“RED FLAGS”:
BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF POTENTIAL STUDENT ATTRITION

Probably the best warning sign that a student is at risk for attrition is if s/he exhibits poor academic progress or intention to withdraw. For example, the following behaviors could serve as signals for detecting students who are at risk for academic failure or who intend to withdraw from the institution: (a) poor academic performance in more than one class, (b) delay or failure to pre-register for next-term classes; (c) delay or failure to renew housing agreements; (d) delay or failure to reapply for financial aid or work-study, (e) failure to declare a major by the end of their sophomore year, or (f) request copies of transcripts before eligibility to graduate.

Early-Alert (Early-Warning) Systems

An early-alert system may be defined as a formal, proactive, feedback system though which students and student-support agents are alerted to early “red flags. Early-alert systems have been implemented in different forms, including the following procedures.

Midterm Grade Reports

One national survey reveals that more than 60% of postsecondary institutions report midterm grades to first-year students for the purpose of providing them with early feedback on their academic performance. Approximately 10% of these institutions obtain student right-to-privacy waivers that enable them to report midterm grades to both first-year students and their parents (Barefoot, 2001). Students with dangerously low midterm grade reports are typically notified by letter to speak with an institutional representative (e.g., academic advisor or academic dean) who, in turn, refers the notified student to the appropriate support service. At some institutions, such as New York University, academic advisors make follow-up phone calls to students who fail to respond to their letter of notification (Early Intervention Programs, 1992). At Brooklyn College (NY), faculty notify peer tutors when students are having academic difficulties, and the tutors initiate contact with the student (Levitz, 1991).

Use of midterm grades as an “early alert” or “early warning” system has a long history in higher education. Unfortunately, however, there also have been perennial problems associated with successful implementation of this procedure. Some of the major problems are listed below, followed by potential solution strategies.

1) Lack of faculty compliance—i.e., faculty have neither the time for, nor the interest in, calculating and reporting midterm grades for all their students.

Faculty compliance rates may be increased if instructors are not asked to submit midterm grades for all students, but only for students who are in academic jeopardy (e.g., students whose grades are C- or below). Compliance rates may also be increased by increasing the convenience of the grade-reporting procedure (e.g., easy-to-complete grade forms or on-line grade submission). Lastly, instructors may be expected to show higher rates of compliance if they are recognized or rewarded for doing so by college administrators. (For example, if department chairs and the academic dean “count” their record of compliance in promotion-and-tenure decisions).
2) Reporting only a grade at midterm, by itself, does not specify the source (cause) of the poor performance and fails to suggest the specific intervention strategy needed to rectify the problem.

Rather than merely reporting a letter grade, some colleges issue early-alert forms that request additional information from the instructor, which is used to help diagnose the specific nature of the problem and facilitate intervention that is tailored or customized to its particular cause. Again, to increase compliance with this request, the report form should be “user friendly,” i.e., completing it should neither be time-consuming nor labor-intensive. For instance, at Adelphi University (NY), early-warning rosters are released during the fourth week of class and faculty report students who are experiencing academic difficulty, using an efficient abbreviation code to identify the specific area(s) of weak performance: AP = Assignment Performance, CP = Class Participation, EX = Examination Performance, IA = Intermittent Attendance, NA = Never Attended, NC = Non-Completed assignments, and WE = Weak Expository skills (Carlson, 2000).

Students’ midterm grades for one course in particular—the first-year seminar—may have the potential to serve as a vehicle for early identification of first-term students who may be academically “at-risk.” Evidence gathered at the University of South Carolina suggests that a failing grade in the first-year seminar can serve as a warning signal for detecting students who are experiencing global academic problems and may be at risk for attrition (Fidler & Shanley, 1993). Also, research conducted on four consecutive cohorts of first-year students at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has revealed that first-year seminar grade can predict students’ overall first-year academic performance better than high school grades or college-entry SAT/ACT scores (in Barefoot et al., 1998). These findings suggest that the course may serve as an accurate diagnostic tool for identifying first-term students who may be academically at-risk and in need of academic assistance or psychosocial intervention.

The diagnostic capability of the first-year seminar may be tapped more proactively if seminar instructors issue midterm grades or midterm progress reports to students experiencing problems in the course. If the first-year seminar grade is a good proxy for first-year academic performance in general, then the midterm grade in this single course may serve as an effective and efficient early-warning signal. Moreover, given that first-year seminar instructors often self-select into the program because of their interest in and concern for promoting the success of first-year students, these students should display a high rate of compliance or reliability with respect to submitting students’ midterm grades in an accurate and timely manner.

