



Early Alert Report Communicates Grades for Students At Risk

Karen Reynolds

Hawkeye Community College, USA

Purpose of the Research

Early alert systems are not highly researched, but are widely used in higher education to improve student retention and graduation rates. The decision to adopt such systems has become more difficult for administrators as technological features have expanded and policies have become more complex. Previous research supports the use of an early alert system as a way to improve academic outcomes and student retention (Varney, 2008). In addition, early alert reports support increased interaction between faculty and students (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018). Community colleges serve diverse, often non-traditional students who may be challenged to persist. Early alert systems have become key in identifying these at-risk students. This research highlights how community colleges in a Midwest state have used early alert systems and it identifies practices that promote the highest overall satisfaction from the perspective of academic administrators.

Previous Research on Early Alert

In a previous study conducted of community colleges in one state in the Midwest, the chief academic officers (CAOs) were chosen to share about their college's early alert reports. Of those

who completed the survey, 87% (13 out of 15) of the community colleges in this Midwestern state had a policy to conduct an early alert report for students, identifying those students who are struggling and at risk of not successfully completing their college course (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018). The early alert has had the best impact on retention (Bradley & Blanco, 2010), but engaged faculty are key to ensuring early alert systems are used effectively. Encouraging faculty to use the early alert report may be more challenging even if the college's retention rates and the students' outcome could be improved. For this research, an additional survey was conducted during the 2016-2017 academic year with these same Midwest CAOs, who were asked about incentives and repercussions for faculty to complete the early alert report according to their college's expectations, as well as details about that community colleges practices. These policies and practices outlined in the results of this research could prove to be beneficial to decision makers who are choosing a new or upgrading their current early alert system.

Names and Timing for Early Alert

The first question resulted from considerations about the terminology, such as if early alert is different than a midterm grade in its purpose, and if early alert means the same as an early intervention or early grade report. While these terms are used in the same way, the key aspect of this study was the process of communicating and providing early intervention for those students who are not receiving satisfactory grades at a midpoint in the college term. Therefore, the first question in the survey identified that the most common term used for this process is "early alert". Consistent with the research of such systems, there are varied opinions about when and what parameters constitute the early alert system (Fletcher 2012, Schwartz, 2010). In this sample, 69% (see Table 1, Appendix A) of respondents indicated that they placed students on the early alert report for their risk of not passing. 31% of the community colleges indicated that they placed students on the early alert report for receiving a grade of C-, D or F at some mid-point in the term, and other respondents indicated that faculty can set an indicated threshold, such as an alert when a student falls below 60%. While grades are an underlying aspect of early alert, a large percentage of the community college CAO's who responded indicated that the students were placed on the early alert report to receive follow up due to social or behavioral concerns. This survey allowed the respondents to indicate multiple reasons for a college student getting placed

on early alert report, and in this study 69% checked several reasons that a student can be placed on the early alert report.

While grade reporting was an important issue surveyed in this research, timing of the notification to a student was also important. The majority of community colleges in this Midwest state have 16-week terms, however, community college academic terms may vary in length. Some colleges choose different timing in the college term for the early alert report, regardless if a midterm grade is collected for the college. More than half of the community college CAO's reported collecting the early alert report at midterm, about halfway through the course. However, 15% (see Table 2) of those surveyed conducted their early alert report was collected at four weeks, and one college indicated that they collect the report at six weeks. A surprising factor was that 42% of the community college administrators indicated that the early alert at their college has no due date or specific timing assigned to this report. These systems with no due date are considered ongoing and can collect student's names to be referred for follow up at any time throughout the college term, which means student can be placed on early alert any time before the end of the term, and therefore intervention can begin at any point in the term. However, Some Midwest community college faculty find that no specific due date equates to never putting students on the early alert report (Reynolds, 2018).

Financial Aid, Attendance and Communication Methods

One surprising result from the survey was that about half of the community colleges in this Midwest state tied financial aid to the early alert report. Attendance is a factor tied to the student receiving their financial aid. Attendance has also been closely tied with academic performance (Tampke, 2010). Therefore, it should not be surprising that financial aid has a close tie to the early alert report, as many financial aid reporting systems also indicate attendance as an indicator of at-risk students for many colleges.

After students are identified to be at academic risk on the early alert report, communicating with the student to offer them help and resources is the next step. Three-quarters of the colleges surveyed indicated that the student is sent an email after being placed on the early alert report. However, only one college indicated that a letter is mailed to the student. In addition, 75% of those surveyed indicated that the student's advisor is informed that the student has been placed on

the early alert report (See Table 3). Only one community college still mails a letter to the student's permanent address encouraging the student to meet with their instructor and/or advisor, while 75% are sending an email message to the student regarding their referral to early alert. While email is easy to use, in an effort to reach the students using technology students may prefer, one community college sends a text message to the student when they are referred to early alert. Four of the community colleges in this Midwest state attempt to reach the student by phone. Because of the challenge in reaching students, 42% of the colleges surveyed use more than one method to attempt to reach the student.

Specialists and Technology

A growing trend found in research is to have a designated person or team on campus reach out to those at-risk students when they are identified by early alert (Habley et al., 2012, Wasley, 2007). In this study, only two of the CAO's surveyed indicated utilizing a "specialist" who follows up with students using multiple media methods in an attempt to reach the student, however even though there is not a designated person, several community colleges indicated that they use multiple attempts to reach a student (Table 4). When asked about the person or people who make a 2nd attempt to reach the student, 44% indicated that the student's advisor is the person who makes the 2nd attempt when a student has been referred to early alert. However, 22% of these Midwest community colleges identified the instructor as the person who made an additional attempt to reach that student who is at risk. All respondents shared that telephone was a method used as follow up on the early alert referral. However, all respondents also indicated that an additional email message was sent as follow up. Multiple methods of attempts to reach students is the most common practice for following up with the students identified by early alert (Reynolds, 2018), in fact, 50% of respondents on this survey also indicated text messaging as a method used for 2nd follow up to the student's original referral to early alert. None of the colleges use the regular mail system for their 2nd follow up, and one community college indicated that multiple methods are used to attempt to reach that student, "until that student has been reached".

