ESTABLISHING A ROBUST EARLY ALERT SYSTEM: PROCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED

by

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges have been working over many years to pinpoint the best strategies for building and maintaining students' success at completion of goals. Research confirms there is not one but a combination of methods that best suits each community college and even each student. Additionally, community colleges have found that it is not always about increasing enrollment, but it is just as important to focus on retaining current students.

This product dissertation describes the key elements of creating an early alert system to identify students who may have barriers to success. The guide includes suggested steps that other community colleges can take to develop and maintain an early alert system, as well as advice from a small, urban community college based on the lessons they learned while developing their own robust system.

Building a robust early alert system can help community colleges move ahead in the realms of student success by involving faculty, leadership, staff, and students in the development and implementation phases. This dissertation provides examples and evidence in order to serve as a working guide for the future.

KEY WORDS: *student success, early alert system, retention, at-risk*

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends. Without their constant support and encouragement, I would have never completed this journey. First and foremost, to my loving husband, Chris D'Avignon: thank you for consistently reminding me of the work that needed to be done, but most importantly, for never letting me give up. To my cherished children, Brittany and Andrew, who have continually motivated me to keep going and offered support just by listening. I hope I have inspired you to dream BIG. I love you very much! To my mother, Deb Doorn, my greatest inspiration, I am so proud to be your daughter. To my father, Tom Rogers, and our beloved Uncle Keith Chatman, who are no longer with us physically, but by our sides in spirit, I know you are both beaming while watching me finish this. To all our friends who cheered me on every step of the way. To Sally Birkam, the absolute best boss/work friend who is now retired, who saw something in me from the beginning of our relationship and helped me to understand the importance of completing this journey. Finally, my deepest thanks go to Dr. Sandra J. Balkema, for keeping me on task and holding me accountable.

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"One of the things that make community colleges so special is they do not pick and choose their students — they work with all students." Dr. Jill Biden

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges currently are experiencing perhaps the highest expectations and the greatest challenges in their history. Facing fiscal constraint, enrollment pressures, and summons to support economic recovery (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012), never has it been so clear that the futures of individuals, communities, and the nation rest significantly on the ability of community and technical colleges to ensure that far greater numbers of their students succeed, attain high-quality certificates and degrees, and transfer to baccalaureate institutions (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). The success of the college and community within which it is located is based on the success of the students at the community college. Higher education institutions must understand how, not only to assist students with their goals, but meet their needs along the path of success, no matter what the end goal may be.

ENSURING STUDENT SUCCESS AND RESPONDING TO STUDENT BARRIERS

In 2021, Venit and Bevevino indicated that for institutions of higher education to continue to thrive in the years to come, they will have to reshape their enrollment strategies, (p. 3). This tasks community colleges across the nation with the challenge of ensuring student success on many levels. It also comes from accrediting agencies, the college administration, the

community, and student families. However, what is not always considered are the factors that contribute to student success. One of those factors is the ability to complete courses while also having non-academic challenges. Living in poverty-level conditions, dealing with low academic scores, facing mental health issues, and addressing family challenges are a few of those non-academic challenges that today's students are facing. Being committed to earning a college degree while dealing with any of those factors can be difficult and make it hard to maintain acceptable grades and class attendance. This leaves it up to the institution to help students with outside challenges making it easier to reach their goals.

Contributing to non-academic challenges is the role of equity, or the lack of, within the rules, processes, procedures, instruction, and any other aspect of higher education. Institutions are recognizing the equity gaps in completion, retention, and overall enrollment, leading to further investigation to determine the root causes of the differences. This urges further data-driven decisions with equity as a priority for any changes being made moving forward. Felix, Bensimon, Hanson, Gray, and Klingsmith (2015) discussed how equity-minded change in higher education also plays into the overall landscape for society (p. 25). With equity leading the way for change, community colleges assist with providing equal access and opportunity along with breaking down academic and societal barriers for students.

Being able to retain the students is a win for all stakeholders. Yuen (2020) explained about community colleges having lower revenue in comparison to universities and how that affects the equitable services community colleges can offer to students. With a large amount of the revenue being spent on the staff time of recruiting, orienting, and advising new students, the cost of retaining a current student is less than gaining a new student. Additionally, Tinto

(2017) described how students look at retention more as persistence. They are not looking to be retained; they are looking to complete. Therefore, community colleges must take into consideration their self-efficacy and sense of belonging as being relevant to their retention and completion.

As a way of developing solutions and analyzing how to retain students, many institutions have moved toward a data-driven solution in providing support efficiently. The ability to pinpoint at-risk students by pre-determined factors, such as low-income status, low placement scores, and first generation, can help staff reach out to students before potential problem(s) in the classroom. Each of these characteristics has been linked, through extensive research, to the causes of student drop out and lack of persistence. For many institutions, Early Alert Systems (EAS) provide a link between students, instructors, and college staff to identify barriers and offer solutions when students may be having problems. In 2015, Katie Lynch-Holmes indicated the importance of identifying at-risk students early enough to make a difference is well documented by researchers and embraced by most community colleges and universities. In fact, she noted that 93% of higher education institutions report having some form of early alert and intervention program (p. 3). Additionally, an EAS can help to break down the equity gaps between students of different demographics in hopes to be more inclusive of all students, no matter the challenges. The intention of an EAS is to help the student succeed — the challenge is creating a program that works for the institution: "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 into action" (Lynch-Holmes, 2015, p. 3).

KEY COMPONENTS OF EARLY ALERT AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

There are two types of Early Alert Systems. One type includes systems that gather data regarding test scores, financial aid status, high school grade point average, and many other factors to arrange at-risk students into cohorts based on these characteristics. Another type requests input from instructors when a student is failing to meet expectations of the course syllabus in some way. This method typically also provides a way for instructors to indicate when a student is having mental, family, or other challenges outside of class.

Because of student demographics and institutional technical and IT structures, no one system has been shown to work best for every institution. Most institutions have created a combination of systems and worked through trial-and-error to find their best outcome. Through this process, research has shown key components for successful programs. As discussed by Lynch-Holmes in Ellucian's White Paper Series (2015), practitioners have identified seven steps to increase success (p. 3).

STEP 1: DEFINE PROGRAM GOALS

Having program goals that are in line with the mission and strategic plan is key to having buy-in and support throughout the institution. From upper administration to those staff in support positions, understanding of the system and the need for collaboration is required across the institution for a successful implementation of the EAS. Hussak (2017) describes how it must be easy for faculty to report and follow up on those students that have been reported. The ease of use will support future usage by faculty.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY TARGET POPULATIONS

Whether the alerts are led by data or by faculty, identifying target populations is crucial to follow-up with the students and for future reporting and improvements. For example, Jayaprakash, et al. (2014) indicated how analytic models for predicting at-risk students can be applied across multiple models of teaching and educational settings. They found no significant difference in the academic performance of the students identified by faculty or by software. Whichever process is used, continuous contact from staff member to student about the challenges being faced is proven to show the student how to adjust for improvement.

STEP 3: BUILD AN EARLY ALERT AND INTERVENTION TEAM

A team consisting of staff and faculty who believe in the purpose of the early alert team is required to build support and buy-in across the campus. Horn, Reinert, and Reis (2015) recommended gaining "campus buy-in through the support and participation of senior leadership, stakeholders, and possible end-users, such as the president, vice president, provost, chief information officer, director of institutional research, the college business office, faculty, staff, and students" (p. 6). The team should have members who have the authority to act when needed and have connections to resources for various situations. Whoever will be responsible for contacting the students must be sure to have time allotted in their schedule. Response from the student may not happen initially, so further follow-up is sometimes necessary for the team to help the student with their challenges.

STEP 4: ENGAGE AT-RISK STUDENTS (GET THEIR ATTENTION, MOTIVATE THEM TO ACT)

The teams can engage those at-risk students, find out what is causing the challenges they are having, and connect them with resources as needed to help them complete the courses. This engagement could be in the form of emails, phone calls, and text messages. Poole (2015) discussed how one institution used a system of three-attempts to contact the student. Starting with an automated email upon referral, one telephone call, then a follow-up email. This first contact can also create trust between the student and the team member, which then allows the team member to continue that connection throughout the student's time at the institution.

STEP 5: DEVELOP INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Depending on the reason for the alert, the intervention strategy will vary to achieve the best outcome. The team member should be prepared to connect the student with the necessary resources upon the initial contact. Access to resources such as a professional counselor, the registrar's office, the finance office, transportation, housing, just to name a few, is a key connection for the team member to provide to the student. Early alert reporting forms could provide a list of options for the faculty member to indicate why and what the student may need so the team member knows ahead of time and will be better prepared for the intervention. Tampke (2013) explains a list of indicators selected by stakeholders regarding the student difficulty. Those 18 indicators range from poor class attendance to mental health concerns (pp. 525-526).

STEP 6: MAKE EARLY ALERTS AND INTERVENTIONS PART OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

As Tampke (2013) stressed, "Faculty stakeholders indicated that they often were not aware of the resources available to aid students and that being able to refer a student to a central 'clearinghouse' would be helpful. Some faculty allowed how they were reluctant to be immediately involved in some student concerns because they felt ill-prepared or unqualified to offer effective assistance" (p. 525). Since one of the interventions can be to recommend tutoring, one institution "found that there was significant association between the alert messages students received and their visits to the tutor center. Further, the achievement of students who visited the tutor center was improving over the semester" (Cai, Lewis, & Higdon, 2015, p. 61). Showing these and other improvement results to faculty should help increase the usage of the early alert, which should result in improvement of the student grades. By gaining trust in the early alert and intervention team and process, faculty will be more confident when referring students at risk.

STEP 7: MEASURE AND LEARN

Data collected from alerts and interventions can be used in combination with other systems, providing important program analytics. According to Horn, Reinert, and Reis (2015), "Although the general goal of early warning systems is universal, systems differ in their ability to monitor the effects of student interventions and link with commercial student surveys, learning management systems, and student information systems" (p. 4). Not only will the data collected from a single alert be used to provide further help with the student, but it can also be used to make changes throughout the campus for future purposes with other students.

