



An Early Warning System Helps Keep Students in School

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to help campuses create an early warning program to alert them to students who are facing academic difficulty early in the semester. This will give them the time needed to intervene and give students the help they need to succeed academically.

Build an Academic Partnership between Faculty, Students and Staff

An Early Warning System (EWS) that focuses on the student's academic well-being has great potential when administered appropriately. It attempts to build an academic partnership between faculty, students, and Student Support Staff. At Southwestern University, the early warning system grew out of a campus culture that already encouraged cross-division communication about student needs.

According to research published in 2002, their student affairs and academic services staff would work together by meeting each Friday to discuss a "student issue." Their office of academic administration sent out rosters of students to faculty three and a half weeks into the semester and asked faculty to identify those students with infrequent attendance and academic underperformance. Students who were identified as at risk received a notification letter marked "urgent" expressing concern over their academic standing and explaining potential consequences for not raising their GPA. Support staffs were able to intervene and provide students with additional assistance. This is a great example of a functional and productive partnership formed between faculty, students, and staff to address student academic needs

Setting up an Early Warning System

Typically EWS programs are staffed and managed in the Student Services division. The program can be administered through the Minority Affairs office, Dean of Student's office or Academic Advisor's office. EWS has experienced its greatest success at smaller institutions, but over the past decade many larger universities have implemented some form of EWS as well. You can concentrate on the freshman class but since most of the required record keeping is computerized many campuses include the entire undergraduate student body. If you need to pilot the EWS first, then you may want to start with a first semester freshman class.

After you determine which students will be included in the program, it is recommended that you meet with the registrar's office. The registrar can advise you on the best way to access student records and class schedules. You will need the names of your students' professors to launch your program. Today there are a number of software programs that Registrars use to handle this function. Just make sure the package you choose is flexible and allows



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you to access student records five to six weeks after classes start, mid-term, and at the end of the semester. This will let you monitor student grades and make contact with professors as needed.

Getting Faculty on Board

If you're just starting out you may have to sell the EWS to the faculty. Keep in mind that faculty traditionally resist any program that requires additional time outside their teaching load, or is perceived as being bureaucratic. Keep your program simple and demonstrate to faculty how the program will assist them, and you stand a better chance of gaining their support. You may also need to engage in some politicking. Try to get placed on the Deans and Departments heads' agendas. This will give you a chance to introduce yourself and your program directly. You will be able to answer questions and gauge how receptive faculties are to the program.

At these meetings try to find out how soon in the semester faculty test students and how often they give out assignments. This information will help you determine how often you will need to receive the faculty early warning student monitoring form. Ideally, you would receive feedback from faculty at least twice during the semester: after the fifth or sixth week of class and after midterm. If you're also able to get this information after the semester is over, you'll have a more complete picture of how effective your intervention worked. Some faculty don't test until midterm, so it is important to talk with students about keeping up with class assignments in that situation.

Make sure you provide faculty with enough information about the EWS program that will enable them to participate easily and integrate it into their syllabus. Information should cover the purpose of the program, and how the early warning system is intended to increase retention. Also, you should enclose a copy of the forms faculty will need to complete, and information on how the students will be monitored. This can all be done electronically. Be sure to send the students in the EWS information as well.

Research has demonstrated that for any student retention initiative to work, there is a crucial need for faculty to be on board of the initiative. In a study of engineering programs across four research universities, Vogt (2008) finds that faculty distance was negatively related with GPA, self efficacy and academic confidence. In other words, students tended to do better when they perceived the faculty to be approachable and supportive.

At the core of the student experience is what goes on in the classroom, and the primary role model and motivator in the classroom is the teacher. Excellence in teaching should not just be limited to a thorough understanding of the material, but a commitment to a fair classroom environment, that encourages participation from everyone, regardless of racial or ethnic background. It also requires an active commitment on the part of faculty to ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Faculty are the ones who deal with students more



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frequently than anyone else and can play an effective role in students' retention. It is therefore imperative to make sure that faculty are on board in establishing and implementing the early alert program.

How the Program Works:

- By the 5th week of class send faculty a copy of the EWS Monitoring Form.
- Have faculty complete either manually or electronically.
- Review all forms and pay special attention to faculty comments.
- Set up mandatory meetings with students to discuss the faculty's feedback.
- Discuss appropriate remedies with the student for improving.
- Have students sign a Remedies form that spells out in writing what is expected.
- Send a copy of the Remedies form to faculty as appropriate.
- Have student meet with faculty to discuss the remedies and other suggestions the faculty member may offer.
- Repeat this after mid-terms if needed.
- Send faculty a thank-you letter after the semester is over for participating in the program.
- Provide appropriate feedback to the student as needed.
- Evaluate the program annually and improve as needed.

By the fifth week after classes start, send faculty a copy of the Early Warning System Student Monitoring Form or let them know where they can access it electronically.