First-term students receiving midterm grades below a certain threshold or cutoff point in the seminar could be contacted for consultation and possible intervention. To determine this cutoff point, research could be conducted on grade distributions in the first-year seminar to identify the grade below which a relationship begins to emerge between poor performance in the first-year seminar and first-year academic problems or student attrition. For instance, students at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts who earned a grade of C+ or lower in the seminar had a significantly higher rate of first-year attrition (p<.001) than students who earned a grade of B- or higher in the course (cited in Barefoot, et al., 1998).
3) *Lack of student compliance*, i.e., students who receive negative midterm-grade reports do not contact the support person or service recommended to them.

To combat this problem, strong incentives or sanctions may be needed to increase the likelihood that students will connect with and follow through on the recommended intervention. (For example, alerted students may not register for next-term classes until they have seen the person to whom they have been referred).

4) Midterm grade reports may *not be sufficiently proactive*, i.e., they may come too late for the intervention to be effective.

To redress this shortcoming, strategies contained in the following section are recommended. While issuing midterm-grade reports to struggling students is a laudable practice, Tinto (1993) warns that, by the time midterm grades are recorded and disseminated, feedback may come too late in the term to be optimally useful.

**Pre-Midterm Alert Systems**

Identifying and connecting with students who exhibit disengagement very early in the term—before midterms grades are calculated, processed, and disseminated—represents a more proactive alert system. Some institutions are resorting to an earlier feedback mechanism, based on student *behavior* during the first 4-6 weeks of class (e.g., students who miss class regularly, who are chronically tardy, who consistently fail to turn-in their assignments, or who rarely are prepared for planned class activities). At New Mexico State University, attendance-problem requests are sent to instructors during the second week and sixth week of the term. Students demonstrating attendance irregularities who fall into any of the following categories receive a phone call from the Office of Advisement Services: (a) first-semester students, (b) students on academic probation, and (c) students with multiple early-alert reports (Thompson, 2001).

At Marymount College (CA), the offices of Academic Affairs and Student Development Services collaborate to identify and intercept academic problems during the early weeks of the term through a program titled, “R.E.T.A.I.N,” an acronym standing for: Re-Engagement Through Academic Intervention Now. Easy-to-complete forms are placed in faculty mailboxes that may be used to identify students exhibiting early behavioral signs of disengagement. Faculty are given the option of sending these forms to the Assistant Academic Dean, or contacting the Dean by electronic/voice mail to report students exhibiting early “red flag” behavior. Particular attention is paid to students for whom more than one R.E.T.A.I.N form has been submitted. The Dean contacts the student’s academic advisor to discuss the situation and the two of them decide what intervention strategy to employ. For example, students needing academic support with their class work are referred to the Learning Assistance Center, whereas students whose disengagement stems from “non-academic” (i.e., psychosocial) issues are referred to the Counseling Center. If the Assistant Academic Dean and academic advisor are unable to connect with the student to resolve the problem(s), the Director of Residential Life is contacted to determine whether the student is living in a college residence and may be reached there.

Empirical evidence for the effectiveness of an earlier-than-midterm alert system is provided by institutional research conducted at Vincennes University Junior College.
When a student begins to miss class at this institution, course instructors tear off one part of a computer-generated ticket whose keystroke input generates two postcards containing messages of concern about non-attendance, one of which is addressed to the student’s local residence and one to the student’s permanent address. Additional absences generate a second, more strongly worded postcard indicating that the student is in danger of being dropped from the course. The system also generates lists for academic advisors, alerting them of students majoring in their academic field who have received attendance notifications. Following institutional implementation of this early-alert system, the number of students receiving grades of D, F, or W was substantially reduced. The beneficial effect of the early-alert system was particularly pronounced in developmental mathematics classes, for which there was a 17% drop in D and F grades and a concomitant 14% increase in A, B, and C grades (Budig, Koenig, & Weaver, 1991).

Evidence for the positive impact of a pre-midterm alert system on student retention is provided by local research conducted at the University of Wisconsin–Oskosh. After the third of week of the semester, early-alert forms are sent to instructors teaching preparatory and basic-skill courses populated by previously identified “high-risk” students. Forms are sent to the Office of Academic Development Services, which initiates intrusive intervention by contacting and meeting with each student to provide academic counseling, referral to a peer tutor program, and suggestions for other forms of assistance. Since the program was initiated, retention rates for at-risk students have risen steadily, reaching a level of more than 70 percent (Green, 1989).
References


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