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WHITE PAPER SERIES

# Helping students succeed:
## Evolving from early alerts to early engagement

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This whitepaper, third in a series dedicated to student success, will build on the educational principles that promote student learning and persistence to degree completion, as well as explore new ways of using early alerts to bolster early engagement. In order to effect desired change, campuses must first establish the foundational strategies for a culture of student success and facilitate a strong early alert and intervention process. Once these foundational principles are in place, the opportunity to engage students in meaningful ways grows exponentially.

The phrase "student success" has many meanings within higher education. Some equate it with persistence to graduation, others define it as completion of students' learning goals, and still others interpret it as supporting the personal and academic growth of future societal leaders. Regardless of the operational definition, one thing remains consistent—student success is contingent on students' active participation in their academic and social communities. Dr. Joe Cuseo, author, professor, and director of Freshman Seminar at Marymount College states, **"**Student success in college depends on both student effort and institutional effort; it's a reciprocal relationship between what the college does for its students and what students do for themselves."

National research has identified many common best practices on which to focus institutional efforts. For example, high-performing institutions foster a culture of collaboration by working toward a shared mission of student success using cross-departmental teams. Additionally, they identify both high-achieving and at-risk student populations through institutional data and connect these students to relevant campus resources. Furthermore, high-performing institutions effectively communicate findings to the campus community, creating a culture of transparency and ownership. These and other strategies are outlined in more depth in the first two white papers of this series: *Retention and student success: Implementing strategies that make a difference*, and *Early alerts as a tool for student success: Defining what "good" looks like.*

No matter how an institution defines and pursues student success, early engagement in educationally purposeful activities is the cornerstone of an effective practice.

## What exactly, is early engagement and what does it have to do with student success?

During the 1990s, colleges and universities were increasingly held accountable for demonstrating student outcomes while also becoming significantly more dependent upon tuition as a key source of revenue. This confluence of factors—along with a movement to strike the right balance between institutional intrusiveness and student privacy and freedom—led to the growth of more formal early alert and intervention initiatives. For nearly 20 years, campuses have identified individual "at-risk" students—often based on poor grades, attendance, or participation. It's a valuable practice worth continuing, but it has its limitations.

Traditional early alert and intervention programs are reactionary, heavily dependent on lagging indicators of performance (such as mid-term grades), reliant on faculty referrals of reported classroom activity, and focused on identifying students *after* they have demonstrated academic, financial, or personal struggles. Additionally, they typically ignore high-achieving students and students who are technically in good academic standing…but just barely. However, increased access to evidence-based practices, data and analytics, and technology allows institutions to proactively connect with a larger population of students in a meaningful way before they exhibit signs of trouble. Thus, institutions can more effectively monitor and promote students' participation in educationally effective or high-impact practices that encourage engagement and success. This also offers institutions additional data points to identify students who are at risk without having to rely solely on faculty referrals, class attendance, or even grades. Progressive institutions are able to pivot the foundational elements of early alert and intervention into a more comprehensive early engagement program. This approach aligns student-development theory

### Muskegon Community College

The student population at Muskegon Community College is diverse in age, demographics, race, and gender. As an Achieving the Dream™ leader college, Muskegon Community College has designed a robust student success and completion agenda that includes 13 high-impact practices that provide students with the extra support they need. These practices focus on intervention strategies for the entire student population as well as specific groups. To get students to engage in the high-impact activities, the college implemented an early engagement software system. Combined with the specifically identified high-impact student success initiatives, semester-to-semester retention and persistence jumped from 77 to 82 percent. Participation in high-impact activities has increased more than 34 percent in just four years and that has made a marked difference: 315 of 1,566 at-risk returning students re-enrolled for fall 2015. "We use multiple systems to draw multiple pieces of information and contact the students based upon what we might see as an issue with a student," says Dr. Dale Nesbary, president of Muskegon Community College. "I can identify students who are part of the President's List, who were 4.0 students. The ability to have information available to us is invaluable. Whether that alert is about a behavioral issue or an alert about a student who's doing very well, simplifies matters dramatically."

Muskegon Community College

and best practices to connect individual students with educationally purposeful activities that help them get—and stay—on track for success.

