Early Alert Program response to the Six “Design Principles”

Keeping New Community College Students on Track

A recent June 2009 article titled “Keeping New Community College Students on Track” outlines and supports the reasons for an Early Alert intervention at Leeward Community College. The Early Alert interventions have been added to the six recommendations outlined below.

Community college students enter their institutions feeling motivated and welcome, but many get lost after just a few weeks of enrollment, according to a new report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). The report suggests ways to help students keep their momentum during their first year.

The Center's Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) looks at the critical early weeks of a new community college student's experience. The most recent SENSE report features preliminary results of a survey of more than 57,000 entering students at 89 institutions in their fourth and fifth weeks of the 2008 fall academic term. It also includes results from focus groups held with students.

The report, Imagine Success: Engaging Entering Students, introduces six "design principles" that aid entering student success.

1) **Personal connections**

Eighty percent of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The very first time I came to this college, I felt welcome." However, less than a quarter of students said that there was a specific person assigned to them that they could reach whenever they needed help.

The report recommends helping entering students build personal connections by requiring academic advising and by pairing students with case managers or mentors. In the classroom, faculty can help build students' connections with one another by making collaborative work part of their courses.

The Early Alert program has partnered an individual counselor with every instructor to develop this relationship. Students are highly encouraged to meet with their assigned counselor during the first three weeks of the Early Alert period for advising and before an Early Alert notice might be given. If an Early Alert notice is sent, counselors will complete a Student Success Plan with the student to set appropriate goals to meet class requirements.

Instructional faculty is encouraged to create a learner centered environment and also develop supportive relationships with their students. Suggested classroom strategies to encourage student engagement are included on the Early Alert web site.

2) **High expectations and aspirations**

More than two-thirds of students said they strongly agree with the statement, "I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college." However, the statement doesn't seem to be followed up by action supporting success. According to the survey, in just the first three weeks of class

- nearly a third of students turned in at least one assignment late
- 25 percent failed to turn in at least one assignment
- 29 percent skipped class

In the report, the CCSSE recommends that institutions and faculty be specific about expectations and the level of effort required to succeed. In addition, the report states, the institution and faculty must act when students don't meet expectations, such as contacting a student who misses classes.

The Early Alert referral page through SARS addresses a number of possible concerns. All concerns will be forwarded to counselors and academic support areas if noted. Communicating high expectations begins with the message that instructors state on their course syllabus and deliver when introducing the Early Alert program in class, and is
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supported by the classroom visit by the designated counselor. Students need to be clear on what happens if classroom and academic expectations are not met.

Students will be encouraged to make an appointment with their counselor during the first three weeks to commit to a plan of success and to sustain their initial motivation. Students will have access to support material that introduces study skills and success behaviors important for college. They will be asked to share these documents with their counselors and/or instructor during the first three weeks.

If students receive an Early Alert notice, clear expectations state that the student must meet with the instructor, counselor or academic support area as prescribed by the faculty member. Counselors will contact students though various means (email, phone call, or letter) to meet with the student. After discussion of the specific concerns stated in the Early Alert, a Student Success Plan is completed and shared with the instructor.

3) A plan and pathway to success

Most students said that an advisor helped them select courses, but only 40 percent said that an advisor helped them see the bigger picture by helping them set overall academic goals and create a plan for achieving these goals. About 20 percent of the students surveyed said they weren't even sure if they planned to take classes again.

However, 58 percent of students enrolled in college success courses developed a written plan for achieving their academic goals, compared to 30 percent of all entering students.

For new students entering LCC for the first time, preparing for college includes completing applications, compass testing, health clearances, financial aid, important dates and deadlines, and attendance at orientation sessions. Registration and selection of courses, concludes the process and choices of classes include the identification of a major and possible career goals. Class schedules, availability of desired courses and closed classes make advising challenging. Students are encouraged, and many do, to meet with counselors during the semester or at a later time.

The college success courses (IS 100) offer students a solid foundation in the first semester. Currently, more college success courses are planned and are suggested to be available before the semester starts to support students’ readiness for college.

The Early Alert program attempts to assist students by offering counseling appointments within the first three weeks of the semester as an initial review of their progress. This proactive approach is aimed at providing students with a more thorough examination of their goals built upon real experiences in college.

4) An effective track to college readiness

Nearly two-thirds of the students surveyed tested into at least one developmental area. The report suggests that mandatory assessment and placement policies are key, citing a Community College Research Center study that found that "more students exit a remedial sequence by failing to enroll in the first course than by failing a developmental course in which they are enrolled."

The report also notes that there is growing evidence that student success courses are particularly helpful to developmental students. However, only 25 percent of the students surveyed were enrolled in such courses.

As noted above, more college success courses, offered in a modular format, are in the planning stages. If successful, students may be more successful in their developmental courses and better prepared to meet college expectations. An issue is the availability of
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5) Engaged learning

Despite a wealth of literature supporting the idea that engaged learning, such as collaborative or hands-on projects, improves persistence, 22 percent say they never worked with other students on a project or assignment during class, and 69 percent said they never did so outside of class.

To help remedy this problem, faculty can assign collaborative work and build community service or other hands-on experiences into their classes. Institutions can also require study groups, the report notes.

Included on the Early Alert web site is a attachment titled, “Early Alert Classroom Strategies”. These suggested activities may offer students an incentive to participate more fully in class and create a more personal relationship with their instructor. Integrating hands-on and relevant experiences in a collaborative learning environment are often desirable by students.

6) An integrated network of financial, social, and academic support.

According to the survey, fewer than a third of entering students know where to access key student services during the first three weeks of college. Twenty-nine percent said they did not know about academic advising/planning services, 27 percent said the did not know about individual tutoring, and another 27 percent said they did not know about financial aid advising.

Colleges can improve students' awareness and use of these services by integrating them into the classroom experience, the report states. An early alert program, for example, allows faculty to identify at-risk students and refer them to an advisor.

This states one of the goals of the Early Alert program. It is vital that instructors support the counselors' effort and refer students to appropriate resources on campus. Included on the Early Alert web page is a campus resource list to direct students to the proper resource. Early Alert initial assessments indicated that students were not aware or had not used academic resources such as the Math Lab or Learning Resources Center with regularity. Students did report that they relied on and were focused on the expectations of their classes. Supporting students in developing a connection to many services on campus will only enhance the total college experience. By having a link to an identified counselor through the Early Alert program, instructors can better support their students.