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WHITE PAPER SERIES

Early alerts as a tool for student success

Defining what “good” looks like

Katie Lynch-Holmes, MS

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The importance of identifying at-risk students early enough to make a difference is well documented by researchers and embraced by most colleges and universities. In fact, 93 percent of higher education institutions report having some form of early alert and intervention program.[1]

But less commonly understood are the standards and practices that define a "good" early alert program. For instance, are you proactively identifying target populations using historical data? Or focusing on social as well as academic factors? Have you established a campus-wide team dedicated to managing early alerts and interventions? These and other best practices can help you build a program that significantly impacts student success.

One thing all successful early alert programs have in common is a systematic approach to deploying the right people with the right resources at the right times to make meaningful connections with at-risk students—and spur them to action.

This paper should help you evaluate how your current program measures up. Keep in mind that any strategies you adopt should align with your institution's specific mission and goals.

Seven steps shown by practitioners to increase success

1. **Define program goals** *(make sure they reflect your own culture and values)*
2. **Identify target populations** *(be proactive, as well as reactive)*
3. **Build an early alert and intervention team** *(look beyond the usual suspects)*
4. **Engage at-risk students** *(get their attention, motivate them to act)*
5. **Develop intervention strategies** *(take advantage of all available resources)*
6. **Make early alerts and interventions part of institutional culture** *(communicate results)*
7. **Measure and learn** *(improve over time)*

1. John N. Gardner Institute, 2013

With funding and accountability increasingly tied to retention, persistence, and graduation, institutions of higher education can't afford to do just the minimum when it comes to investing in programs that directly support student success. Early alerts and interventions are paramount to student success. Getting to "good" should be a top priority.

Define program goals

For an early alert program to succeed, its goals must align with those of the institution. This ensures buy-in and support from the top down. It also prevents mission creep, which often results in a loss of credibility and resources.

For example, if your strategic plan calls for an increase in student diversity, focus early intervention efforts on underrepresented populations most at risk. If your student success plan identifies first-year students as representing the highest attrition rates, create comprehensive alert and intervention tactics to meet their needs.

In other words, use the program to drive value in the areas that matter most to institutional leaders. And be prepared to demonstrate the rationale behind the priorities you've chosen.

Equally important, ask up front whether or not early alerts are a realistic tool for achieving a particular strategic outcome at the departmental or institutional level. *If not*, don't waste limited resources on an approach that is unlikely to succeed. Choose an alternate strategy. *If so*, create measures to help track and demonstrate your impact on the desired outcome.

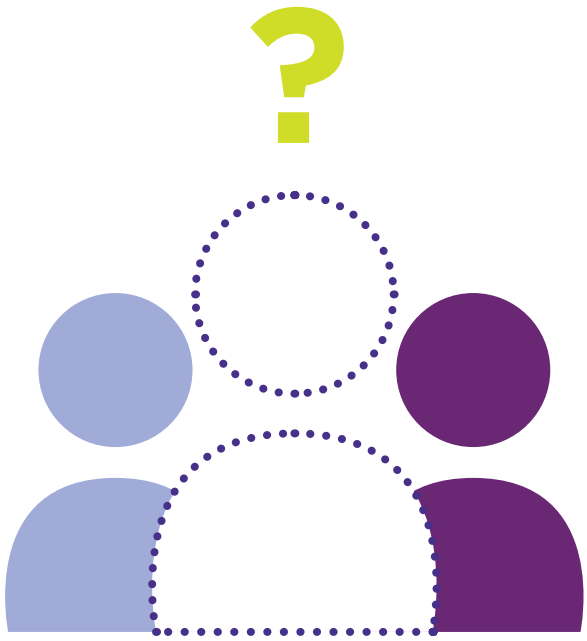
Identify target populations

One of the best strategies for taking your early alert program to the next level is using proactive as well as reactive measures to identify target populations.

Using data to predict risk

Institutions collect thousands of data points each year—used primarily for reporting and accountability. Data is less frequently used to enhance programs like early alert and intervention.

Many institutions rely on a reactive approach to identifying at-risk students—often through academic performance reports from faculty. Instead, consider cross referencing historical,



academic, and demographic data to identify at-risk populations before you even receive the first red flag.

Conversely, look for patterns among students who have excelled and use it to inform strategies for closing skills gaps among those at risk.

Looking at national predictive data can add context and insights as well.