Given the value of shifting from an early alert to early engagement mindset, this paper will explore key research and best practices, as well as examine four components of an effective early engagement strategy, including:

1. **Using theory to inform institutional strategies**
2. **Leveraging the power of peers**
3. **Identifying at-risk behaviors (before students miss class)**
4. **Communicating to connect**

### Common practices

In the whitepaper, *Retention and student success: Implementing strategies that make a difference*, we defined six comprehensive institutional strategies that serve as foundational elements. These include:

1. Establish a shared vision of student success
2. Focus on what successful students do
3. Determine an intervention strategy
4. Start small and grow
5. Build bridges
6. Use data—don't just collect it

A comprehensive strategy that combines all of these practices helps engage students and keep them on track for a timely graduation.

## 1 Use theory to inform institutional strategies

National research has demonstrated that student learning, persistence, and degree attainment are strongly associated with student engagement. Both *Student Success in College*[1] and the Center for Community College Student Engagement have outlined effective educational practices to enhance student engagement using findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) as a foundation. Such "high-impact practices" (HIPs) as academic challenge, learning with peers, and out-of-class experiences with faculty have been identified as having a strong influence on student satisfaction, engagement, retention, and completion rates.

These practices share several traits: they demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide clear channels for students to receive frequent and substantive feedback. As a result, participation in these practices can be life-changing.[2] NSSE founding director George Kuh recommends that institutions should aspire for all students to participate in at least two HIPs over the course of their undergraduate experience—one during the first year and one in the context of their major.[3] Many campuses are already incorporating these practices, thereby making it possible to cull participation data.

By shifting to an early engagement mindset, institutions can more effectively examine the

1. Kuh, (2005)

2. Kuh, 2008
3. NSSE, 2007

gap between students' expressed expectations and their actual engagement behavior as an early indicator of risk and success—both in and out of the classroom. For example, the vast majority of entering students expected to participate in co-curricular activities, yet almost one-third spend no time in these activities during their first year. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of first-year students *never* use career planning, financial advising, or academic tutoring services, yet we know them to be linked to success.[4] High-performing institutions monitor students' involvement in these types of high-impact activities, as well as track such desired student behaviors as pre-registration, academic advising participation, or orientation attendance. Unfortunately, in many cases, data is currently being collected in various silos or shadow systems around campus, making it difficult to use it to pinpoint student populations that need support. However, the increased demand for data and analytics, performance metrics, and assessment results has made tracking student engagement a much higher priority; and today's technology makes this a less daunting task.

## 2 Leverage the power of peers

Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as measured by first-year student grades and persistence between the first and second year of college.[5] Therefore, it is important to design an early engagement strategy to increase positive engagement efforts starting from the moment of students' first interactions with the college.[6] And research is increasingly demonstrating the value of peers as a component of this strategy.

### Early alerts—what's working now

In our whitepaper, *Early alerts as a tool for student success: Defining what "good" looks like*, we outlined seven steps to develop and implement an effective early alert and intervention initiative, including:

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. 6. Make early alerts and interventions part of institutional culture *(communicate results)*
7. 7. Measure and learn *(improve over time)*

The power of peers in influencing positive learning and developmental growth is well documented.[7] **Peer leaders** can help advance students' adjustment to college life, enhancing learning, social and emotional development, and the cultivation of skills needed for academic, leadership, and career success. **Peer mentors** are integral in the formation of supportive networks. The strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is the student's peer group. . . [which has] enormous potential for influencing virtually all aspects of the student's educational and personal development.[8] The power of peers in influencing positive learning and developmental growth, or conversely inhibiting it, is well documented.[9]

4. Kuh, 2007
5.
6.

7. Whitman, 1988
8. Astin, 1996
9. Whitman, 1988

Including peer leadership and mentoring in early engagement strategies is an effective way to create an inclusive environment in which students can better understand campus expectations and navigate complex academic and social environments. Examples of such programs include one-on-one mentoring; peer outreach, tutoring, and advising; peer leadership in new student orientation and residence life activities; involvement in student organizations; and selection for fellowships and scholarships. Additionally, peer leadership and mentoring provide an important opportunity for community development among specific populations of students, most notably those who are historically at risk. In these situations, given the critical role of the peer leader, he/she should share defining characteristics with the students being mentored, including similar background or common educational pathway, challenge, or experience.[10] Through these connections, peer leaders can help students find their "fit" on campus, take risks, try something new, and refer them to appropriate resources, such as an academic support service, which reduces the stress of transition.