Learning what interventions work best for different situations should help to improve the system.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The landscape of higher education has been shifting over time to focus on equity to access and outcomes to provide society with higher rates of educated citizens. Community colleges are continually looking to create methods for eliminating barriers for students to not only attend, but also to complete. The ability to help students persist from one semester to the next has brought to the forefront the challenges students have outside of the classroom that can lead to academic struggles. The need for a method to identify, report, and connect at-risk students with resources can be fulfilled by implementing an early alert system. The process that Muskegon Community College (MCC) took in developing its current, robust Early Alert System covered many years and included many growing pains. Even today, after nine years since its beginning, the MCC system is still evolving and finding new ways to respond to student needs and challenges. The development and implementation of the MCC Early Alert System can, however, provide other, similar community colleges with a workable plan and valuable components.

About MCC

The Muskegon Board of Education established Muskegon Junior College in 1926, in Muskegon, Michigan, and was originally housed on the third floor of the then-new Muskegon Senior High School. The combined junior college and high school enrollment had grown beyond the capacity of the building by 1934. This growth caused Muskegon Junior College to move into

the former Hackley School in downtown Muskegon across from Hackley Park. Enrollment

climbed quickly in the years after World War II. The Muskegon Board of Education, which

operated the junior college, expanded usage into available space within other buildings it

owned in the area. Additionally, when enrollment exceeded the capacities of those buildings, it

rented other community facilities. In June 1951, the name and educational scope of the

Muskegon Junior College was changed after an enabling act by the Michigan Legislature.

Muskegon Junior College was renamed Muskegon Community College (MCC) to reflect the

expanded nature of the programs in retailing, vocations, technical fields, public health, and

trades. Additionally, MCC moved to larger expanded location in eastern part of Muskegon.

MCC offers more than 80 two-year degree and one-year certificate options that provide

students with a well-rounded education that prepares them for today's in-demand and

emerging career fields. There are three early college programs based in the counties served:

Muskegon with 550 students, Ottawa with 610 students, and Newaygo with 139. In addition,

the Muskegon Promise scholarship, started in 2015, and has brought approximately 400

students to MCC each year. MCC has 17 men's and women's athletic sports with approximately

250 student athletes annually. On average, 145 students utilize disability support services each

semester. Approximately 125 students per semester take advantage of veteran education

benefits.

BRIEF HISTORY OF MCC'S EARLY ALERT PROGRAM

The early alert program at MCC started slowly in 2010 with the push for data-driven

decision-making after the college became a part of the Achieving the Dream program. After

assessing what data were being collected and what was missing, eight high-impact educational

practices were implemented over six years. The intended use of the collected data was to determine the best strategies for increasing student retention and completion rates. The decreasing number of high school graduates and the need for increasing community residents with degrees led MCC to seek ways to take a proactive approach to assist students in being successful. During this time, administration slowly discovered the challenges students were facing in their lives that ultimately were causing a negative impact on their course success. Working through staffing, process, and software challenges, MCC was able eventually to arrive at the right mix to maintain a successful early alert program. The connections between faculty, staff, and students have slowly become increasingly natural through this early alert process; since 2017, the process and approach became known as the Care Team and Care Report.

In 2020, when the world was hit with a pandemic that forced most of the instruction and services to switch to a virtual environment, the number of students needing assistance drastically increased at a very quick pace. At MCC, the number of students with Care Reports and number of faculty using the system quadrupled over one year. This crisis forced the Care Team and administration to make decisions quickly on how to assist students with new emerging needs. These ranged from students having no computer to those having no internet access. While the pandemic had a negative impact on the United States higher education system, it pushed the abilities of the Care Team and positively impacted the support that is now provided to students.

GUIDING QUESTIONS BEHIND THE EARLY ALERT PROGRAM

At any institution, three main groups are involved when implementing an early alert program: students, faculty, and student services staff/administration. The following questions,

focusing on these three groups, were the focus of the development of MCC's Early Alert

Program and will be addressed by the Guide (provided in Chapter Four) to define the tried-and-

true methods useful when starting or improving an EAS.

Students

- How can an EAS connect students with outside resources?

- How can an EAS connect students with internal supports?

Faculty

- How can an EAS help faculty connect students' academic needs to the proper supports?

- How can an EAS help faculty understand the relationship between a student's mental health and their academics?

Student Services

- How can an EAS improve the connections between Student Services and faculty?

- How can an early system improve the communication between Student Services and students?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

To avoid confusion or misunderstanding, for the purposes of this dissertation, the

following definitions will be used for these terms:

Academic Concern: Challenge a student is having causing struggles within the classroom. This could be direct challenges with understanding the course content, study habits, poor grades, attendance, lack of course materials/books, or lack of technology. Additionally, this includes any other barrier outside of the classroom or higher education institution causing the student to not be successful in the course.

Achieving the Dream: AtD is a national the national, nonprofit leader in championing evidence-based institutional improvement—has seen firsthand what happens when there is a long-term, sustainable commitment to improving student success. Achievement gaps close. Momentum builds. Lives change. Neighborhoods flourish. (https://www.achievingthedream.org/about-us-0)

At-Risk: Students who are considered to have a higher probability of academic failure

Care Report: Name of the report used to notify the Care Team of an early alert/academic concern for a student at Muskegon Community College.

Care Team: The MCC Care Team consists of 13 staff and faculty members who receive the Care Reports, create and maintain case management, communicate with students, faculty, and staff involved, and provide solutions and referrals to students in need.

Data-Driven Decisions: Using both quantitative and qualitative data to make decisions on processes and procedures to reflect positive changes in student success.

Early Alert: Also referred to as early intervention, is a formal method of notification from faculty to a designated student support person or team regarding poor academic performance or challenges

Equity: Each individual student receives the access necessary for their success.

Graduation Rate: Measure of total number of students in the same cohort who graduate within a 3-year period.

High-Impact Education Practices (HIEP): Methods of engaging students that make a noticeable and documentable positive impact on the path to completion in higher education.

Persistence: When measuring success, many higher education institutions use persistence rates. Here, persistence is defined as the continued enrollment and completion from one semester to through the next semester. For example, a student attending and completing fall semester and then attending and completing the following winter or spring semester.

Retention: Retention is another measure of success for higher education. Here, retention is defined as the continued enrollment and completion from fall semester to the next fall semester.

Student Success: Each institution has own definition however, most involve the completion of a student's goals which could be completion of a course, a degree, or transfer to a 4-year university.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE GUIDE

The intended audiences for the Early Alert Guide are those working in higher education in administration, leadership, and direct staff members who would be involved in creating and implementing an EAS. The intent is to provide best practice examples and guidance from an

institution that has developed its early alert program by applying extensive research,

intentionally addressing problems as they arise, implementing evaluation and assessment

practices, and at times simply using trial and error to implement a successful and robust

system. The Guide attempts to provide insight into all the key elements needed to implement

an EAS that will ultimately effect student success.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation focuses on one method of increasing retention and student success at

community colleges. The implementation of an Early Alert System is directly linked to providing

access for students to necessary resources used to assist with their completion. The Guide

provides examples to give the reader information for the creation of an Early Alert System

including the best method for support across campus, possible technology solutions, and

building a team. After giving information on what the reader needs to know and what the

writer's community college learned during implementation, the final chapter includes items for

future consideration that were not included in this dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

While a key focus for higher education is increasing or maintaining enrollment, a crucial

factor to the success of any institution is retaining the current students. Community colleges

are becoming equity-focused in order to identify and remove personal, academic, and societal

barriers which may hinder student retention and success. The efforts made to help students

successfully meet their goals range from offering free tutoring to transportation and housing

assistance. The wraparound services offered must be determined by data collection to indicate

the types of barriers students face. While there is limited literature regarding early alerts

specifically, there are many other aspects relating directly to student success barriers and

supporting students holistically.

STUDENT SUCCESS AND BARRIERS TO LEARNING

While higher education institutions have continued to climb in overall enrollment

throughout the last 25 years, there has also been extreme growth in the efforts of increasing

student success. However, success rates have not increased at the same rate. In 2012, Vincent

Tinto described the importance of enhancing student success efforts, specifically in the

classroom. Students tend to follow the expectations set in the classroom, which, therefore,

should be set high. As McClenney and Arnsparger (2015) explain, students also have high

expectations of the community colleges to provide support services to help reach their goals. In

2012 and 2013, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) created a

series of guides to help community colleges invest in success. Within these guides are

recommendations for implementation of practices which teach administration how to

determine what data is needed, how to gather the correct data, and how to use that data to

make informed decisions about the services and support necessary to help students be

successful in reaching their goals. The first guide, "A Matter of Degrees — Promising Practices

for Community College Student Success," introduced thirteen suggested high-impact

educational practices for planning, initiating, and sustaining success. The thirteen practices are:

- Assessment and Placement

- Orientation

- Academic Goal Setting and Planning

- Registration before Classes Begin

- Accelerated or Fast-Track Developmental Education

- First-Year Experience

- Student Success Course

- Learning Community

- Class Attendance

- Alert and Intervention

- Experiential Learning beyond the Classroom

- Tutoring

- Supplemental Instruction.

These suggested practices are the foundation for the future of student success

initiatives. They serve as the method for implementing engaging practices that engage

students. The CCCSE guides provide survey data from community colleges where the practices were implemented and proven to work, along with suggestions for promotion and how to achieve the best involvement across all campus employees.

Student success is not just about the completion of goals. It is also about providing students with the ability to be successful in the workforce and helping to become productive members of the community. George Lorenzo (2013) discussed the variety of ways community colleges are directly linked to workforce development. The relationship could be with employers paying for their employees to attend specific training, providing internships and apprenticeships for those on track to obtain a special degree or certification, or simply to assure the programs being offered are those that will be needed in the workforce in the future. The connection with employers is critical to maintaining the possibilities for students at community college. Thus, the success of the students is critical to the community.

Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) provide a clear direction for recreating advising from the cafeteria model to Guided Pathways, which helps to maximize both access and student success. Along with the information created by CCCSE, Achieving the Dream (AtD) has become a staple for many community colleges across the United States as a resource for information and connections for implementation and proof for how looking at data and making informed decisions works. In 2016, AtD led the way by providing coaching to thousands of community colleges to assist with breaking through to the issues that really matter when it comes to student success. Some of those initiatives include supporting students' nonacademic needs, expanding the use of open educational resources (OER) to reduce costs to students, creating pathways to local industries, and integrating advising through technology. With the coaching

and community in the AtD network, community colleges can move forward with successful implementation of broad initiatives across the country.

Pelletier (2019) gave three big questions for higher education institutions to ask themselves: (1) What does student success really mean, (2) How do we measure success, and (3) Campus structures for student success: Philosophy or function? These questions can be used as guidance to any higher education institution when the focus is student success. Each institution should have its own answer to each question while knowing that no one institution is the same.