Knowing which cohorts need the most support allows you to allocate limited resources effectively. Invest in strategies that put at-risk populations on track for success from day one, such as summer bridge programs or first-year courses on cognitive and study skills.

Using data to inform reactive measures

There are common red flags, such as low classroom attendance, low test scores, or excessive time playing video games, which indicate potential risk. The early alert team should run an ongoing awareness and training campaign to ensure potential referrers, including all faculty and staff, know what to look for and how to respond.

The most noted factors attributed to whether students succeed or struggle include academic preparation, goal development, academic skills, and acculturation to the institution.[2]

Social constraints also play a key role: relationships with peers, economic struggles, juggling family responsibilities.

A strong early alert program fleshes out more discrete, tangible indicators that students are struggling in these areas. For example, absences, tardiness, weak writing skills, missed assignments, early request for transcripts, and mid-term grade performance.

2. ACT, 2004

Ask more from your data

- Are there specific populations succeeding at a lower rate? (male, female, underrepresented, transfers, grade levels, etc.)
- Is there a highly competitive department or program unable to serve all of its applicants?
- What courses are most students struggling with? Which have the highest registration, drop, fail, withdrawal rates?
- Are there specific demographic populations that follow the national trend for graduation rates?

Build an early alert and intervention team

An important foundation for any early alert program is a multidisciplinary team dedicated to implementation and stewardship.

Based on program goals, the early alert team could include representatives from such diverse areas as: student life, residence life, athletic services, multicultural affairs, disability services, financial aid, enrollment, institutional research, the provost's office, and the counseling center.

Depending on the size and resources of the institution, the early alert team might be a few people or a formal committee. The team's role is to oversee core components of the program, such as goals, engagement protocols, communications, measures, and learning.

Above all, the team must develop an active and engaged network of faculty, staff, and community members to serve as go-to "referrers" and "responders."

Referrers

Referrers raise the red flags. They are often faculty and advisors. However, increasing the community of people watching out for various student populations increases the likelihood of detecting concerns. And it makes students more aware that help is available if they need it. Studies show that if a student can identify one person on campus to turn to with questions or concerns, they are more likely to remain at the institution.[3]

Other referrers might include residence life assistants, academic support staff, parents and family (especially for non-traditional students), and peers.

The key is to establish an effective communications loop between (1)"front line" offices, (2) students, and (3) the early alert team.

Responders

One or two members of the early alert team—preferably those with some knowledge of or relationship with the student—are usually the first to respond to a red flag. This is followed by responses from designated faculty members, academic advisors, staff from the student success office, the office of the registrar, or even the office of first-year programs.[4]

You might broaden your safety net of institutional responders to include partners such as residence life, Greek life, athletics, multicultural affairs, and student life. This increases the chance that a student is contacted by someone with whom he or she is already familiar or is likely to connect with on a personal level.

3. Schlossberg, N. K., 1989
4. Tinto, 1992; Barefoot, 1998; Cuseo, 2006

Engage at-risk students

When it comes to getting students' attention, borrow some tried and true tactics from traditional marketing.

- **Use multiple channels:** Emails, postcards, face-to-face conversations. College students often respond best to emails and texts. But they still look at print mail, they still answer the phone, and they still respond to requests for face-to-face meetings. Assume each student's preferences will be different. Cover your bases.
- **Try more than once:** As with any marketing campaign, it often takes multiple attempts, using multiple methods, to get a response.
- **Set a deadline for response:** This reinforces urgency and reduces the chance the communication will be put in a "to do later" pile. Consider setting an appointment time and location in the initial communication.
- **Make contact info prominent:** Put the name of an actual person, not a department, as the contact. Include links in emails to pertinent resources.
- **Personalize:** Don't rely on "Dear Student" communications with generic messages. These appear mass generated and low priority. If possible, ensure that the first message comes from someone the student knows. Sending communications from two different people also reinforces urgency (for example, an academic contact and a more personal contact, such as an RA). If using email, avoid institutional-sounding subject lines. State the what and why in plain, appealing language.
- **Offer help rather than scolding:** Implying a student is being contacted because he or she has failed, or is likely to fail, is not as effective as a message that stresses (1) someone cares and (2) help is available because the institution wants them to succeed.

And the most important rule of marketing: know your target audience and speak to the things they care about. Students are likely to care about getting their degrees, keeping financial aid, or meeting the expectations of family or peers. Let them know how inaction might affect one or more of these factors, rather than just stating what they've "done wrong."

