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Oct. 8, 2026

CONTACT: Katie Emerson

(909) 324-0345

katharine.emerson@vmapr.com

Clark State College Unites Under Caring Campus with Support from ECMC Foundation

LONG BEACH, CA – Staff at Clark State College in Ohio are building a strong culture of care and meaningful connection through Caring Campus, helping students feel welcomed and supported, with plans to expand Caring Campus work to faculty in 2027 through continued support from ECMC Foundation.

As part of Caring Campus’ rural network expansion initiative funded by ECMC Foundation, the college began initial implementation with staff in 2025 and will help advance a more united campus culture focused on student success. The new grant will bring Caring Campus to as many as 18 rural colleges across the nation, helping institutions foster strong cultures of care that increase student retention, persistence, and success rates.

“As a new president coming to Clark State, one of the things that was immediately evident to me was the college’s intentional commitment to creating a truly student-centered environment,” Clark State College President Dr. Evon Walters said. “Caring Campus has helped translate that commitment into everyday behaviors and meaningful interactions. Most importantly, it is contributing to an environment where students feel that they belong, that people are invested in their success, and that they have a community behind them as they pursue their goals. That is what a student-centered college should look and feel like.”

Clark State staff have implemented multiple strategies to help ensure students feel a sense of belonging and care. While the college still hosts traditional Welcome Week tables and events, staff have also developed Open Houses held the week before classes start, providing an opportunity for students to explore campus, meet their faculty, get their class schedules printed, receive IT support, and get one-on-one assistance from staff.

“No matter the age of our students, whether it be 18 or 50, they are often nervous about coming to school and worried they won’t fit in,” Mellanie Toles, Chief of Staff/Coordinator of Board Operations and Caring Campus liaison, said. “Once we welcome them to campus, help them feel more comfortable in the environment, and show that we’re here to help, they feel more encouraged and ready to start their journeys.”

Staff have also embraced the traditional Caring Campus commitments of the 10-foot rule, greeting students within a 10-foot radius, and ensuring that there is a warm hand-off by walking students to their destination. Toles said she recently witnessed a co-worker strike up a conversation with a student and offer to walk them to their destination and could see the student’s immediate relief as the staff member went above and beyond to make him feel at ease and welcomed.

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“Caring Campus has not only helped create an intentional and caring environment for our students, but has also helped empower our staff members,” Toles said. “It’s been so encouraging to see staff who aren’t used to being in a leadership position take ownership and get excited about Caring Campus.”

Students are also embracing the Caring Campus culture they see modeled. Trained student workers in the Admissions Office help set the tone by greeting their peers as they walk in the building with a smile, warm acknowledgement, and inquiry of how they can be of assistance.

“This is a far cry from the past where students would walk in, head buried in their phones, not being engaged,” Toles said. “Now, they come into the building with their heads held high, expecting to receive our welcome and reciprocating it themselves by responding to the staff or student workers.”

Clark State staff have also produced a Caring Campus brochure that can be used as a desk reference by all staff members. The brochure highlights each Caring Campus behavior, along with descriptions of how to put each behavior into practice, and includes QR codes to the employee directory and schedule of cross-departmental awareness information sessions for easy access.

Toles presented at the inaugural Caring Campus Conference in November 2025 about Clark State’s Caring Campus efforts, including how she incorporated Caring Campus into a capstone project for her master’s degree at Wittenberg University. As part of her project, Toles conducted pre-Caring Campus and post-Caring Campus surveys with staff members focusing on their job satisfaction. Her results showed staff members felt more like college leaders, had higher confidence in their impact on student success and in their ability to help remove barriers for students, and could see the bigger impact they made on the college’s strategic plan following involvement in Caring Campus.

“We really appreciated the opportunity to have grant funds available to us so we could implement Caring Campus,” Toles said. “And our efforts will be even more evident in all aspects of the college once faculty go through it too. The conference really provided a wealth of ideas for us to use in our staff implementation, and we are hopeful that some faculty members will attend this year to see what faculty across the nation are doing to create that culture of care.”

The [Caring Campus Conference 2026: Developing a Legacy of Impact](#) is happening Nov. 11-13 in Nashville.

“We are so proud of Clark State College for their efforts and commitment to fostering a continuous culture of care for their students,” Caring Campus President Dr. Bola King-Rushing said. “Thank you to ECMC Foundation, whose generous grant support will bring Caring Campus to even more rural colleges across the nation.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

IEBC_CLARKSTATE1: Staff at Clark State College in Ohio are building a strong culture of care and meaningful connection through Caring Campus, helping students feel welcomed, supported, and connected to their college.

IEBC_CLARKSTATE2: Clark State College staff have developed Open Houses held the week before classes start, providing an opportunity for students to explore campus, meet their faculty, get their class schedules printed, receive IT support, and get one-on-one assistance from staff.

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(562) 688-5721



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3711 Long Beach Blvd., Suite 6044 | Long Beach, CA 90807