Early Alert: A Guide to Best Practices

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Abstract

Early alert is a program designed to flag students who are unprepared for rigorous college-level work. Due to numerous pilot programs implemented by various colleges and universities nationwide, studies have shown that the early warning system can raise pass rates for freshman classes and ultimately improve graduation rates. This chapter provides an overview of what a well-functioning early alert system looks like, how instructors can plan to implement one into their own classes, and the steps UNC Charlotte is taking to create a campus-wide approach through the adoption of Starfish®.

Introduction

Early alert is a formal, proactive program designed to identify students who display problems in class and to direct those students to campus resources which can positively affect their retention and success in the class. Ideally, the program will be come at the end of the first month of classes and flag students who display problematic behaviors in basic skills. Crucially, these students should then be directed to programs which help with student retention and skill formation. When properly implemented, Early Alert will identify students who lack basic preparation for collegiate-level success and direct them to resources that can help form those skills. Early alert is not a tool to punish bad students, but rather an opportunity to reach out to students who have not been given the tools necessary for success.

Goals and Purposes of the Program

As college enrollment rates have climbed over the past two decades, retention rates have fallen (Mortenson 2005). The reasons for the drop are multifaceted, but one is the lack of preparation for the classroom experience. Students do not have the skills, both technical and abstract, to succeed in college. While remedial classes are an option for the 70% who need them, study skills are not typically addressed in the same way (Kuh *et al,* 2005). Students who lack study skills do not recognize a problem until they fail an exam or other assignment, which is often impossible to recover from in order to salvage a passing grade in the class. To remedy this problem, several universities have established pilot programs to identify these unprepared students before they fail. Early Alert is the most common name for the program which attempts to identify and offer resources to students who display signs of distress in the first month of classes.

To accomplish this early alert, data collection is imperative. When faculty regularly log attendance, early grades, class participation and other warning flags, these students can be notified and directed to university resources as early as four weeks into a semester. These students might still struggle, but failure rates dropped significantly (Taylor and McAleese, 2012). A 2006 study concluded that implementing early alert reduced the percentage of students who dropped courses due to multiple absences. Students were even surprised that their attendance was tracked and that someone on campus was so concerned as to contact them (Hudson, 2006). New college students clearly struggle with their new responsibility. While not relieving them of that responsibility, tracking their attendance and alerting them to failure seems to improve their skills in the classroom.

The Early Alert program assesses more than attendance; it combines multiple sets of data to help identify students with other skill issues. In 2008 Frederick Community College created an early alert program. Instructors noted students who had multiple absences or poor grades. The alert was sent to the student, and the student was referred to an academic advisor. As a result the college reported that successful outcomes for students rose from 52% to 66% in that semester (Chappell, 2010). Ultimately, the goal of any early alert is to get students help before their lack of preparation dooms their classroom performance. A student who avoids a failing grade or a withdrawal in their first year will be better prepared to graduate within four years. In addition, the program should make the student more responsible for his or her own success. Instead of being left without help, the student is clearly made aware of any problem and offered help. Early alert, when implemented and combined with direction to campus resources, offers every student the best chance to succeed.

One way that early alert also encourages higher retention rates is by helping the student feel part of a larger community. Unfortunately, the majority of students who lack preparation for college tend to be either first-generation students, economically disadvantaged, or both (Tough 2014). They do not know how to succeed in a university setting, and when they face problems in the classroom they do not know where to turn. Early alert can help identify those students and direct them to appropriate resources. This issue is particularly important with freshman as they face the most crucial moment for long-term success is the first year of college (Upcraft *et al,* 2005). Freshman to sophomore persistence increases if the student finds a support network (Nora *et al,* 2005). While many freshman initiatives target out-of-class issues, time management, and personal development, grades seem to be the largest reason for dropouts (Upcraft *et al,* 2005). To that end, an early alert system, while not a magic bullet, can increase retention and performance for underprepared students.

Planning for Early Alert

For an early alert system to be effective, instructors must plan for it. The class syllabus must be constructed to provide data to the instructor in order to flag students who might have trouble with college-level skills. This data may take different forms depending on the topic, the class, and the preferences of the instructor. Unlike midterm grades, which reflect knowledge and content learned in the class, early alert programs measure the student's baseline skills upon entering the course. Through Early Alert the instructor is mapping the student's preparation and likelihood of success in the class. The instructor should plan on collecting data in multiple ways during the first few weeks of classes.

Instructors often complain that early alert comes too quickly in the term and that students cannot yet be evaluated. This concern shows how Early Alert can be misunderstood. Attendance, participation, and communication with the instructor are all necessary skills to succeed in the university environment. Early alert is designed to identify students who are unprepared in these areas. Students in freshman-heavy classes are most likely to lack these skills. By identifying them early and directing them to resources on campus, their chances of success (not just in that course but for the entirety of their academic career) are greatly increased.