Barriers

While AtD assisted with gathering the right data and supporting effective use of the data, community colleges still struggle when it comes to getting students in the door (enrollment) and keeping them in the building (retention). To help them complete, they must be retained. To retain them, they must be successful. Their success is not just about understanding the content and testing well in classroom. Success can be hindered by many other barriers that are outside of the classroom. This could include tasks competing for time, feeling like they do or do not belong, finances, and list can go on forever. Helping students to understand from the very beginning what their goal is and what needs to happen for them to achieve that goal is essential.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Included in those struggles is the topic of diversity for both students and employees. Having a diverse body of faculty and staff help students connect with those who they can

identify with. The sense of belonging is an important piece of success, in any circumstance. Morse (2016) and Janosky and South-Paul (2016) spoke about fostering a campus culture with inclusiveness and systemic commitment to change all practices with equity and access in mind. From hiring practices, admissions, support services, and teaching methods, all the pieces fit together to help the campus community belong to one another.

FINANCE

The special report *Making Ends Meet* (2016) from CCCSE explored the problems of financial instability of community college students by not only using quantitative data, but more specifically qualitative data. The report describes how community colleges need to look at the situation empathically, through the student's experience, to fully understand who needs to be done to thoroughly assist the students. For example, the discussion includes the notion that students need better budgeting skills; however, when students are on limited income and have been for an extended time, they simply do not have the resources to attempt to budget for anything. By collecting information from students regarding their socioeconomic history and ask further questions to determine what they understand, staff can better assist with solving root problems that are barriers to success.

The Lumina Foundation (2018) produced *Beyond Financial Aid* to assist higher education institutions with understanding low-income students and how to increase their success. The guide provided five strategies:

1. Know your low-income students
2. Review internal processes and organize supports
3. Build internal and external partnerships

4. Optimize student use of services

5. Create a culture of support.

With most community college students using some form of financial aid as a way of paying to attend and live while attending, it is critical for administration and staff to understand who the students are and what they need.

TECHNOLOGY

The 2018 Ruffalo Noel-Levitz National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report provides detailed data regarding what students' priorities are when it comes to their satisfaction in attending a higher education institution. The information gleaned from this survey report can indicate the key focus areas when adjusting services based on what the students are reporting. Additionally, in 2018, Educause produced the *ECAR Study of Undergraduate Student and Information Technology* for higher education institutions to review the importance of various technological resources and usages from a student's perspective. The findings of the report indicate that most students have access to necessary technology needed for student success; however, certain students rely on technology to be available on campus. Additionally, students view student success tools as moderately useful. This information indicates that higher education institutions need to continue to work towards providing resources in the necessary formats for students to assist with their success.

RETENTION

With high school graduation rates on the decline over the last decade, higher education institutions are continually looking for ways to increase enrollment. However, new students are

only half of the solution. The other half are those students who are already enrolled and attending courses. Yook (2012) explains that this is not a new concept. Retaining students is good for students, the institution, and the community in both the short and long term. By assisting students with completion of their goals, they are also encouraged to become a successful part of society. Miller and Bell (2016) and Venit and Bevevino (2018) argue that higher education institutions must include retention as part of the process in the strategic enrollment management plan. Thoughts from the past were that if a student did not return, it was their own choice. Now, colleges realize the impact of losing students for challenges that could have been avoided by expanding support services. Additionally, when a student is not retained, there is lost revenue and recruitment dollars for the institution, along with potential loss of future wages and unnecessary debt for the student.

Another piece of retention is ensuring the student is receiving as much support and understanding as possible. In 2013, McKlenney and Dare discussed the concepts of designing new academic pathways which are meant to help students choose a pathway leading to a career. This also encompasses staying on the path and completing the path, which requires a method for learning students' needs from the time they enter. They come in with high expectations of successful outcomes. It is up to the institution to provide integrated support to help the students meet those goals.

Direct and indirect costs of attending higher education are a large contributor to whether a student can continue with degree completion. As Kelchen (2015) discussed, institutions can set the direct costs of attendance but are not able to control the indirect costs (books, supplies, room and board, transportation, childcare, etc.). Depending on the method of

payment, the total cost of attendance can become too much for a student to cover for repeated semesters if they do not have adequate support. To retain students who need help maintaining the cost of attendance, institutions must continue to find avenues of student support.

Shapiro, Dundar, and Huie (2017) from the National Student Clearinghouse, produced a signature report over a six-year completion period. While the report includes a variety of information for profit and non-profit and 2- and 4-year higher education institutions, for the purpose of this review, only 2-year non-profit information is included. The completion rate outcomes from the report clearly show that while enrollments have continued to increase for adult and part-time students, completion of a credential is declining. The report also provides understanding of gaps in completion which can indicate where more work is needed to assist certain populations.

EQUITY-MINDEDNESS

McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-Piqueux (2020) thoroughly explain how equity is related to retention of students. While many higher education institutions are collecting and disaggregating data regarding ethnicity, gender, and age, many leave out the deep analysis of socioeconomic status. To fully understand and become equitable for everyone, all data must be considered.

Palmer, Wood, Dancy II, and Strayhorn (2014) consider how higher education institutions can increase access for black male students by leveling the playing field with what services are offered, how they are accessed, and simply how they are communicated. By increasing the knowledge of both faculty and staff about minority students and history,

community colleges can become more equity-minded in all aspects of education. Felix and Bensimon (2015) bring detailed information about the equity scorecard framework used in a community college study that helps the reader understand how both qualitative and quantitative data can be view through an equity lens. Those involved in the usage of the framework begin to understand where equity shortfalls lie and where changes need to be accomplished. Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2017) directly explain how inequity is a problem of practice, not a problem with students. This statement alone helps stakeholders to realize that the institution needs to meet the student where they are.

DATA AND ANALYTICS

The collection of data has been occurring for community colleges since they started. What is changing is the need to have relevant data to appropriately assist students. Vendituoli (2014) and Morris (2016) indicated that even though data has been mined for years, it is not being used as planned to predict and prevent dropouts. In addition, the gathering of data is being done now by more than just the institutional research office. After ensuring the collection of the correct data, it is being analyzed in many ways. Miller and Bell (2016) and Cele (2021) suggested a predictive model to put analytics to work and creation of a communication strategy for student persistence. By using specific data factors, a student can be rated on the level of being at-risk for failure. This provides the opportunity to create methods for reaching out to students before they choose to stop attending on their own. Danley-Scott (2018) indicated the inclusion of data usage in the classroom as well. Faculty can incorporate usage of data collection to determine the best methods for sharing information with students and ensuring they are learning material. Additionally, since the classroom is where the student spends the

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most time, it is essential for faculty involvement to fully engage in the support mechanisms available for students. As Russell, Smith, and Larsen (2019) described, the collection and sharing of data with students is also a possibility that could lead to increasing or decreasing overall grades. Assessment data can indicate when a student is doing well or needs assistance, which could have a positive or negative effect for the student.

Parnell (2018) and Earls (2019) both urge that there must be consistent collaboration with cross-functional units including institutional research, student affairs, and information technology to share data, analyze, making informed decisions for methods of assisting students frequently. The analyzing cannot be left to one person to create data-driven vision for the organization. It must be a team effort. Additionally, the team must understand the different types of data to be collected and analyzed to fully grasp the concept of how to best utilize it. Yang and Li (2020) make relevant points about stakeholders' data literacy makes a difference in student success efforts. Involved stakeholders must understand what the data means to interpret it to others and to make valid informed decisions. West, Luzeckyj, Toohey, Vanderlelie, and Searle (2020) give more to think about with the discussion of whether analyzing and making assumptions from student data is ethical.

EARLY ALERT AND COMMUNICATION

As one of the methods for increasing retention rates, the concept of early alert and intervention was created. Pistilli and Arnold's (2012) report regarding Course Signals at Purdue University indicates the usage of the student success system that was meant to provide useful feedback to students based on predictive models. Serving as an initial effort for early alert, the concept of signals established a starting point for future mechanisms. Tampke (2013) offered a

study on the academic early alert concept that follows the lead that administrative, faculty, and student service guidance is necessary for development. Also included is much discussion on the usage of aggregated descriptive data for those using the system, those referred, and for follow-up.

The *Early Alert of Academically At-Risk Students: An Open-Source Analytics Initiative* conducted by Jayaprakash, Moody, Lauria, Regan, and Baron (2014) provides relevant information regarding how using predictive models with demographic data, aptitude data, and learning management system data can assist with pinpointing at-risk students who may need early intervention. This study adds much to the research to assist higher education institutions in deciding the best methods for identifying students who would benefit from an EAS. Horn, Reinert, and Reis (2015) include multiple recommendations of software solutions for higher education institutions to review when considering implementation of an EAS, including which products have analytical modules to assist with campus-based practices. Lynch-Holmes (2015) provided a thorough description of what it looks like to build a good early alert tool for intervention. The suggested steps give direction on essential elements to increase student success. Hussak (2017) suggested three key steps to improving early alert adoption: evaluate EAS for usability, develop soft deadlines, and provide regular reminders. These tasks serve as a guide for other higher education institutions to follow.

In 2015, three separate reports from Naidoo and Lemmens; Cai, Lewis, and Higdon; and Poole, all discuss studies that provide evidence of increased advising, tutoring, and class attendance and ultimately course completion, when an EAS was in place. These are different aspects of how interventions can prove to be useful. Atif, Richards, and Bilgin (2015) provide

feedback regarding the satisfaction of students receiving alerts, how they preferred to know as soon as possible if performance was not satisfactory, and the preferred communication methods that would prompt response. Implications from the study conducted by Dwyer, Williams, and Pribesh (2019) indicate that EASs have a positive impact for certain populations, but not all, that can help leaders refine the usage of alert flags and that the flag type can be more useful if varied by the type of of course enrollment. Additionally, Schoolcraft College's (2019) study had statistically significant results for students receiving an intervention and an increase in their sense of belonging, which lead to higher success rates.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Achieving the Dream (2018) created a *Holistic Student Supports Redesign Toolkit* that is meant to assist community colleges with understanding what exactly it means to support a student holistically. The Toolkit is thorough, starting from the basic definition to creation of an intake survey. Additionally, AtD holds an annual conference for higher education institutions to attend and learn from both AtD coaches and others. Ellucian (2018) produced a case study on one community college's proactive outreach to keep students on track. The study proves how using a CRM advising system can give faculty a method for identifying and reporting students with challenges outside of the classroom, thus, making it easier for students to connect with the correct staff and resources to assist with barriers to success. Eigeman (2019) recommends hiring of more faculty, staff, and administrators with diverse backgrounds that will help with understanding of the situations and backgrounds of the students. Carlson (2019) provided relevant examples from community colleges who created strategies to help low-income

students ranging from connecting students to community resources for rental and utility assistance to direct access to campus food pantries.