The benefits of peer leadership extend to the institution as well. Peer leaders can offer budget relief to programs and offices that need to provide more student assistance to meet the demands of a larger campus community or to offset the effects of budget cuts on staffing levels. Student paraprofessionals provide a cost efficient and yet high quality alternative to better accommodate the large number of students who need services. And with peer leaders, student support and programming offices are better able to administer broad interventions and conduct large-scale events without hiring additional full-time professional and staff members.[11]

## 3 Identify at-risk behaviors (before students skip class)

Institutions don't have to rely on faculty to refer students at the second, third, or sixth week of class based solely on class attendance or academic performance. Now, they can assess student risk levels by analyzing a variety of data such as SAT scores, high school GPAs, book or eBook purchases, orientation participation,

10. Keup, 2012

11. Keup, 2012

### Howard University

Howard University used its early engagement to identify not only high-risk students but also students who qualified for a competitive scholarship. "We were able to create a set of criteria and identify more than 20 talented students who could honestly apply for and be highly competitive for this scholarship," explains Precious Smith, deputy director of the Center for Academic Excellence at Howard University. "We sent an email to that group of students with all the information about the scholarship, resources, and contact information. And five came in to do the application."

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tutoring and advising appointments, applications for financial aid, or even attendance at campus events. Use of these data points can help an institution gauge whether or not students are at risk, even before they miss class.

To expand beyond the traditional early alert and intervention process, institutions must design a more supportive infrastructure that engages students in effective campus practices as early as possible. Institutions can monitor which students are and are not engaging in proactive and positive behaviors that set the foundation for success. For example, students who pre-register for courses, participate in supplemental instruction or tutoring, or meet with advisors in a timely manner to review degree plans are more likely to excel. On the other hand, students not participating in such practices may be in jeopardy of getting off track academically. An early engagement strategy plays an important role in connecting with these students before they are referred for poor academic performance.

## 4 Communicate to connect

Successful students can lend a wealth of information about how to tailor campus resources to meet the needs of your institution's unique student population. Effective communication can help staff and faculty connect students with campus programs that support a positive experience. Follow their cue and modify your communications accordingly.

As your institution builds a plan for engagement and growth, consider that much like intervention, the conversation must be supportive. Use the principles of Appreciative Advising (the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize

### Delta State University

Given that many of the students entering Delta State University are from educationally underserved populations and not considered college-ready, the university has formed a comprehensive student success initiative that includes every department on campus with various task forces. "The campus-wide retention task force works closely with the Student Success Center to coordinate next-step, university-wide retention strategies, to examine administrative policies and practices to ensure they are optimized for student success, and to identify opportunities to overcome challenges faced by our students," says Christy Riddle, executive director for Student Success at Delta State University. Its early alert task force uses data to provide meaningful support to the students who are doing well. "We send an email or have a person call a student when they are struggling with classes, but also award them for the great achievements that they had," says Edwin Craft, chief information officer at Delta State University. "If every message is negative, the students would quickly turn a deaf ear. But if we can tell them, 'Congratulations on that A,' or 'Congratulations, you're now a sophomore,' or 'Only one more semester until you graduate,' that's a huge message to give to our students and it makes them want to achieve better." The system looks at both reactive data and proactive data such as grade trends, attendance, logging in to online courses, participation in discussion boards, and if they're turning in assignments. It's paying off: as a result of these efforts, Delta State University has increased its persistence of the target population's first-to-second year retention rate from 57 percent to 90 percent.

DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY
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their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials) or Intrusive Advising (an action-orientated model that involves and motivates students to seek help when needed) to structure conversations that support growth, development, and attainment of larger and long-term goals. Conversations about their interests spark their curiosity about future opportunities, underscore their original approach and contributions, and nurture authentic relationships that open the door to richer communication. Meaningful, relevant, and personalized communications are a core component of an effective early engagement practice.

## Conclusion

Early alert and intervention is still an effective way to identify and work with students at risk. However, expanding to an early engagement process allows institutions to be intentional, help students earlier, and communicate more effectively. These strategies can also facilitate personalized, meaningful messages of encouragement that acknowledge each step of the student's journey—so students feel they are supported and noticed for what they are doing well.

Much like the institutions outlined in the book, *Student Success in College*, your institution must purposefully align resources and structures with its educational mission, curricular offerings, and student characteristics and aspirations. Furthermore, institutions must continually tweak or introduce new programs and services to meet changing student needs.

The good news is that the wealth of data now available, combined with sophisticated technology, makes this approach not only possible, but also practical. With a student-centric approach and a campus organized to help students thrive, early engagement becomes an intrinsic element of an institution's student success strategy.

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