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Caring Campus

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Rural Colleges Foster Student Success Through IEBC's Caring Campus

LONG BEACH, CA – The Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) is bringing Caring Campus to rural colleges and universities nationwide with support from an ECMC Foundation grant, helping students to successfully navigate the transition to college life by establishing a sense of belonging and connection on campus.

Rural colleges often face unique challenges with student persistence and success. Students from rural, tight-knit communities can experience culture shock and feel disconnected when transitioning to a new campus environment, according to ECMC Foundation Program Officer Stephanie Sowl. Caring Campus provides staff and faculty with the tools, resources, and support needed to create an inclusive and welcoming on-campus environment for students of all demographics. Data shows that retention, persistence, and success rates increase when students feel connected to their campus.

“IEBC’s success with this grant goes to show that rural postsecondary institutions are hungry for this type of support,” Sowl said. “Creating a sense of belonging and connection is correlated to persistence and completion for rural learners. It’s incredibly important work, particularly with rural institutions.”

Sowl said that rural postsecondary institutions often lack the resources to attend professional development opportunities typically available in larger urban areas. This disparity can lead to challenges in retaining students and helping them succeed. Through Caring Campus, IEBC can bring professional development opportunities directly to rural campuses, eliminating the barriers that these institutions often face.

“By fostering a culture of support and belonging, we are helping rural students navigate the often-overwhelming transition to college life,” IEBC President Dr. Brad Phillips said. “Our goal is to ensure that every student feels valued and connected to their institution.”

Looking to the future, Dr. Phillips said he is eager to collaborate with state governments to integrate Caring Campus practices into statewide education systems. By partnering with states, IEBC aims to expand its reach and continue improving outcomes for rural students across the country.

“Our vision is to work closely with states to embed Caring Campus principles into their educational frameworks, ensuring that all students, regardless of location, have access to the support they need to succeed,” Dr. Phillips said. “We believe that by collaborating with states, we can create lasting change that benefits rural learners for generations to come.”

MORE

IEBC's grant from the ECMC Foundation, launched in September 2023, allows for 18 Caring Campus implementations across rural colleges and universities, with one implementation defined as coaching either staff or faculty in Caring Campus principles. These efforts have reached 11 rural institutions so far with only one implementation slot remaining, well ahead of the grant's official end date of Feb. 28, 2026. IEBC expects the work to be completed as early as Fall 2025, highlighting the commitment of rural colleges and universities to implement Caring Campus principles to support student success.

PHOTO CAPTION:

IEBC_ECMC1: Texas A&M University – Kingsville (TAMUK) has established a welcoming environment on campus, helping students to succeed. TAMUK is one of the rural institutions that received Caring Campus coaching through a grant from the ECMC Foundation.

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