Price, Schneider, and Quick (2015) conducted a study of community college presidents who indicated one of the top three pressing concerns for community college presidents is how to maintain student access during a time of increasing costs. This concern relates directly to how community colleges can assist students with challenges both inside and outside of the classroom. Warman (2015) and Niehaus (2021) both discussed how the usage of design thinking in higher education can be beneficial. By using empathy as a regular mechanism in communication, staff and faculty show students how they care. The feelings associated with being cared for can increase the level of involvement by the student. Goldrick-Rab and Broton (2015) share that while higher education institutions welcome anyone, community college is still not free. Outside of tuition and fees, the student still has many other costs both associated with or without attending community college that are not all covered with any sort of financial aid. Therefore, offering services to help students live is essential to them being successful.

Acee, Barry, Flaggs, Holschuh, Daniels, and Schrauth (2017) conducted a study regarding the student-perceived interferences to success. The feedback indicated students' perceptions of interferences were widespread encompassing academic abilities to socioeconomic status. These topics can assist higher education institutions with awareness of the same types of challenges and suggested wrap around services to help students on the path to success. In 2018, Troester-Trate discussed how a community college offers specific veteran, transportation, and food services to students with a goal of increasing retention and

persistence. These services can help students who have various struggles with food insecurity, transportation and/or financial instability, and other mental health challenges.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Strayhorn's (2012) research on creating a sense of belonging for students guides the reader to understand how being involved with student organizations, for example, can lead to increased chances of continuation to the next semester and completion. Tinto (2012) enlightened the higher education community with in-depth information regarding the impact of student engagement and linkage to retention. The research clearly indicates the importance of faculty engagement in the classroom with students. Parcha (2014) and Allen (2019) focused on how essential the engaged lecture is for active involvement between, not only the students and instructor, but also between the students themselves. This was tested further using Twitter for assignments between students as an effort to increase the engagement outside of the classroom.

Further research from McClenney and Arnsparger (2015) shares direct feedback from students regarding whether higher education faculty and staff are listening to what they need. *Student Speak: Are We Listening* provides a clear layout for higher education institutions to follow when attempting to gather qualitative data from students and how to use it to make positive and impactful changes. In 2016, the Center for Community College Student Engagement pointed out that there is clearly a divide between the expectations of students and reality regarding whether they are academically prepared to success. Their report urges institutions to work towards innovative practices in the developmental education field, even more so now as there are more students returning to higher education as adults. The Michigan

College Access Network (MCAN) (2020) has set a precedence with awarding Michigan community colleges grants to hire trained completion coaches who are on-site for directly coaching of students. The focus is to be fully engaged with students in the cohort to ensure their retention and completion of a degree.

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions are constantly facing expectations to increase completion rates. As the economy continues to change, enrollment changes with decreasing high school graduates and increasing adult students. This causes a shift in focus from new students to maintaining those already attending and ensuring they graduate. Students need community colleges to be more involved as in the past and provide a more holistic approach to getting them to their goal. This calls for a high level of engagement, communication, and willingness to go the extra mile by those working in higher education. Community colleges must be ready for any situation and equipped with the resources to be immersed in the best ways to help students overcome challenges and barriers to success.

CHAPTER THREE: DEVELOPING THE EARLY ALERT SYSTEM GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background and process used to create the Early Alert System

(EAS) Guide (the Guide). The basis of the Guide is derived from key literature, best practices

from the writer's community college and other higher education institutions, along with

knowledge gained from student success trainings and involvement with Achieving the Dream.

BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

The content of the Guide represents lessons learned, advice garnered, and best

practices identified through the experience of the writer who researched, planned,

implemented, and continues to maintain a successful EAS at a community college.

In 2010, Muskegon Community College (MCC) took the first major step to becoming

centered around student success by becoming a member of Achieving the Dream. This

membership launched MCC into refocusing on identifying what data were needed to guide

leadership in making data-driving decisions. These activities included, not only assessing current

data points collected and gaps, but also identifying what steps the institution needed to take to

gather appropriate data and how to best analyze it. As part of this process, MCC moved toward

implementing several of the high-impact educational practices (HIEP) suggested and tested by

the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). For example, after analyzing

the data of optional student orientation attendance, the decision to change to mandatory

student orientation was executed. The work of those implemented high-impact educational practices started out small, but eventually lead into a grander plan to launch a new EAS.

As these plans progressed, the director of Student Success position was created in 2016, to lead the efforts of creating and maintaining the policies and procedures of the EAS. Part of that maintenance included learning how to engage faculty and staff to ensure the system would be used at scale. While the team started out small with just three staff members, it has grown to 14 team members over the last five years. Additionally, the faculty involvement through the Care Report Advisory Committee has grown from four original faculty members to a faculty representative from each of the 14 academic departments. While these faculty members serve on the advisory committee, they also serve as an Academic Care Team liaison in their academic department, being the point person for other faculty in their department to come to with questions or concerns as a way of continuous ownership and link to the Care Team and the EAS.

It wasn't until society was hit with a worldwide pandemic that forced higher education institutions to switch quickly to all online learning and services that MCC was able to implement the EAS at scale. The pandemic caused MCC to increase staff assisting with the EAS, communicate in multiple ways to students and faculty, and ultimately force widespread usage of the system and support services. While COVID-19 is one of the most unfortunate events of this lifetime, it exacerbated equity gaps, mental health challenges, and student abilities to function through everyday life and work. With the assistance of leadership, the state legislature, and the federal government funding, MCC was able to create more ways and

connections to assist students with their needs. As a result, the usage of the EAS increased over 200% from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020.

Additionally, the involvement of MCC's marketing team has been essential for promoting the system, both to faculty and students. Key to this success was the implementation of various options for reporting, along with multiple methods of promotion, to ensure all avenues are covered and all stakeholders are aware of how, what, and why to report. Other institutions wishing to implement a robust EAS like this one should be aware, not only of the components essential for effective day-to-day operations, but also of the institutional commitment necessary to support its ongoing effectiveness.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE GUIDE

The intent of this Guide is to assist community colleges with creating, implementing, and maintaining an EAS used by faculty and staff to connect students with necessary resources for their ultimate success. It is designed to provide guidance for top leadership and mid-level management through lessons learned from a community college director who has been through implementation, maintenance, evaluation, and transformational changes of a robust EAS.

This Guide provides a systematic method for implementing an EAS at a community college; however, because this system is based on one community college's experiences, the following assumptions and aspects should be considered when using the Guide's recommendations. These factors can, and will, affect the components, process, and success of any institution's EAS.

The size and location of an institution, and thus, its student population will affect the specific needs the EAS will address. MCC is a small, urban community college with both traditional and non-traditional aged students. Enrollment at MCC ranges between 3,800-4,900 over the last four years, with a consistent small decline in enrollment each year. The student body of MCC is 75% white, 10% African American, 3% multi-racial, 2% Hispanic, 1% for each of Asian and Native American, with 8% not reported (MCC, 2016).

The student population of the MCC reflects the local environment, and the local population needs. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Muskegon is considered an urban environment, with a population of 175,824 residents, with a median household income of $59,584 (U.S. Census, 2020). The educational attainment levels in Muskegon County are various across the age ranges of 18-24 and 25 and above. Those community members with some college but no degree is 40.3% in the 18-24 group and 24.4% for those 25 and above (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The population with only a high school diploma is 34.2% for those 25 years and above and 39.8% for those 18-24 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

MCC serves all of Muskegon County, as well as a portion of two northern counties, Oceana and Newaygo, and Ottawa County, south of Muskegon. Both Oceana and Newaygo Counties are considered rural, while Ottawa County is urban. Two other Michigan community colleges are located nearby: Westshore Community College is in Mason County, just north of Oceana County, and Grand Rapids Community College is in Kent County, just east of Ottawa County. MCC is the closest community college by location of the main campus and extension center sites for all three counties.

The institution size also has a direct impact on how the EAS is constructed and the number of staff required for the Care Team. While MCC does not currently specify case load per staff member, case management is used to monitor all actions for a student when an early alert report is received. This includes all communications with the instructor, student, and any resources that may be used for referral and follow up. Additionally, the special groups of students discussed within this dissertation (athletes, early college, disability support recipients, etc.) are a case load for a specific staff member handling that group of students. The numbers range from 15 to 250 students and the number receiving early alerts varies each semester.

COMMITMENT OF THE ENTIRE INSTITUTION

Also key to the successful development of an EAS is the extent of the commitment across the institution. The EAS described in the Guide has enjoyed institutional support and commitment from its beginning, and this involvement is a key assumption behind the development of the EAS described here.

The faculty and staff are aware and trained on why, how, and when to submit an early alert for a student. They are involved regularly with suggestions and feedback to improve the overall system, including helping increase faculty usage. Because MCC is a smaller community college, a key element of the success of the early alert process is the size of the classes. Small class size allows faculty to be more involved with each individual student as well as within each class as a group. Faculty get to know students and strive to help them feel they belong at MCC. This strong faculty-student relationship has helped to increase the connection student services has with the students when it becomes clear that they may need more help. Engagement of

faculty and staff is critical to the implementation of a successful EAS. The ability for the early

alert team to know when and why to connect with a student stems from the sharing of

information from faculty, staff, and students.

Committed and supportive administration is also necessary to sustain and expand a

successful EAS. Administration must provide the capacity within staff members' job duties to

assist students as the number of students needing assistance increases. This means being

flexible with adjusting job descriptions until the right combination of time and knowledge is

confirmed within the staff. Having the right number of staff with time allotted in their daily

tasks to respond and assist students is a key element in a successful EAS. Additionally, sufficient

resources must also be available to support program development and implementation. These

resources include budget allowances for resources such as bus passes, gas cards, food for the

pantry, technology equipment (laptops, internet connection), counseling staff trained for

mental wellness assistance, and any other resource connection a student may need to ensure

they have the equal access to success. Any institution working to implement an EAS will need to

consider these, and all additional operational components discussed in the Guide, when

determining the right combination for best fit into its culture.