So how do you measure skills instead of knowledge? The instructor should consider what skills are essential to success in the given course. In almost every course attendance is paramount. Students who miss class, even classes when they are not yet enrolled, will be at a disadvantage. Requiring attendance can measure how well a student can and will meet the basic course requirements. Instructors should consider ways to track attendance and input that data into any early alert. No matter what method you choose, absences should be entered into an online database. Instructors should also try to measure for comprehension of syllabus requirements, technological familiarity, pre-requisite knowledge, and study skills. Each of these issues, which can prevent a student from fully grasping material in class, can be addressed through early alert measurement.

Besides being physically present, the instructor should try to ascertain the student's familiarity with college-level expectations. Many instructors require a syllabus quiz to continue with the class, which ensures that students are aware of their responsibilities in the class. Other low-stakes quizzes may also measure basic study skills and student's mental engagement with

the class. If the class has pre-requisites, the quizzes might cover that material to examine the

student's fitness to be taking a class. The results of data in the first four weeks helps to identify

students who would benefit from university resources.

Disadvantaged and non-traditional students are often unfamiliarity with technology.

Requiring students to interact during the first few weeks with technology can identify those

who lack technology skills. Resources might be examined during these weeks by offering

quizzes in an online environment and requiring students to post to an online discussion.

Students who struggle with technology issues should be sent to the appropriate on-campus

training prior to the due date of an exam or assignment using that technology. This examination

also allows instructors to catch any technological flaws in the system early in the semester.

Students' preparation for a class is a final way that students can be measured. More

than any other area, this will vary from discipline to discipline. The sciences may require a

remedial exam to ensure that students have the requisite knowledge to proceed with the class.

The humanities might require a brief writing assignment to gauge a student's ability. In either

case the focus should be on measuring where the student is prior to any major content

knowledge from the class in question. For an instructor, the practice can be freeing because it

unmasks the underlying problems. If students suffer from preparation problems and not in-

class problems, the instructor can make better judgments about pedagogical practices.

Students are not adequately prepared can be directed to the most useful campus resources.

Implementing Early Alert

Following in the path of other successful universities, UNCC has been testing a new

system to integrate the data and issue early alerts to faculty and academic advisors. This tool,

which is tied in with the university's online platform (Moodle2), is named Starfish® and should

be available beginning in the Fall semester of 2015. Starfish® is the early alert tool that gives

instructors the ability to keep track of student's progress. An instructor builds an institutional

profile that contains their contact information and office hours for students to make

appointments with them. Email notifications are sent to both the instructor and students to

remind them about appointments. The Outlook calendar and Starfish® calendar can be linked

and all appointments can be seen at the same time. A progress survey is provided for each

course by which an instructor can raise flags if necessary. Starfish® can be integrated with

Moodle 2 gradebook, therefore instructors can flag students that are below a certain grade or

number of attendance days. If an instructor raises a flag then a standard email will be sent to

students about their progress as well as their academic advisors. An instructor can also send

positive feedback to students to encourage them to keep up their good work.

     While Starfish will ease the burden of collecting data for instructors, they must still plan

for proper evaluation to take place during the semester. Instructors should also prepare their

students to receive alerts. A poorly prepared student should be given a warning with the proper

framing to maximize potential changes in behavior. The student should be offered support and

suggestions for improvement. This warning comes early enough in the semester that students

can improve. If the student is willing to take steps to improve, a failure or withdrawal does not

have to be inevitable. Instructors can assist by sending a personal email that offers guidance for

the next steps in class. Students should be reminded by their advisors and instructors that early

alert is not a tool to punish bad students, but it is rather an opportunity to improve their

success.

Resources

Student's guide to Moodle2

A Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) presentation for students unfamiliar with the

university's online platform.

Writing Resource Center

The writing center will work with students in writing and re-writing their papers. They

also offer online tutoring for students if they cannot make it physically to a meeting.

UNCC Tutoring Services

The tutoring center is offered by the Center for Academic Excellence. It is a free service

available to all students.

Study groups offered by Center for Academic Excellence

This is a free academic support program that utilizes peer-led group study to help

students succeed.

Personal Consults on Academic Problems by Center for Academic Excellence

These Personal Academic Consultations (PACs) are one-on-one sessions led by graduate

students that help students develop specific strategies to address their academic concerns.

Study Skills Workshops

The center for academic excellence offers a variety of topics for these workshops which

range from time management to oral presenting skills to personal budgeting.

Disability Services Home

Starfish Training

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