Early alert systems have evolved as technology has improved. Choosing the system that is best for your college is challenging since there are many options available. In this sample, 45% of the

respondents indicated that their college created a custom software system for the purpose of early alert reporting. Another 45% indicated that at their college, the faculty must manually enter the grades from their current grading system to the early alert system. One community college indicated that the early alert system they use was purchased from the company that provides their Learning Management System, and therefore integrates with the early alert report. Using two separate systems can create some challenges and difficulties (Reynolds, 2018), however, the tight budgets and limited resources make large purchases such as an early alert system difficult for some community colleges.

Evaluating the Systems and the Faculty for Increased Use

Reviewing the college's early alert system, such as collecting data, and assessing the value and outcomes requires resources, such as time and personnel. How often should these college systems be reviewed? While eight of the community colleges surveyed for this study indicated that their early alert report is reviewed every semester, two of the community colleges indicated that their early alert report is reviewed yearly. However, one of the two indicated that they review online once each semester, and meet in person once per year to review the report. One community college shared that their college rarely reviews the early alert report.

But, what kind of incentive is there for the faculty to complete the early alert report? Or what kind of repercussions occur if faculty do not fill out early alert referrals for their students? In this study, 67% of the community college CAO's indicated that the early alert report was a requirement or expectation, with one clarifying that early alert is "an expectation that benefits students". However, 33% shared that the early alert report is just "strongly recommended" for faculty to complete for their students they feel are at risk (See Table 5). Only one community college CAO indicated that faculty are sent one additional reminder if they do not complete the early alert report. Another community college CAO indicated that the faculty are contacted if they do not complete the early alert report, and may be "talked to" by their supervisor at their yearly review. Two CAO's indicated that the college will follow up with faculty until the report is completed. Fifty percent surveyed indicated that their college does not make it a point to track which faculty have completed the report (See Table 6).

Colleges could use incentives as a way to encourage faculty to participate in the early alert system and refer their at-risk students. In this study, one community college respondent indicated that the faculty can use their completion of the early alert report with their annual review. Another community college indicated that they give faculty a certificate of completion when the report is done. Two of these Midwest community colleges shared that they feel the incentive for faculty to complete the report should be increased retention in their class and a personal satisfaction in helping those who are at risk. Five of the community colleges surveyed (42%) indicated that no faculty incentive is given for completing the early alert report. One community college indicated that they had no way of tracking which faculty had completed the early alert report (see Table 7). One additional comment added by a respondent to this survey shared that the early alert is part of the faculty's role in advising, which could be inferred to mean that nine out of 11 (82%) of these community colleges have no incentives for faculty for completing the early alert report in this Midwest state.

Satisfaction and Overall Results

Satisfaction with the early alert system used at their college was indicated by a Likert scale from "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied". Two of the community college CAO's indicated that they were very satisfied with their current early alert system. Five respondents (42%) were somewhat satisfied. These seven responses make up the majority of these Midwest community colleges, indicating that most of them are gratified with their current system. Three of the respondents were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied with their current early alert system. One community college indicated that they were somewhat unsatisfied. And only one surveyed shared that they were very unsatisfied with their current early alert system (see Table 8)

Retention is of significant importance to many colleges especially in today's economy, and is one of the biggest reasons many colleges use early alert systems to identify and intervene with the at-risk student. In this era of shrinking enrollments in the Midwest, tight budgets, and low graduation rates at community colleges, retention is even more important. The national average for retention rates for community colleges in the Midwest is 49.9% (Community College Week, 2013). Preparing early alert reports do not assure colleges of improved retention rates. However, identifying, intervening and offering resources can make an impact on students by making them

aware and assisting them before it is too late to make a change in their current academic behavior. Selecting the right early alert process for your campus is important, and this research study identifies many of the more common practices used in community colleges early alert programs.

References

- [1] Bradley, Jr, A. & Blanco, C. (2010). Promoting a culture of student success: How colleges and universities are improving degree completion. *Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)*.
- [2] Community College Week (2013). Retention rates lagging at Iowa community colleges. <http://ccweek.com/article-3630-retention-rates-lagging-at-iowa-community-colleges.html>
- [3] Fletcher, M. (2012). *A national study of student early alert programs at tow-year institutions of higher education*. Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (UMI 3503809)
- [4] Habley, W. R. (2004). *The status of academic advising: Findings from the ACT Sixth National Survey*. Washington, DC: National Academic Advising Association.
- [5] Reynolds, K. (2018), “How Faculty Perceptions of the Early Alert Report Impact Use” , National Council for Instructional Administrators
- [6] Reynolds, K. & Friedel, J. (2018) Policies of Midwest Community Colleges around Communicating Grades to Students, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 42:7-8, 574-576, DOI: [10.1080/10668926.2018.1429960](https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1429960)
- [7] Schwartz, M. (2010). *Improving community college persistence: An investigation of promising practices*. (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (UMI 3433184)
- [8] Tampke, D., & Shirley, M. (2009). *Early alert: Letting students know you are concerned*. Conference presentation at the Alliance '09 Higher Education Users Group Conference, Anaheim, CA.
- [9] Varney, R. (2008). Study of early intervention on first-year non-development community college freshmen (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (UMI 3503809)

[10] Wasley, P. (2007). A secret support network. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from Feb 9, 2007 from <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Secret-Support-Network/12417>