GUIDE STRUCTURE

The following Guide is intended as a resource to help community college faculty, staff,

and administration to build a framework for implementing a successful EAS. While it is not all-

inclusive, it is an instrument for those who may struggle with implementing an EAS. Each

section is divided into categories and subcategories, and each includes two components: (1)

recommendations for *What the Reader Needs to Know,* based on best practice research and

our experiences in creating, maintaining, and evaluating a successful EAS, and (2) specific

examples detailing *What We Learned* as we implemented our own system.

The Guide is divided into four major sections:

Section 1: Setting the Priority — This section includes information regarding the importance of having a global campus focus on student success for key areas, along with examples of lessons learned from the writer's community college. Subcategories for this section include Institutional Commitment; Administration, Staff, and Faculty; and Budget.

Section 2: Building the Team — This section includes what the reader needs to know about including all levels of staffing and commitment from each area, along with examples of lessons learned from the writer's community college. Subcategories for this section include Administrative Champion; Alert Team; and Faculty/Staff Advisory Committee.

Section 3: Determining the Process — This section includes key steps to building the process and procedures that will support the EAS, along with examples of lessons learned from the writer's community college. Subcategories for this section include Choosing a Software; Creating the Procedure; Communication within the Process; and Marketing the System.

Section 4: Evaluating the Process **—** This section includes factors regarding how to maintain and ensure the EAS is functioning well and providing appropriate data, along with lessons learned from the writer's community college. Subcategories within this section include Decision Making; Regular Assessment; Reporting the Data; Troubleshooting; and Enhancements/Looking to the Future.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The structure of the Guide provides a methodical path that follows the relevant steps a

community college could take when considering implementation of an EAS. The Guide includes

key factors to consider from the culture of the institution to what communications can and

should occur. The recommendations and examples provided in the Guide are based on the

writer's actual experience and founded in research of best practices and are intended to

provide direction and exist as a resource for others.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN EARLY ALERT SYSTEM GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This guide discusses the components, processes, software, mechanics, challenges, and advice for a community college to review while considering an EAS implementation. An EAS is meant to be an intervention between students, faculty, and staff to assist with challenges students may be having while attending a community college. Challenges could range from the need for tutoring to difficulty with financial stability. The EAS can be the mechanism for learning what students are having challenges, what those challenges are, how to best help them, and ultimately increase their chances of success in retention and completion. The EAS is an organized way of gathering information, communicating with students and faculty, and connecting them to the necessary resources.

SETTING THE PRIORITY

The higher education institution must have a clear focus on student success. Administration should be leading to ensure equitable paths to success for all students. This means including not only the mid-level management but also the front-line staff and faculty that work with students every single day. With involvement at all levels, the intent to have a focus on student success will be clear with everyone.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

What You Need to Know

In 2019, Kathe Pelletier wrote in her *Educause Review*, "Institutions can be student-focused and create a culture in which every decision is mediated by a reflection about what's best for the student. Academic advising staff and technologies can serve as a key lever for outreach and resource delivery. In fact, cross-institutional collaboration is critical to moving student success efforts forward, and one department alone cannot carry the full weight" (Educause, 2019, p. 63). EASs stem from a commitment to ensure students are successful during their time at the institution. **The priority and definition of student success must be established as part of the mission of the institution so that it can filter through all systems and employees.** Having the commitment to student success spread across academic departments, student services, custodial/maintenance, athletics, and any outside connections to the institution will assist in an easier implementation of an EAS.

What We Learned

Offering the opportunity for all employees to understand why student success is important is a key factor to having ownership in the implementation of how students are fundamentally guided to reach their goals. For example, at Muskegon Community College (MCC), in 2017 the mission was recreated with student success at the forefront. The mission defines the institution's purpose of priority of preparation of students, improving lives, building community, and ensuring equity and excellence. This mission aligns directly with the values and vision, which are all directly linked to student success. This is made evident through the intentional changes that have been made since the adjustment to the mission. Through the

2017-22 Strategic Plan, over 25 goals with 100+ measurable objectives align with the mission to engage all levels of staff and community involvement in fulfilling the mission and vision. A few examples include the creation of the Jayhawk Hub, one location housing resources connections for assisting students holistically with all of their needs, providing 110 laptops and over 60 Wi-Fi hot spots to students in need; and shifting all staff and faculty from desktop to laptop computers in order to work more easily and safe future costs.

ADMINISTRATION, STAFF, AND FACULTY

What You Need to Know

When beginning the discussion on how to implement an EAS, it is important for administration, staff, and faculty not just to be informed, but to be included and involved throughout the process. **Understanding the purpose of the EAS and what to expect are key factors for active cooperation and successful implementation.** While it will take time to produce a fully functioning system, a broad understanding across all sections of the institution will be necessary for an action plan to move forward. Administration should lead the way with the message and actions indicating that student success is a priority. With student success as the focus from administration it will be easier to filter the message and work through both faculty and staff at each level. This can be done through training, professional development, and involvement at conferences — anywhere that shows a seat at the table is being offered.

What We Learned

Many other initiatives tend to creep up to the top of the priority list throughout the year. Student success always needs to remain the focus of every single goal or initiative that is

created. The time spent on other initiatives takes away from time spent on implementing a successful EAS. For example, at MCC, although there was a director hired specifically to run the EAS, at that time there was no other staff. It has taken five years since that director started to increase the staff from one to nine. However, even after this time has passed, none of the staff members' roles are solely focused on the EAS. There are other parts to their jobs that become priority throughout the year while the early alerts are being submitted throughout the entire year. To maintain the focus on student success, MCC has worked to train more staff members and spread the knowledge and ability to assist with the EAS. Additionally, all new initiatives are directly linked to some form of student success outcome. Thus, everything being done should have a direct or indirect effect on student success.

BUDGET

What You Need to Know

When implementing an EAS, there will be costs associated with personnel, training, and technology. **One of the main steps will be deciding who will be leading the effort and what other staff will be involved in the direct tasks and work that will need to be done regularly once implemented.** For example, you may need to establish a director of Student Success or director of Early Alerts to be the key person leading the team. Staffing clearly requires a commitment in terms of budget. As previously mentioned, there will need to be multiple staff members to handle the early alert processing and connection with the students.

The early alert team will need training and the capacity in their jobs to add in the student success work of the early alert initiative. This training begins with the hiring process but must continue for the team to be effective and to improve and develop. Ongoing training

must be an established budget item. This could also require funds for consultant use from the software company and conferences that may be helpful for improvements.

Lastly, deciding what technology to use will be another key factor in the implementation budget. There are software solutions for processing of early alerts, but these cost money and time to not only implement, but also build the system and train the personnel to use the software.

What We Learned

It is very likely that one person will not be enough to make the entire system function well. It takes time to learn the best ways to do things, both for the procedures and for software. In addition, it would be best to have the EAS be the sole focus of the job for the team lead. If the team lead can spend all their time implementing, maintaining, and enhancing the system, it will be more effective in the long run. Therefore, the funding must be available to have that full-time position be designated solely for the EAS along with funding for other support positions. For example, the MCC Early Alert Team is built around the director and two full-time administrative support positions whose main jobs are receiving alerts, creating cases in the software, and communicating to students and faculty within 24 hours of the alert submission. While these tasks do not comprise their entire job, maintaining the EAS does take most of the time each day and week.

BUILDING THE TEAM

It is important to realize the work simply cannot be created, implemented, and maintained with one person. Creation of the early alert team requires effort from the leader,

but also from human resources and administration. The buy-in from mid-level management to spread the student success message and the need for the EAS plays a key role to getting others on board with the movement to provide holistic student support. If the early alert lead is also leading other student success efforts — for example, tutoring, counseling, outside connection to resources — it may be easier to introduce the EAS to staff who are already working in those support roles. Additionally, seeking out the areas where cohorts of students are involved is another group to connect with and have on the team.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHAMPION

What You Need to Know

As previously mentioned, there will need to be support at all levels, starting with institution's administration. Having a champion who fully supports the mission of the initiative will help to lead the efforts to gain support at other levels within the institution. **The directive from this champion guides the rest of the team to stay on task and continuously fulfill the purpose of the EAS and its connection to your students' success.** Additionally, the champion relays data regarding the early alerts to key administration and the board through regular reporting. This helps to continue the message of student success being everyone's business.

What We Learned

The champion always needs to have the EAS and student success at the front of every discussion at every level. This is a key factor to the success of the system. This person must be aware of other initiatives that may become competitive priorities and be ready to direct other staff, faculty, and administration of the importance of the EAS to the institution's mission. Of

course, the champion will be challenged to introduce new projects and new initiatives while maintaining the EAS; however, the director or team lead must remain diligent in providing data to show the success and relevance of the EAS. For example, at MCC, the administrative champion is the provost/executive vice president. His response to anyone indicating new problems or identifying student issues is to refer them to the EAS. This consistent messaging is clear to anyone working under the provost, and it is what makes the system continue to be the first thought in everyone's mind when assisting a student. In addition, data about the early alert types, numbers, students, and faculty are reported monthly in the provost's report, which is also included in the monthly report to the Board of Trustees. This reporting is also done at the end of each term and for the academic year.

ALERT TEAM

What You Need to Know

It should be clear that one person cannot do this work on their own. Not only will the champion be necessary, but also a person to lead the team at the mid-management level. That leader will need the support of other staff to promote, receive, and respond to the early alerts when they enter the system. Thus, the importance of the early alert team.

The team should be built of specific staff members working in student support areas of the institution. Depending on the enrollment of the institution, it may be necessary to have staff members whose jobs are dedicated to working with the EAS regularly. For example, those receiving the alerts could be tasked with the initial communication to students and faculty, along with additional follow up when needed. This could be the work of an administrative assistant level position versus a mid-management level, who may be the person meeting with

the students and connecting them with resources. Additionally, based on our experiences, we found it valuable to include staff members who lead and represent various cohorts of students from the campus. For example, athletes, students with disabilities, those receiving veteran funds, early college students, or any other groups where students have a direct institutional contact or coach. Because these groups of students have contact with the person responsible for leading their cohort or group regularly, the early alert process will likely have better success if it uses the existing channels and people for communicating with the student and resolving the alert issues.

