

2025

NATIONAL
REPORT

OCTOBER 2025



Next Steps

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS

for Community College Student Success

Maximizing Student Engagement
by Fostering a Culture of Caring



Next Steps

The intensity of a college's culture of caring is evident in every aspect of college life. When a college has a holistic culture of caring, students are aware of it from their first interactions with the institution, and it is evident to anyone who visits the campus. When asked about their college, students will describe an environment in which they feel supported and know where to turn for help.

When a culture of caring is lacking, the impact is equally strong even if no one is actively describing it.

Colleges that are interested in developing a culture of caring—or deepening an existing culture of caring—should involve faculty and staff in assessing current practices and identifying opportunities for better connecting with and supporting students.

Everyone on a campus who comes in contact with students can play a role in the college's culture of caring. College leaders should engage all employees in conversations about their role in a culture of caring and build student-focused actions into the day-to-day work of all faculty and staff.

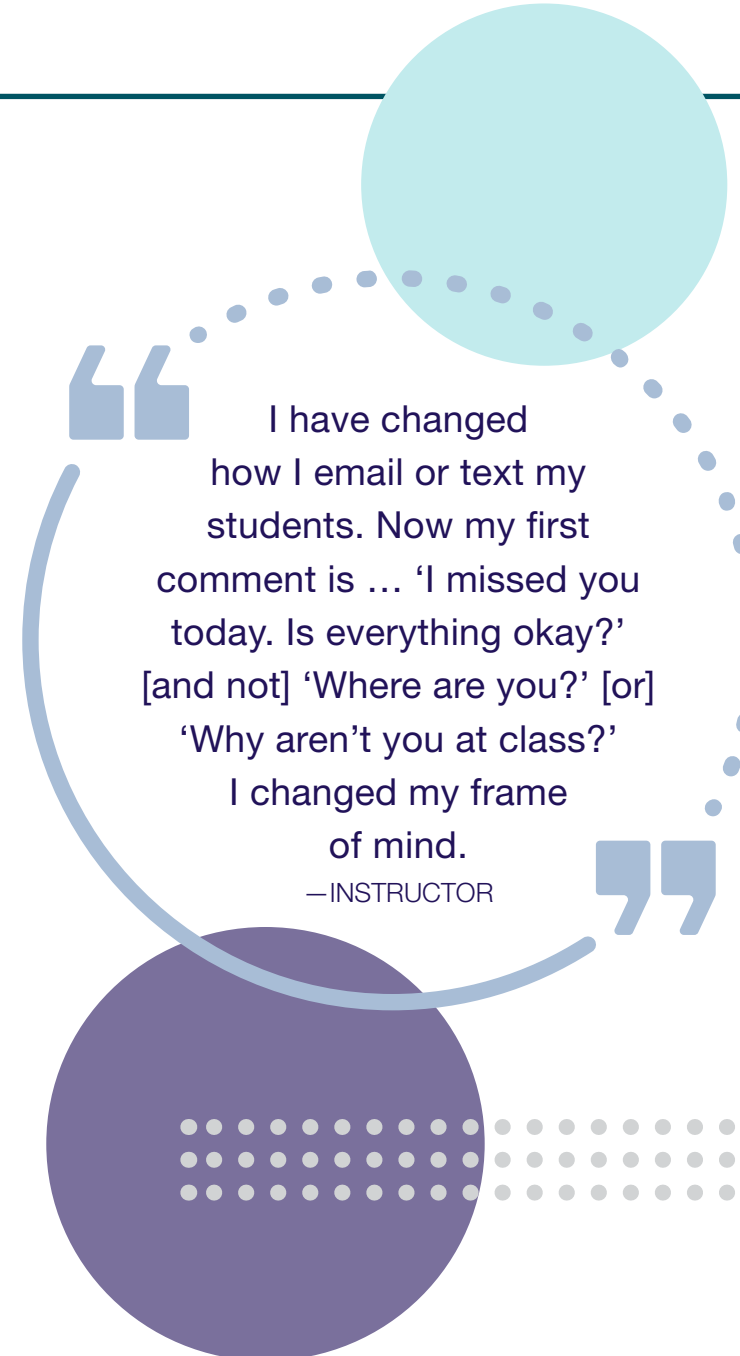
To support all employees, colleges should make supports easy to find and access. They also should make supports inescapable by making sure students are reminded about supports multiple times from multiple sources, beginning with students' earliest interactions with the college.