Develop intervention strategies

After successfully establishing an initial connection, the next step is to create a well-defined intervention plan with a clear path to success.

Assessments show that, historically, institutions face three main challenges at this stage.

1. Students receive alerts from too many different faculty or advisors, who are working in silos.

2. Students encounter different types of intervention plans within different campus settings.

3. A plan does not include a method for closing the loop—i.e. tying change in student behavior back to a specific intervention strategy, as well as making it clear progress or success has been achieved.

Respond to the student not the problem

Make sure you have a single, integrated plan of action. Especially when addressing multiple red flags, using multiple responders.

Within your technology constraints, strive to create a single repository for student information, including alert and intervention status and history of communications to date. Even more important, educate referrers and responders on the importance of consulting and contributing to this resource.

Provide more than one point of contact for intervention (but coordinate!)

Assigning more than one person to an intervention helps impress upon students the level of seriousness and need, while also covering multi-pronged issues. And it increases the probability students end up speaking with someone they know. However, providing multiple points of contact also increases the need for clear communications and an integrated plan.

Provide clear and concise steps for timely recovery

Each plan of action should include multiple small, manageable goals and time-appropriate tasks with deadlines. SMART[5] goals in particular align expectations for the student, support staff, faculty, or other members of the intervention team.

Regular communications keep students on track toward these goals. Students feel more accountable when they know someone will be following up at regular intervals and tracking progress. The timeline should include who, when, how often, and with what expectation in mind responders will be contacting the student.

Create templates and tools

Most schools don't have the resources to create a unique response strategy for every individual. Nor is this always the right approach, depending, of course, on the circumstance.

Creating standard protocols benefits both students and the team. Students learn consistent lessons about how to ask for help, how to follow

5. Specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based

an improvement plan, and how to tie activities to outcomes. Staff can more effectively handle a heavy influx of alerts. And, they have uniform data for evaluating what works and what doesn't over time.

Develop templates and checklists for responders. But also provide instructions and communications tools for reporting and handling unique cases.

And find ways to maximize available expertise. Assign specific early alert team members to at-risk populations they are best qualified to help. This allows them to develop consistent, effective strategies over time based on an increasingly strong understanding of the target group.

Varying capacity to address challenges

Obviously, capacity for managing interventions varies between schools. Some track plans and communications using programs like Excel, which makes coordination between responders from different departments a challenge. At the other end of the spectrum lie institutions with sophisticated, centralized information systems, which make intervention plans and progress accessible to all involved.

Intervention resources also vary between schools of different sizes, with different budgets. Some have entire student success departments and a wide range of academic support programs. Others rely solely on faculty or peer mentoring. But studies show what matters most is that intervention is taking place and students feel as though they matter.[6]

6. Cuseo, 2006; Hammon & Kelland, 1994

Intervention examples

Academic interventions

- Tutoring
- Supplemental instruction for historically challenging courses
- Proactive advising for at-risk students
- Counseling on career and degree/major selection
- Defining goals and expectations

Social interventions

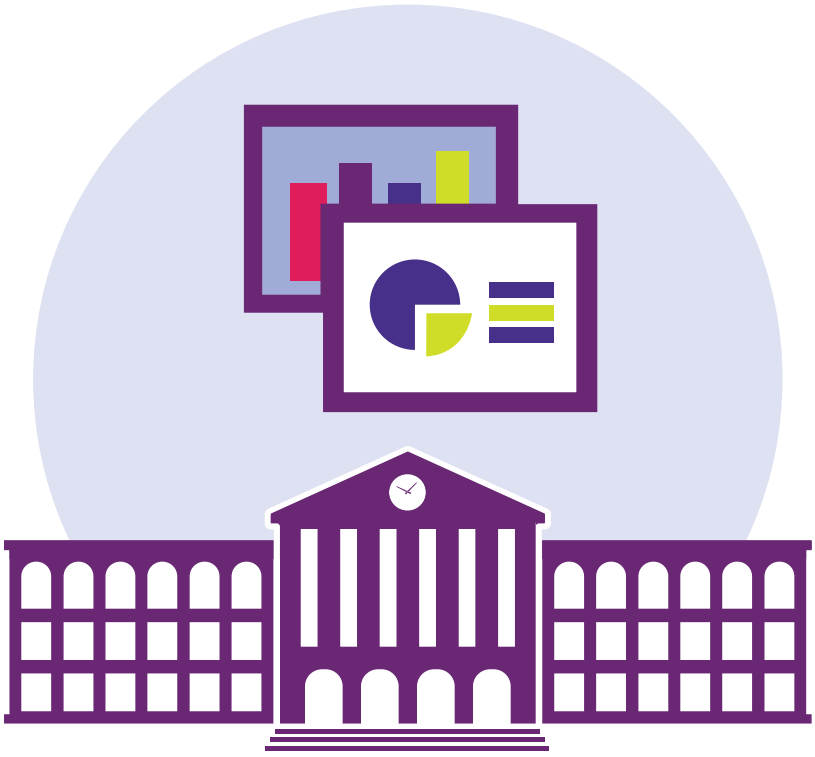
- Counseling on personal, family, or financial issues
- Courses and workshops on "soft skills," such as time management, good study habits, effective communications
- Peer study groups/mentoring in non-academic settings (residence hall, Greek organizations, peer groups)
- Support from non-academic advisors