What We Learned

The staff members from the various student groups who are directly involved in ensuring their students' success need to be brought on board and trained as soon as possible. Their understanding and feedback throughout the process are necessary for the initial set up and system implementation. They need to have ownership in how the system functions, the communication processes that will be involved, and the methods for receiving and processing alerts. For example, at MCC, while the director leads the team, the other members have special groups and cohorts of students they lead regularly. Because they already have a relationship with the students in their cohorts and groups, they have a direct, open connection to them when an early alert is received for a student in their group. At MCC, the early alert team includes a representative from athletics, disability support services, three early college cohorts, veterans, and students in the college completion cohorts. Early alert interventions can be even more successful when the person contacting them is someone they know well and who has a direct connection to them from within their cohort.

What You Need to Know

Because most of the early alert reports will come from your faculty, regular feedback from the faculty about how the system is working or not working is an important factor for continuous improvement. In addition, effective interactions and active listening with the users of the system will help with buy-in and ownership of the initiative and process. **An effective approach is to establish a standing advisory committee consisting of staff members who process the alerts and meet with students, as well as faculty members who are interested in being members of the feedback team.** One way to build this committee and to involve a wide range of faculty is to establish an early alert liaison in each academic department. This liaison can be the point-of-contact for their department for other faculty across the institution who have questions. Because they have rapport with their fellow department faculty, it may be easier and quicker to have discussions regarding when, how, and why to complete an early alert report for a student. In addition, if the rest of the department faculty have a good connection with the liaison in their department, they may be more willing to give feedback and offer suggestions.

What We Learned

The advisory committee or team should also be established as soon as possible. The ownership and feedback from faculty is a key factor in getting all faculty involved in using the EAS appropriately and regularly. By having faculty involved with making decisions on how things are set up initially and for suggested changes over time, continuous support becomes natural and certain. Each department's academic department liaison serves as a point person for other

faculty to connect with in case of questions about the system. For example, at MCC, the advisory committee was not established until the system was up and running. By the time the advisory committee was in place, the director was already amid system upgrades and modifications. Without the faculty's early input and advice, creating buy-in and ownership at the faculty level was more difficult and challenging. The EAS was not recognized as the first, primary method for student assistance until faculty were involved, providing feedback and recommendations. Those faculty could then go back to their colleagues and spread the word about the system, explaining the importance and necessity of early alerts to their students' success. It is not likely a surprise that some faculty would rather talk to another faculty member instead of someone in administration or student services. There is a trust factor between faculty that sometimes does not exist across other divisions.

DETERMINING THE PROCESS

Building a new process can be a challenge but can also be a very good experience. An important part of keeping it a good experience is to have the team members who will be involved in the tasks also involved with determining the flow and steps to the process. This may seem tedious to some, but it will be helpful in the long run since all input will be heard. It is also helpful to start with the end in mind and build the process from the end to the beginning. By realizing what result possibilities there could be, the steps to getting to those results will be easier to determine.

What You Need to Know

The first step to choosing a software for an EAS is to contact your institutional

department in charge of technology implementation and maintenance. Because the initiative

should already be known across campus as a top priority, they should be aware of the need of

their involvement to assist with purchase and/or implementation of a software package. They

can help either by identifying software they may have access to or know about, or by assisting

with a request for proposal for external software products. **The request for proposal (RFP)**

should include the requirements needed for fulfillment, which the advisory team should be

able to provide. In addition, it would be beneficial to have an idea ahead of time of the

products used by other higher education institutions. The companies responding to the

proposal should then provide demonstrations to the team for review and questions. When

reviewing the proposals, continuous support from the software company through a consultant

is extremely helpful for future implementation, training, and maintenance. Additionally, the

software company should be expected to provide opportunity for customization without

hesitation.

What We Learned

When considering software options, the review team should try to avoid using price as

the primary determining factor if possible. Using an RFP process is recommended, as it gives the

review team the opportunity to compare products in depth with demonstrations and reports.

Extensive communication with other institutions about their experiences, good and bad, can

help the review team identify good "fits" as well as incompatibilities.

Our experiences at MCC, though, were a little different and did not follow this recommended practice. Although the software CRM Advise was selected, it was not identified through an RFP process. Because MCC's Information Technology Office is outsourced to Ellucian, the Chief Information Officer (CIO) was working with the provost and dean to identify available software to replace a product that was not working well as the EAS. The CRM Advise product, created by Ellucian, was suggested as an option for a pilot program. While the price was right, at the time the product was brand new and not in use in many locations. These aspects caused issues with implementation, lack of available training, and absence of a general knowledge base to draw from when troubleshooting. MCC and the CIO had to work closely to teach themselves how and why to use this new system. While the system is now robust and enjoys broader usage, it is not used to full capacity, even after eight years. In addition, MCC still encounters difficulties getting appropriate assistance from the company when the Information Technology Office does not know how to fix a problem.

CREATING THE PROCEDURE

What You Need to Know

Just like any new process, establishing an EAS takes time, trials, and tests. Sometimes it may feel that the right thing is not going to happen and that the initiative is sure to fail. **It is important to be patient, take notes, collect data, and be willing to adjust as the work continues. In addition, the realization that training and learning are never complete is a key factor in staying the course for student success.**

The actual procedure that you'll determine for your early alert reporting process will be determined by the software and staff that are in place. Besides knowing what the software is

capable of, the procedure needs to have clearly defined steps — with detailed instructions —
so all staff members doing the work can follow the same steps. This detail and consistency will
also help to ensure good data are being collected for future reporting purposes. In addition,
because the follow-up reporting and communication with students will follow a consistent
pattern, it will be more beneficial for students and easier for staff to process. Recommended
practices include (1) naming each alert or case with specific titles (for example: Technology
Loan Request, Missing Books or Materials, Attendance Issues), (2) using certain database fields
to store consistent information (for example: the "Description" field houses the course and
section information), and (3) consistently sending email, text messages, and/or phone calls for
every student alert.

What We Learned

Expect trial and error when creating the process and procedures. Be prepared to add,
change, delete, and recreate. As a back-up, there should be a secondary method for reporting if
the software is not working. There needs to be a mechanism, not only for faculty to report, but
also one that allows staff reporting, since they, too, regularly help students with challenges. In
addition, the system should allow students to file reports when they are having challenges —
expanding the system so that does not always rely on a faculty or staff member to notice when
there may be an issue.

At MCC, some of our growing pains in our adoption of the early alert process were tied
to access to the system. For example, if faculty were having problems logging in to file a report,
they might contact the staff by phone or email, or in many cases, they'd simply give up.
Additionally, because the CRM Advise system was initially available to faculty only for students

currently registered for their classes, when faculty wanted to file reports for other students, or

when staff wanted to report, they had no access. These access issues led the team to work with

the Office of Information Technology to create a secondary reporting method that *all*

employees could access through Microsoft Forms. Both types of reporting methods, CRM

Advise and Microsoft Forms, are then handled the same way, by creating a case for the student

in CRM Advise. The efforts to solve these problems sparked the idea to create a similar

reporting system for students who wanted to self-report when they recognized that they need

help, making access easy and giving them direct connection to the early alert team. While some

of the student reports are simple questions, they are all evaluated to determine the proper

steps for the report. If necessary, a case is also created for reports received from students.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE PROCESS

What You Need to Know

A key component of an effective EAS is targeted, regular, and consistent

communication with students, faculty, and staff. **The parties involved in the communication —**

senders and receivers — should be triggered by who submitted the early alert report. If a

faculty member submitted it, both the faculty member and the student will have regular

communication with the early alert team, in addition to any other referral resources the

student may need. If a staff member submits an alert, then both the staff member and the

student would get that consistent communication, the same as if it were faculty. Lastly, if the

student submitted their own early alert report, then the communication with be directly with

the student and whatever resource is identified as necessary for assistance.

Different methods of communication are necessary because each group of users will likely have different primary modes of communication. Campus office staff likely prefer email, while most students have constant access to mobile devices and may prefer text messages. Using all channels of communication — email, phone, and text messages — will be a key factor in connecting with the students to help resolve the challenges they may be having. In addition, if a student does not respond, the process must trigger follow-up communication with the faculty or staff member involved in the initial alert.

In some situations, early alerts are received with an urgent need to connect students with a resource, many times referred to as a student crisis or mental wellness concern. This response needs to be a fast-track to connecting the student with immediate assistance. For example, in a situation with a potential suicide, once the team is made aware, staff can work quickly to connect the student with a licensed counselor, either internally or externally to the institution.

Lastly, an essential part of communication is training. Any staff and faculty using the early alert system will need to have regular instructional sessions to keep up to date on any changes to the system. Each semester there may be new faculty and staff training for all things relating to the campus. The training for the early alert system should be included in that regular staff development.

What We Learned

The different communication systems need to be in place from the start of implementation, as well as clear information about the communication options for all staff involved. The communication procedure should also be established early and remain consistent

and include opportunities for regular feedback from students and faculty. At MCC, we experienced confusion with the communication process, often resulting in the communication to students not being completed consistently. The email messages sometimes took a few days to be processed when the director and the other team members where busy and simply could not get them processed. Once two administrative support staff were added to the team, the alerts are processed as they are received, and students and faculty are consistently receiving immediate communication via email and text message. We also found that including telephone contact was valued by many students, especially when their need was more serious or personal. Figure 1 shows an example of possible communication flow.

**Figure 1: Communication Flow within Care Team**
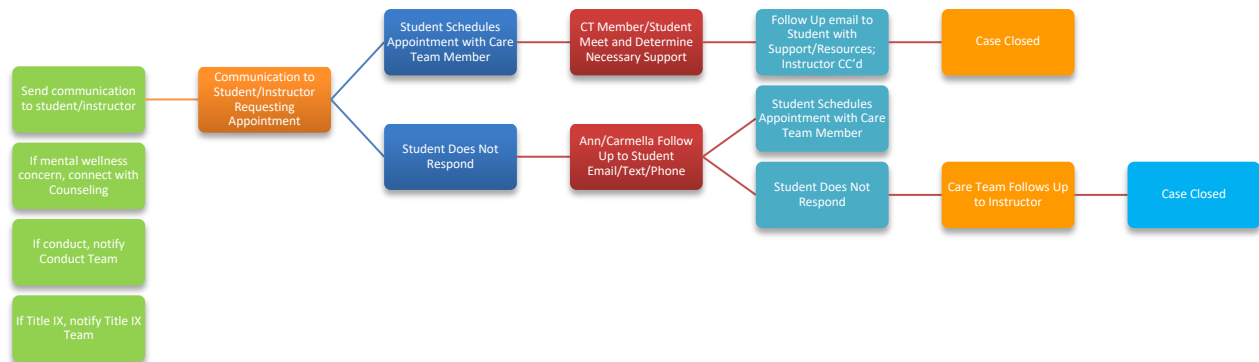
Another factor of an effective communication plan is having backup plans in place. On any given day, the software system may have problems. Or the student's voice mail will be unable to accept calls. While the text messaging function is essential for communicating with students, if that function goes down or is somehow unavailable, there should be another way

to convey messages to those students. Having a backup communication plan is key to remaining consistent in all functions.