Earning Warning System Student Monitoring Form

Student name _____

ID# _____



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Course/Section _____

Instructor _____

Date Sent _____

Please rate this student by using the following scale

Excellent 1 Good 2 Fair 3 Poor 4 Very Poor 5 Unable to answer 6

_____ Participates in class discussions

_____ Attendance

_____ Submits assignments on time

_____ Quality of homework assignments submitted

_____ Quiz results

_____ Test results

_____ Asks for assistance if having difficulty

_____ Other _____

_____ Explanation of items checked _____

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What grade would you assign this student at this time?

Circle one A AB B BC C D F Other

Comments:

Please return this form to: _____



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Call _____ or email _____ if you have questions or need additional information.

Have faculty return this form directly to you. Encourage faculty to complete the entire form even if they are unable to answer some of the questions. Pay special attention to the comments faculty write. They can be very instructive when advising students.

When you have received the forms from faculty, you and your staff will need to set up meetings with students to review the reports. We've found that students respond positively to being able to review their progress early in the semester. Below is a sample email that you can send to students to discuss the reports.

TO: Student enrolled in EWS Program

RE: Meeting to discuss academic report

As you know we are working with your professor to monitor your academic progress. Early in the semester we asked your instructors to complete a report on how you are doing academically in the classroom. Now that we have received this report we need you to schedule a meeting by _____ to discuss.....Thank you

During the meeting the counselor or advisor should carefully review the student's progress in the class. An important caveat to keep in mind is that when advising students, counselors should attempt to have the following information available:

- 1) Student transcripts
- 2) Test scores
- 3) Faculty Early Warning Report
- 4) Course syllabi
- 5) Course descriptions and reading lists
- 6) Tutorial information



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When the student is doing well, that should be acknowledged. When the student is having difficulty, remedies should be explored. These remedies should be agreed upon in writing by the student, counselor, and teacher. After the counselor has met with the student, the student should then set up a meeting with his or her teacher to discuss the remedies suggested. The teacher may add remedies. He or she should then sign the Remedies Form. A copy of this form should go to the teacher, student, and counselor.

The above scenario should be repeated after midterm grades are out and at the end of the semester when possible to reinforce good study habits.

An example of a Remedies Form

Name of Student _____

ID Number _____

Course _____

Time/Day _____

Instructor _____

After meeting with the student the following suggestions were agreed upon to help improve the student's classroom performance.

_____ Attending classes

_____ Taking notes

_____ Study skills sessions

_____ Tutoring

_____ Regular counseling

_____ Other _____

The student has agreed to take the following steps to address the items

Checked above: _____



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Student signature _____

Counselor/advisor signature _____

Instructor signature _____

Other comments:

_____ Student has dropped the course.

_____ Student plans to drop the course.

_____ Other _____

As another check and to encourage students to meet up with their teachers, it is advisable to send a follow-up letter to teachers similar to the following.

Memo

To: (name of instructor)

From:

Re: Faculty Early Warning Report

Date:

We would like to express our appreciation to you for completing the Early Warning Report forms. Your efforts have helped us identify some academic problems early enough to allow us to address them. (Name of student) has come in to discuss your feedback on his (or her) progress. We have encouraged him (or her) to set up an appointment with you, whether or not there is a problem, but especially if there is a problem. In addition, we have suggested the remedies on the enclosed form as a way of helping the student improve his (or her)



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academic standing in your class. Please discuss this (or other) remedies as you see fit. Then please sign the form and return a copy to my office.

We will be closely monitoring the student's progress for the remainder of the semester. We have made it clear to the student that the ultimate responsibility for succeeding academically in your class is up to him (or her). Again, thank you for your assistance. Feel free to contact me to discuss further.

Cc: Student File

Involve Parents and see Student Participation increase

Many institutions are finding if they involve parents, the Faculty Early Warning System is strengthened further. Students should be given the option of involving their parents and the choice to do so must remain with the student. However it's been my experience that parental involvement works well with freshman and sophomore students, but upper-class students tend to reject it. "Southwestern University has used the method of sending parents a letter describing the early warning system and encouraging them to ask their sons or daughters if they had received one of the letters. This method still affords the students a degree of privacy while opening the lines of communication between parent and child." (Southwestern University, 2011).

Conclusion

A well planned and executed early warning system improves student retention rates. Campuses have found success with this program for nearly 25 years now. The literature is filled with examples of successful programs. Fayetteville State University reports a steady increase in retention rates ever since they initiated the early warning system. In a study conducted to evaluate the result of a pilot initiative for reporting, monitoring and tracking excessive absenteeism among students during the first six weeks of classes Hudson (2005) indicates that early warning signals are not only good indicators of the likelihood of failure, but that early detection can lead to a significant decline in dropping out or failure among students.

Out of the 216 students who had excessive absenteeism 99 were successfully contacted by their advisers. Of the 99 who responded 44 passed the course while the rest either dropped out or failed the course. The students were surprised that their attendance had been monitored and glad that someone took the initiative to help them get back on track in order to avoid failure in the class.



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At the end of the semester it's important to get faculty feedback on how the Early Warning System worked out and how it can be improved. After the first time around, faculty are usually more receptive. It doesn't hurt to send a final thank you letter at the end of the semester to faculty, department chairs, and college deans.

If your campus hasn't implemented an EWS program, what are you waiting for?

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