Make early alerts and interventions part of institutional culture

As with any institutional program, stakeholders will be more motivated to continue participation and serve as champions if they see results. An ongoing communications campaign should celebrate results, as well as demonstrate accountability to key stakeholders.

For example, faculty compliance and buy-in is a frequently noted challenge.[7] Some believe students are being coddled. Some don't see the current program as effective. Following are some strategies for "winning over" faculty, referrers, responders, executive leadership, and other program champions:

- Provide participants with proven techniques, grounded in research, for early alert and intervention, in order to reinforce the validity of the program.
- Create simple and user-friendly referrer forms and responder reporting tools to increase likelihood of use.
- Set up automatic acknowledgment of alerts, as well as reminders to responders to report on progress.
- Conduct short, easy-to-complete surveys on a regular basis to gauge and address concerns about the program; communicate efforts to address those concerns to demonstrate responsiveness.
- Secure an executive champion willing to reinforce the importance of the program in regular communications.
- Close the loop with both referrers and responders about results of intervention.
- Advertise program impact on student success on a regular basis.



7. Cuseo, 2006

Measure and learn

Measure success on multiple levels

As described earlier, measuring an individual student's progress should be built into his or her intervention plan. It is equally important to create metrics that gauge the overall effectiveness of various tactics, as well as achievement against the program's ultimate goal—increasing student success.

Sample metrics for monitoring tactics

- Effectiveness of different intervention strategies
- Time elapsed between alert and intervention
- Responder follow-through rate
- Allocation of resources proportional to need (by academic unit, demographic, etc.)

Sample metrics for monitoring outcomes

- Increase in retention rate among at-risk populations
- Less drop/withdrawal/fail rates in key courses
- Increase in average GPA across terms, years
- Student satisfaction rates

Ensure that you measure progress at regular intervals and have a mechanism for making program adjustments. For example, review measurement reports at meetings of the early alert team, propose new processes or tactics as needed, and assign follow up to specific faculty or staff.

An annual review should focus on lessons learned and what needs to change in order to move the needle over time.

Metrics that show overall impact on student success can be used to increase participation and, if necessary, justify additional resources for the program.

Conclusion

Nearly all institutions of higher education have some sort of early alert system in place. But many struggle to achieve meaningful results because their programs lack strategic design and/or effective implementation.

While institutions have different needs, the definition of a good early alert program will always include:

- goals that align with institutional priorities
- proactive as well as reactive methods for identifying at-risk students
- a broad, diverse network of support
- communications tailored to the way students think and act
- carefully coordinated interventions with a clear roadmap to success
- a communications loop that keeps all parties informed and motivated by results
- a strategy for measuring impact and improving over time

Being strategic about how you invest time and resources will yield a greater return when it comes to your ultimate goal—increasing student success. And, it will instill confidence in the program among faculty and staff, increasing participation and impact over time.

About Ellucian

Ellucian helps education institutions thrive in an open and dynamic world. We deliver a broad portfolio of technology solutions, developed in collaboration with a global education community, and provide strategic guidance to help education institutions of all kinds navigate change, achieve greater transparency, and drive efficiencies. More than 2,400 institutions in 40 countries around the world look to Ellucian for the ideas and insights that will move education forward, helping people everywhere discover their potential through learning.

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