Lastly, when an early alert is received that is considered a student crisis, the communication method needs to be quick and take top priority to connect the student with necessary assistance. As the COVID-19 pandemic grew larger, it was clearly influencing the mental health of students. The early alert team and Counseling office learned quickly that there needed to be a consistent method for communication between the teams. Multiple strategies were tested, including a group chat, email sent directly to a specific counselor, email sent directly to the administrative support in the counseling office, and finally, an email sent to the entire group of counselors for quick response to the student. Figure 2 shows the communication flow for those Care Report case referrals for mental wellness concerns. Additionally, within the early alert case management, the case title is now adjusted to Mental Wellness Concern. This assists with the counseling team having access to the case in CRM Advise, along with the ability to easily report the number of cases that were referred due to Mental Wellness Concerns.

Figure 2: Counseling Communication Flow for Care Reports
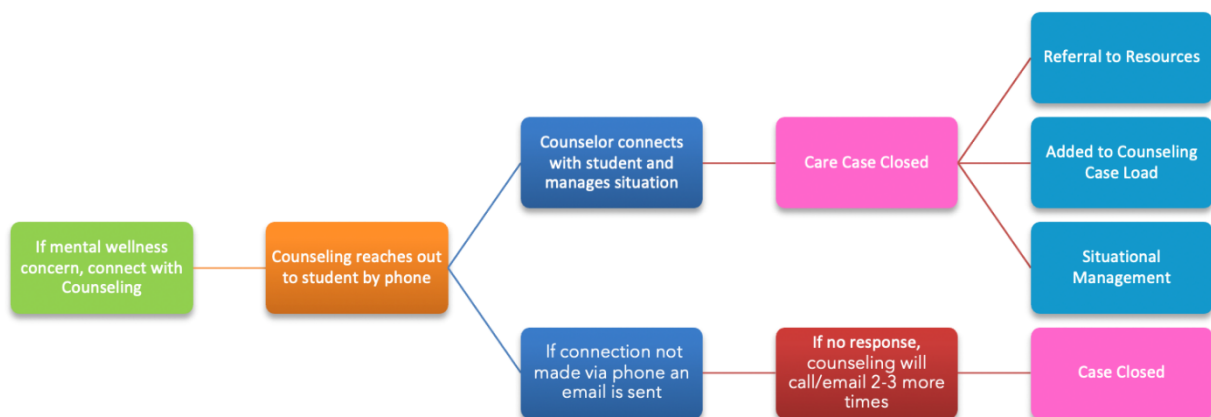
MARKETING THE SYSTEM

What You Need to Know

Helping students understand what an early alert is and why they may receive an early alert report is essential in the early messaging about the system, emphasizing the systems' ability to make connections to resources and assist them with challenges they may face. The early alert team will need to have work directly with the campus' marketing team to create clever advertisements for the EAS, focusing on boosting interest and curiosity within students. Using the language students can relate to along with the type of platforms they may be using is a key factor in getting their attention. Once students understand that the early alert team is there to help, they will be more likely to actively respond and participate in the support services being offered. Marketing efforts can include flyers and posters circulated across campus, information tables during institutional events, social media posts, email, and text message campaigns, as well as reminders included in course syllabi.

What We Learned

Any method of advertising to students has served to be helpful at MCC; however, communicating through their instructors, orientation, and social media seems to be the most effective. Have faculty talk about the EAS regularly, emphasizing the goals of the system and helping students understand that early alerts do not mean they are in trouble, but rather that they are being helped. The biggest barrier to communication is getting students to respond to the message; when students do not know why someone is contacting them, they ignore the email, phone call, or text message. If they understand why they are hearing from the early alert team and realize they are there to help, they are more likely to respond and explore the

resources available to them. Another approach we've taken is to have members from the early alert team visit certain specified classes each semester, telling them about the early alert process and reiterating the message that the system is there to help. This approach has, for us, been the most successful. Our early alert team has built on this direct communication by participating in welcome week activities and other events when giveaways attract students and help spread the message about the EAS and its purpose.

EVALUATING THE PROCESS

Once the process has been implemented and established within the institution, it is highly important and recommended to create ways to regularly evaluate the work being done. This will provide a sense to leadership and to the community that all the efforts being made previous were not for nothing. Regular assessment also provides for opportunity of improvement based on direct feedback from the users — both students and faculty/staff. Regular reporting should be created to indicate the levels of usage, referral, and assistance to students. Additionally, data could also be disaggregated to show differences in who is responding, being helped, and how that may or may not be making a difference in the student success rates as decided.

DECISION MAKING

What You Need to Know

While the team lead will need to be the main decisionmaker for the early alert process and system, they will need active involvement from the team and from the advisory committee. **An inclusive process will help ensure that any changes being made have valid reasoning and**

agreement from those utilizing and participating in the work. Meeting with the team at least

bi-weekly will ensure any immediate concerns that have occurred requiring changes or

additions to the process and procedures will be addressed quickly. Additionally, the advisory

committee should meet at least one time per semester, if not once per month, to equally

provide feedback on concerns that may have occurred throughout the semester requiring

adjustments. For example, if a reason type for an alert is not making sense to faculty members,

it will be necessary to consult with the advisory committee for feedback on what changes to

make. When necessary, of course, the team lead will consult with higher level administration

when changes require additional funding or major changes to the system.

What We Learned

  Establishing an advisory committee that includes faculty is important to have at the

beginning of the process. Because faculty members are the primary source of early alert

reports, it's important to consider their input as end-users of the system. If you want them to

use the system, it needs to be easy and functional for what they need. Their input is valuable

and necessary to keep them system working to the extent that they will continue to use it. That

feedback will help in making decisions on how to make changes and how to market the system

to other faculty and to students. For example, by having the faculty involved early in the

implementation, they can provide input on what reasons they feel they would submit an early

alert. They could also connect directly with other faculty who are not on the committee to

gather their feedback on what should be included. This will help with buy in for the system

since more faculty will know what is involved. In addition, the staff processing the early alerts

and meeting with the students should also be just as involved with providing feedback for

system and procedure changes. These can all be brought for discussion and eventually be brought for requested changes and funding when necessary to administration.

REGULAR ASSESSMENT

What You Need to Know

The main purpose of an EAS is to assist students with challenges they are having that may be hindering their success. There needs to be regular assessment and evaluation of what is being done and how it may or may not be helping the students. An assessment or survey should be created to collect regular feedback from both students and faculty using the system. This is useful and necessary information to help in determining if any changes are necessary and possibly what to change. Additionally, data can be used to not only to see what services or needs students have, but also to predict for the future any new needs that may require new resources. For example, Table 1 describes possible regular assessments along with when and to whom they should be administered.

Table 1: Assessing the Early Alert System

ASSESSMENT NAME	PARTICIPANT	TIMING	DATA COLLECTED
Early Alert Survey: Faculty	All Faculty	End of each semester	Self-reported usage data, reasons for using/not using, comments/concerns
Early Alert Survey: Staff	All Staff	End of each semester	Self-reported usage data, reasons for using/not using, comments/concerns
Early Alert Survey: Students	All students who received an early alert	After alert has been addressed, whether student responded or not	Self-reported response data, connected with instructor/care team, comments/concerns

What We Learned

Establishing regular surveys to all groups at implementation is a must. In addition, make sure to use the information provided by the surveys. Tell participants how the information is being used. By having the surveys and the data gained being part of the regular procedure, participants will realize how they are making a difference by providing feedback. For example, at MCC, the feedback survey for students was not initially created at implementation of the system. This caused a lack of data about those receiving alerts for the first few years. Later, a survey was implemented that now collects feedback from the student when a case is closed. Our current efforts are focusing on getting more students to complete the survey.

REPORTING THE DATA

What You Need to Know

Data collected throughout the early alert process will be important to maintain and use for reporting at specific times during the year and on demand when necessary. **The information gathered from the alerts — for example, the number of reports, the number of students, the subject of the report, and the number of faculty and staff using the EAS — are key factors to provide to leadership and to the rest of the team regularly.** This reporting is recommended at minimum by the semester; however, more frequent reporting may be requested. The data could also be expanded to included completion information for the student involved in the early alert as well. Final grades and withdrawal rates are good indicators to review after each semester to evaluate whether the work is helping students. Additionally, the monthly report can be included to leadership and up to the board of trustees.

Another important aspect of collecting and analyzing the retention and completion data regarding students receiving early alerts is the connection back to faculty and the linkage to accreditation. Administration should be able to review evidence indicating how the work faculty and staff are doing by submitting early alerts is helping or not helping students with their end result. This information can be connected to student learning outcomes for required accreditation review data. Faculty could then speak to the connections between the early alert to the possible success of the students.

What We Learned

It is important to understand what the general requirements for reporting will be set at the beginning of implementation. This will help to provide a full understanding of how and why to build certain elements, for example, the case title, in any specific nature. Consistency is key to having clean data to report. At MCC, reporting was not completed at the start of the process; however, as time passed, data regarding completion, total numbers of reports, total number of students responding, among other information, were being requested. This changed the way some items were entered into the cases at creation to make reporting easier. Our current reporting is done monthly for the provost report, which is then included in the monthly Board Report. The provost can talk with the Board of Trustees whenever they have questions about the data, thus continuing the support for the EAS and its connection to student success. Additionally, end-of-semester and end-of-academic-year reports are also completed, which are included in portions of the Strategic Plan and, ultimately, the college's Annual Report.

What You Need to Know

As with any software or procedure, there will always be a time when something is not working correctly. There needs to be a mechanism, such as email, for faculty, staff, and students to contact the program administrators when there are errors or problems with the software. **Users of the system should be aware of how and who to notify when they are having challenges with the established system.** There should also be an established procedure for the team when there are problems, including a contact in the technology office or a contact who can reach the software company directly. To keep the system running smoothly when problems arise, the team should be prepared to develop new solutions in case something cannot be fixed right away.