College employees in all areas and at all levels can:

- Make participating in an active culture of caring their top priority. Consider how their work can support each component of caring.
- Create opportunities to connect with students, build trust, and act as a resource over time.

Presidents and senior leaders can:

- Commit to developing a culture of caring. Make this work a priority for everyone at the college, and make sure each person understands what their role can be, what resources they can direct students to, and the importance of encouraging students to use these resources.
- Designate a person or team of people to maintain a centralized list of current services that are part of the college's culture of caring. Make sure everyone on campus has access to this



I have changed
how I email or text my
students. Now my first
comment is ... 'I missed you
today. Is everything okay?'
[and not] 'Where are you?' [or]
'Why aren't you at class?'
I changed my frame
of mind.
—INSTRUCTOR

- information so they use it in their contacts with students. Include campus, community, and government resources.
- Make sure advisors' caseloads allow for asking students about their needs and following up regularly.
- Allocate sufficient funds for emergency aid to help students facing unexpected financial burdens.
- Build partnerships with community organizations that provide critical services related to housing, food, child care, health care, and mental health care, or delegate specific people to do so.
- Develop systems—and train employees—to recognize and respond to students who may be experiencing food or housing insecurity, anxiety, or depression.
- Provide professional development so all staff are better able to identify students who may be struggling and connect them to the support they need.
- Encourage leaders of student government and student organizations to share information about available resources with other students.

“We don't want our students to have to retell their stories. [If a student is] coming to me and [then] advising, [I will tell the advisor about] the student's situation. Then they don't have to retell their story because it's traumatizing.”

—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR

Faculty members can:

- Increase students' self-efficacy with a combination of high expectations and high support. Acknowledge that coursework is challenging, and connect students to tutoring and other resources when they need support.
- Ask students to complete a voluntary, confidential questionnaire on the first day of class, and explain that this information is to help students be more successful in the class. Ask students, for example, what challenges would keep them from being successful in the class and what types of support they might find helpful. Then return to these questions when meeting with students who are academically underperforming in the course.
- Include information about college supports in syllabi, email signature blocks, and other regular communications with students.
- Regularly remind students to ask for help when they need it.
- Invite advisors, counselors, or staff from various support programs into classrooms to briefly present information about resources that are available to students.
- Look for changes in a student's behavior, such as missing class, not turning in assignments, or looking unkempt, and recognize that these changes may be indicators that the student is struggling. Offer to connect the student to mental health supports.

Advisors, counselors, and other staff who interact with students can:

- Ask every student what would prevent them from being successful. Use each student's responses to identify supports they need, and then connect them to appropriate services. Revisit these questions regularly because students' circumstances can change. Follow up with students who need support.
- Position themselves as a resource for students, and remind students to ask for help when they need it.
- Create a needs assessment for all students to complete at the beginning of each academic term. Based on responses, route students to support resources. Send follow-up messages during the academic term to students whose responses indicated a need for assistance.

- Share details about a range of supports as part of routine contacts with students, such as communications about registration, orientation, and billing.
- Coordinate with faculty members to make sure they are aware of resources they can share with students.

Trustees can:

- Allocate funds for emergency assistance and other student supports as well as relevant professional development for employees.
- Help the college build partnerships with community organizations that address food and housing insecurity, provide mental health support, meet students' transportation needs, and offer resources for students who are parents.

Students Also Can Play an Essential Role

While colleges must take the lead in establishing a culture of caring, students themselves are powerful agents in sustaining and strengthening that culture through their daily interactions with peers. When students have the tools and opportunities to care for their peers, they become integral partners in creating an environment in which every student feels valued and supported.

Colleges can prepare students to support each other by:

- Providing training related to recognizing signs of distress and using effective peer support strategies.
- Creating structured opportunities for students to connect with and help one another.
- Equipping students with knowledge about campus resources so they can guide their peers to appropriate support services.

When I first got here, when I first started taking my classes, it was really strange to see people care so much about [my] well-being and how good [I did] in school. I never really had that personal attachment. [It] was really nice and, honestly, really refreshing.

—STUDENT

I focus on relationship-building in my class. I teach math, but I am more of a relationship-builder than a math teacher a lot of times.

—INSTRUCTOR



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