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Culture of Care Fuels Record Student Retention, Persistence at Texas A&M University – Kingsville

LONG BEACH, CA – Texas A&M University – Kingsville (TAMUK) is achieving record student persistence and retention rates by building a campuswide culture where every employee plays a role in helping students succeed.

Fall-to-spring retention reached an all-time high of 92.6% in the university's most recently reported cohort, up from 78% just two years earlier. Fall-to-fall persistence has also climbed from 62% in 2022 to 76.3%. TAMUK President Dr. Robert Vela attributes those gains to a culture of care they have intentionally built through participation in Caring Campus, which helps community colleges and universities create environments centered on meaningful relationships rather than transactional interactions.

"You can't deploy and execute strategy without culture," Vela said. "Caring Campus has helped us build that university-wide caring culture where every employee –whether they are in a traditionally student-facing role or not – understands they are an educator with a role in helping students succeed."

That culture begins the moment students arrive on campus. During Welcome Week, TAMUK employees run welcome stations, hand out treats, answer questions, and help students feel excited and prepared to begin their college journey.

Throughout the year, staff reinforce that sense of belonging by wearing name badges, greeting students within a 10-foot radius, and walking students directly to the office or resource they need through warm hand-offs rather than simply pointing the way.

Faculty also strengthen that culture in the classroom by learning and using students' names, clearly communicating course expectations, and encouraging students to take advantage of office hours for both academic and personal support.

"Many of our students are first-generation college students who often feel a sense of fear and nervousness about starting such a new experience as college," Vela said. "It's our job to give them every reason to believe that they belong here and that we fully support and believe in their potential."

Vela first implemented Caring Campus while serving as president of San Antonio College, where the framework was a key contributor to the college earning the prestigious Aspen Prize. Whether at a community college or a university, Vela said the Caring Campus methodology remains the same. By building a culture where students are treated as valued assets, every employee shares responsibility for student success.

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“You can’t just wish for culture change and get it,” Vela said. “You have to put a framework in place that builds that caring culture and provides employees with tangible daily practices that create good habits. It’s a collective impact effort. When everyone commits to simple behaviors they can practice every day, we become better educators and our students are more successful.”

TAMUK has continued expanding its commitment to student success by earning Caring Campus Bronze Certification, recognizing the university’s dedication to fostering a caring culture. The university is also participating in a Caring Campus Regional Collaborative, funded by the Greater Texas Foundation, which is bringing together regional community colleges and universities to align caring practices and create a more seamless transfer experience for students.

“One of the most incredible unintended consequences of Caring Campus is that our students are now modeling the same caring behaviors they see us exhibiting,” Vela said. “Visitors have told me that when asking a student for directions, they will walk them to their destination rather than just pointing the way. That is a truly beautiful piece.”

Looking ahead, Vela expects the university’s gains in persistence and retention to translate into stronger graduation rates as more students continue progressing toward earning their degrees.

“Texas A&M University–Kingsville is a powerful example of what can be accomplished when an entire campus commits to creating a culture of care,” Caring Campus CEO Ken Sherwood said. “Their dedication to helping every student feel welcomed, valued, and supported is producing real results, and we look forward to seeing their continued success.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

IEBC_TAMUK1: At Texas A&M University – Kingsville, a caring culture begins the moment students arrive on campus. During Welcome Week, employees run welcome stations, hand out treats, answer questions, and help students feel excited and be prepared to begin their college journey.

IEBC_TAMUK2: Texas A&M University – Kingsville is achieving record student persistence and retention rates by building a campuswide culture where every employee plays a role in helping students succeed.

IEBC_TAMUK3: Texas A&M University – Kingsville has continued expanding its commitment to student success by earning Caring Campus Bronze Certification, recognizing the university’s dedication to fostering a caring culture.

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