What We Learned

Creating an email address that is published everywhere and marketed for reporting questions or problems is an easy, workable mechanism for most institutions. When instructors have problems with submitting a report, they can use that email to get assistance not only in reporting the problem, but also in submitting the report directly. For example, at MCC there have been times at the beginning of the semester and throughout when the faculty early alert report is not working due to a software issue. Faculty are provided with the information to contact the early alert team lead (director) or the team email (Care Team email) to communicate the problem. Additionally, they can then also tell the team or the director about the student report they were submitting. The team can then handle both issues. First, they create a case for the early alert being received. Second, the lead has administrator access to the

software system and troubleshoots the problem with the actual function of reporting. If the lead cannot resolve the problem, they then reach out to the Office of Information Technology software liaison for further assistance in resolving the software problem.

ENHANCEMENTS/LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What You Need to Know

Once the team, committee, and procedures are set in place and faculty and staff are aware of how, when, and why to submit early alerts, it will be important to continually gather information from users — faculty, staff, and students — to make enhancements and streamline processes and procedures. As with any complex processes, there will be clunky steps that will need to be fixed. The best way to handle those is to work through them, evaluate, and figure out better ways to make the work more efficient and access easier. This enhancement process will require the team to have patience with each other and to talk openly about challenges, with the opportunity for creating new, more effective solutions. In addition, even when a system is working well, the team should be open and willing to look for opportunities to create solutions to related issues that students are facing or add new features to the EAS itself to help with other initiatives.

What We Learned

The information gleaned from individual meetings with students was key for our team's understanding how to make further enhancements to the EAS and offer more opportunities to students. This is true for any time; however, the COVID-19 pandemic made many community colleges very aware —very quickly — of new challenges students were having and in mass

quantities. For example, at MCC, the early alerts we received during the Winter and Summer 2020 semesters immediately indicated a significant need for students to have access to laptops, wireless internet, and webcams. The staff on the early alert team acted quickly to work with the Finance Office and the Office of Advancement to apply for grants to fund equipment that could be loaned to students in need, creating the Technology Loaner Program. This program started with two donated laptops from the college president and has expanded to over 120 laptops, hotspots, and webcams available for students to borrow for the semester, with a possible extension into future semesters. This program has impacted over 350 students in just over one year. Additionally, with the early alert team meets monthly, challenges students may be having are discussed, especially when there are more of one nature than another. This gives the team an opportunity to assess regularly what new needs are coming forth along with any that have not been resolved and need solutions.

CONCLUSION

The Guide gives specific examples and suggestions for community colleges to use when implementing an early alert system. The first step is ensuring the priority of student success is clear to all faculty, staff, and administration so every effort is being made to use the system. A team of staff is necessary to continue the regular efforts of the initiative. Those team members must have commitment to the project to keep the flow of communication with faculty and students. Team members will assist with the procedures to have ownership in the process. Lastly, evaluation of the system should happen at least each semester to determiner any adjustments that need to happen. Faculty and student feedback should be collected regularly to assist in the evaluation of the system.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is meant to assist community colleges with creation of an Early Alert System (EAS) that can increase retention, completion, and student success rates. There are many factors to be considered when implementing an EAS, but of utmost importance is the involvement of faculty, staff, and students. No matter the higher education institution type, community college or university, the must be a clear directive of leading with equity and student success from the highest level of leadership.

IMPLICATIONS

With the expectations of community colleges to increase completion and student success rates, there comes the need to have solutions to reach those goals. Through faculty and staff recommendations and data collection, community colleges can now identify at-risk students. This lends the ability to connect those students with whatever resources are necessary to assist with challenges and barriers to their success. With the early alert and intervention strategy, community colleges can bridge the gaps students may have between becoming a student to becoming a graduate.

Implementation of an EAS requires creation of internal campus and external community relationships. The early alert team can work towards having an understanding with internal resources including the counseling office, registrar, financial aid, financial services, information

technology, faculty, technology assistance, athletics, disability services, and food services.

External links with community organizations serving the public with childcare, housing, utility

assistance, transportation, financial, and food instability resources and assistance can be

established with the team for referrals through the early alert system. Whether the alert

notification comes directly from a student or from a faculty or staff member, the early alert

team will have the knowledge and availability to talk with the student, find out what is

happening, evaluate how to best help the student, and connect them with the right group(s). In

addition, the early alert team, along with licensed professional counselors, can provide staff

development to indicate how the way a student is doing academically is directly connected to

how they are functioning mentally as well.

Another perk of creating an EAS is the increased relationship building that happens

between faculty, student services, and students. With the faculty being an active and essential

part of the early alert advisory team, there is ample opportunity for collaboration with student

services staff. This gives the pathway for regular feedback leading to continuous improvement

of the EAS. Additionally, being part of the committee provides reason for regular

communication between faculty and student services staff, which could then lead to other

opportunities for working together. The increased communication also filters between student

services, students, and faculty. It becomes evident that the connection between the three

groups is fluid. It does not stop once the student is in class. With the EAS, students will hear

from both faculty and staff when there is an indication that they may need some additional

help.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE GUIDE

The audience for the Guide is those working at community colleges in administration, leadership, staff, and faculty who could help with creation of an EAS. It should be known that while the Guide is based in Muskegon Community College's experiences, each community college faces its own unique set of challenges in their environment that may be different from those at MCC. Additionally, the resources used for this dissertation reflect research from both community colleges, universities, and other higher education organizations. While use of Early Alert Systems is becoming increasingly widespread, there is limited research and data regarding systems at community colleges.

While this dissertation was being written, the nation was responding to a worldwide pandemic that caused many challenges for higher education. While the students were already having challenges, the pandemic forced higher education institutions to recognize more quickly when these were happening and who was having problems. Because MCC already had an active EAS, we were able to quickly adjust resources and staffing to handle the increased number of reports when students needed help. If the EAS had not been in place and fully functioning in March 2020, many MCC's students and faculty could have had a very difficult time with attending and completing coursework over the last two years.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

When reviewing the Early Alert System and how it functions with the Care Team Advisory Committee, the team will always have suggestions and recommendations to enhance the system. There is continual work to make the system more user friendly, give quicker feedback, and produce satisfactory completion results. Creation of a faculty dashboard where

faculty users can view Care Reports that have been submitted at any given time and where they are in the process is in the list of requests. The software that MCC uses, CRM Advise, does have a faculty dashboard; however, at this time it is not customizable, leaving MCC using work-arounds for giving faculty the information they would like.

Additional research could be conducted to examine the reasons for low or lack of participation by some faculty, staff, and students. Along with this, checking into any correlation of the reasons of reports and those that have received responses versus those that have not. Focus groups are an option for exploring with students what they feel are the good and bad parts of the system, along with what are the best methods of communication in terms of getting them to respond and act.

Looking forward, there could be thoughts of creating a student success score to be proactive in identifying students who may have high-risk factors (Pell eligible, first-generation, disability support recipient, among others) and using the early alert system to communicate with those students *before* the need of a report arises. This will take some work to confirm what the right ratings and items for scoring would be, however, it is a possibility for the future.

Some external benefits of CRM Advise have been picked up along the way of the continuous work on Care Reports. As mentioned in Chapter Four, other teams for Personal Counseling, Disability Support Services, Veterans, Debt Forgiveness, and Completion Coaching have been created to handle case management for student cohorts. This practice created a discussion about enhancing the usage of CRM Advise to all student services staff for a few reasons. When using Colleague, the student management system, the user must view multiple screens in order to view multiple bits of information. In CRM Advise on the student record

screen, there is a massive amount of detail information available in one location. This same, consolidated approach would save time for staff, both when working with students directly and with processing. Additionally, staff can provide notes about various types of appointments which is normally only viewed on individual calendars.

CONCLUSION

In closing, Early Alert Systems (EAS) can play a large role in the student success outcomes for students and have an impact on how successful a community college or university is considered with the community and the nation. The Guide included in this dissertation serves as a mechanism for assisting with implementing an EAS with suggestions of things to consider. The goal of this dissertation was to answer how communication and collaboration between faculty, administration, staff, students, and the community can result in increased student success. By implementing an EAS, the community college can make transformative change within closing equity gaps and making the possibility of obtaining a college education accessible for many more students.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT SURVEY

Student Feedback - Care Report ⸜

At some point during this semester one or more of your instructors told the Care Team you might need some help through a Care Report. We would appreciate your feedback on this. By filling this out you are entered to win one of three $25 gift cards. We look forward to hearing from you.

1. Do you recall receiving a Care Report by one or more of your instructors this semester? *

   ○ Yes, I received it and responded to the Care Team.

   ○ Yes, but talked to my instructor instead of the Care Team.

   ○ Yes, I received it, but did not respond.

   ○ No, I do not recall receiving it.

2. Was that communication helpful to you? *

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

3. What else could the Care Team do to help? *

   Enter your answer

4. What would have prompted you to respond to the Care Team? *

   Enter your answer

5. Did the Care Team communication prompt you to talk to your instructor? *

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

6. How often do you check your MCC email? *

    ◯ Daily

    ◯ Weekly

    ◯ Never

7. What can the College do to encourage struggling students to successfully complete their courses?

> Enter your answer

8. Was the communication with your instructor helpful? *

    ◯ Yes

    ◯ No

9. How was it helpful? *

> Enter your answer

10. Any other questions or concerns?

> Enter your answer

Thank you for your feedback!

＋ **Add new**

APPENDIX B: FACULTY SURVEY

Faculty Feedback - Care Reports

We appreciate you taking a few minutes to tell us about your experience with Care Reporting. Your feedback will be used to consider necessary improvements.

. . .

Hi, MCC Care Team. When you submit this form, the owner will see your name and email address.

* Required

1. Did you submit a Care Report and/or Tutoring Alert during the Winter 2020 semester? (select all that apply) *

   ☐ Care Report

   ☐ Tutoring Alert

   ☐ Neither

   ☐ Both

2. Did you receive follow up from the Care Team regarding your report? *

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

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3. Please provide any suggestions for the Care Team to improve service to students?

Enter your answer

4. Please provide any suggestions for the Care Team to improve follow up with Instructors?

Enter your answer

5. Please indicate your experiences with and/or interest in the following:

☐ I attended a professional development activity or information session that explained the use of the Care Report.

☐ I received information about how to use the Care Report prior to the start of classes.

☐ I am interested in participating in activities/sessions focused specifically on the Care Report.

☐ I am interested in professional development or information sessions about student success in general.

☐ I am interested in being on the Care Report Advisory Committee.

6. Any other comments or concerns?

Enter your answer

Faculty Feedback - Care Reports   ...

Thank you for your feedback!

☐ Send me an email receipt of my responses

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