform professional staff about any activities that the college is engaged in to support the students and the staff, with the majority of the time open for questions. During these virtual sessions, it's important for the president to assure staff that while they may not have all of the answers, the goal is clarity, to understand what is being asked, what information is needed and can be provided, and what steps are in place or planned.

It is also important for the president to use a platform that allows for their face to be projected onto the participant's screen. In our data use work, we note that the human brain is prewired to react to other human faces. Human beings need to see other human beings and not just hear a voice. Calls are not enough.

In addition to weekly open chat sessions, it is important to share new information. Professional staff need real-time information to do their job well and to serve students with the most up-to-date information. Presidents can announce flash meetings asking professional staff to participate. If they are unable to do so, these meetings need to be recorded for easy access. By holding weekly chat sessions and special topics flash sessions, professional staff are kept aware of the most up-to-date information and are able to stay connected to leadership. Both of these will reduce unnecessary stress and improve staff morale and sense of competence.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 2: VICE PRESIDENTS SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS OF SUPERVISORS

The vice presidents of instruction, student services and administrative services need to set clear expectations for department and division leads who supervise staff. They need to set a clear expectation that supervisors will be supportive of staff. And they need to provide suggestions for meeting this expectation. These suggestions can include how, and how often, supervisors are expected to communicate with their staff and how supervisors will support professional staff activities. Since the supervisor is the closest person to the staff member, it is important that they work to understand professional staff needs.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 3: SUPERVISOR CHECK-INS WITH EACH STAFF MEMBER

Supervisors need to express what they expect individual professional staff to accomplish and do so in a supportive way. Let staff know that you understand their home environment is very different from the office environment; and so is yours. Supervisors need to be sensitive to the many demands placed on professional staff and take some time to check in with staff members on each and every call about their well-being.

Staff have other priorities while at home ranging from extreme isolation, if living alone, to family responsibilities, distractions in a household environment, and demands on their time outside of their work life during regular college operating hours.

Each conversation should begin with a check-in exercise making sure that individuals on the team are doing well.

Each conversation should begin with a check-in exercise making sure that individuals on the team are doing well. Express your support. And don't expect that you'll be hearing everything that is going on in each staff member's life.

These individual check-in sessions should take place weekly. The following items should be discussed: the professional staff's information technology and telephone needs, as well as their environment for doing their work. Supervisors should be aware of college and community resources to suggest if a staff member is in crisis or just needs a little extra help. Once professional staff feel cared for, ask about their work and how they're getting things done. Offer solutions and support.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 4: REGULAR STAFF MEETINGS



Staff meetings should be held at least weekly at a regular time so team members can schedule them into their lives. As with all contacts, staff meetings should begin with a quick round-robin of check-ins on the well-being of one another. Encourage an optimistic frame by asking staff to share some positive activity—related to work or in their personal life—that took place during the week. Next, provide any college-wide messages, followed by department-specific documents, changes in policy and/or practice, to be shared and discussed. Then ask your team if there are any common issues they're hearing from students for which they'd like to develop a unified response. Finally, remember to ask about work challenges. It is important that these meetings are not voice only but use a visual platform such as the Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

One tip to help lighten up the meetings is to suggest a theme. Let your team know that a meeting will begin with participants presenting an image that holds meaning for them. Professional staff can be encouraged to wear a funny t-shirt or hat. Choose a color theme for everyone to wear. These mood lighteners can help brighten your meeting and participants' day.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 5: PROFESSIONAL STAFF COLLEAGUE-TO-COLLEAGUE CONNECTIONS

Professional staff should be encouraged to check in with at least one other colleague each day. This helps share the burden of support, it relieves the supervisor of sole responsibility and encourages professional staff to be supportive of each other.

These check-ins, ideally, should take place either at the beginning or at the end of the day. Brief check-ins can be used to review

items related to their work and to support each other's well-being. A buddy system or round-robin schedule can be developed to ensure each professional staff member gets contacted every day. These engagements are designed to maintain connection and continuity among your professional staff to ensure they are supporting each other and can provide their best support to your students.

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT 6: PROFESSIONALS ENGAGE IN SELF-CARE

Our physical well-being has an influence on our mental and emotional well-being. During these times, most of us are finding that we are not exercising as much as we should or eating as well as we should. Monitoring our exercise, as well as our food intake and the quality of food, is important to our well-being.

It is also important for professional staff members to take some time every day to reflect on how they have made a difference in students' lives. This positive reflection reinforces the value of our work. It is especially important if staff are feeling down or distracted by current events. It makes us feel good, on emotional and neurological levels, to help others.

Professional staff need to move. They should stretch, take a walk, exercise; move their body at least once every two hours. Staff also should take some time away from their tasks if feeling overwhelmed or unable to focus. Professional staff also may be going through stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), and it is important for them to relax, take a breath, and practice self-care.

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 supporting our professional staff in ways that help them support our students. Professional staff may be experiencing many of the same stressors our students experience. If we want to maintain excellent service to our students to make sure that they remain connected and enrolled, professional staff must be cared for, and encouraged to care for themselves and each other, as they are central to this effort.

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

Janet Nowell, Project Coordinator

jnowell@iebcnow.org

619-933-7489



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.