Reaching Those Who Don’t Reach Out:
Developing an Undergraduate Early Alert System

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Learning outcomes

By participating in this session, registrants will:

— Explore common challenges in student help-seeking behavior based on recent literature and experience
— Gain a better understanding of early alert and proactive advising approaches
— Consider structure and important stakeholders involved in implementing an early alert system
— Begin to develop guiding questions for pursuing the proactive advising and early alert best practices within the context of their own institution
▪ What is early alert?
▪ Discussion: challenges of connecting
▪ University of Calgary model
▪ Our development process
▪ Outcomes to date
▪ Planning your early alert approach
Why do student leave before degree completion?
Why do students leave?

- Low student engagement
- Lack of sense of belonging/community
- Not the right fit (post-secondary)
- Not the right program
- Financial limitations
- Family commitments or pressure
- Lack of academic preparation
- Part of a vulnerable/at-risk group
- Stress, burnout, health issues (MENTAL HEALTH)
Some definitions

▪ Retention = rate or percentage of students who return from one enrollment period to another (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012)

▪ Attrition = the “non-continuation” of students (Higher Education Academy, 2015)

▪ At-risk students = students or student groups with a higher probability of attrition (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013)
Why Early Alert?

- Retention/ Efficiency of resources (EAB, 2013)
- Mental health initiatives
Components of Early Alert

Proactive outreach *early in a problem*

Identification /alert

Connection to resources

Lynch-Holmes, 2015
Proactive Advising

- Advisor-directed
- Anticipates student challenge/intervenes early in a problem
- Focused on motivating the student to engage in resources

Varney, 2012
Trends in Post-secondary Early Alert

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<tr>
<th>Academic factors</th>
<th>Behavioural factors</th>
<th>Non-cognitive factors</th>
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<td>• In-progress course grades</td>
<td>• Engagement</td>
<td>• Motivation</td>
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<td>• Attendance</td>
<td>• Goal orientation</td>
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<td>• Financial aid applications</td>
<td>• Self-efficacy</td>
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(EAB, 2013; Lotkowski et al., 2004)
Issues We See in Early Alert Students

- Financial/housing
- Personal relationships
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Legal/immigration
- Motivation
- Bereavement
- Transition (first year or international)
What makes it so hard to find students early in a problem?
What prevents people from accessing help when they need it?
UCalgary Definition of Early Alert

- Academic indicators of change from baseline behaviour (e.g., grade decline, disengagement from class)
- Comparing each student to their own historical performance
- Identifying life issues that could derail a student if not resourced quickly
Academic Development Specialists

- One-on-one, relationship-based support
- Self-regulated learning strategists
  - Information processing, test strategies,
  - Time management, organization, life balance
  - Skills for monitoring and refining strategies
- Referral network
  - Skills for finding and accessing help
WE ALL NEED HELP SOMETIMES
Timeline

Fall 2013:
- Coordinator hired, working group established
- Environmental scan, faculty consultation
- Commercial early alert software testing
- Early alert development conference

Winter 2014:
- Small pilot with invited faculty
- Cultivating relationships with IT, FOIP officer
Timeline

- **Fall 2014:**
  - Revised model piloted in select faculties
  - Switch to D2L data, Cognos system

- **Spring-Fall 2015:**
  - Software tool development process with IT
- Winter 2016:
  - launched software tools
  - Launched branding
- Spring-Summer 2016:
  - refinement of algorithm
  - Faculty outreach
Fall 2016 and onwards:

- Full-campus launch of finalized model
- Hired research assistant
- Student surveying, student ambassador
How We Find Undergraduate Students

- D2L gradebook data
- PeopleSoft GPA history
- In-house analytic tool
- Faculty report form
- Thrive Administrator

Student ADS
Student ADS
Student
Student
Student
Student
Student
Student
Multiple-course View

Winter 2017

- Math GPA
- Physics GPA
- Chem GPA

Performance drop across multiple courses
Fall 2016

Failing grades across multiple courses
▪ FOIP officer advised on development
▪ Info collected under Post-Secondary Learning Act
▪ Collection notice on university website
▪ Faculty put information into Thrive system, but do not receive information on student actions
▪ Students surveyed on approach are generally comfortable
Next steps

- Define “success”: what indicators to use for assessment
  - Uptake rate?
  - Flagged students?
  - Use of resources/referrals?

- Continue to explore developing a parallel mental health/wellbeing form and support

- Refine algorithm to correctly identify “at risk” students

- Continue to debate predictive modelling and its potential application
  - How do we use specific factors ethically?
Research Questions

▪ Does flagging alone have an impact?
▪ Who are/aren’t we reaching?
▪ Are we reaching students at the right moment?
▪ How does Thrive impact the students who use it?
▪ How can we improve the Thrive system?
▪ Do certain faculties use the concern form more than others?
Reflecting on your own Early Alert plan

- What are your financial/human resources?
- Who are your allies/champions?
  - Admin, student affairs, wellness, IT
- What is your institutional context?
  - Size
  - Teaching/assessment practices
  - Institutional strategy documents
Reflecting on your own Early Alert plan

- Who is best placed to offer this support in your institution?
- What is your referral network once you connect with a student?
- What kinds of outreach are already taking place at your institution?
- Do you take a centralized approach to student support or is it handled by faculties or smaller units?
Reflecting on your own Early Alert plan

- How will you communicate your system?
  - to students
  - to faculty/staff

- How will you evaluate your system’s effectiveness?
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Faculty website: http://www.ucalgary.ca/ssc/faculty/thrive
Faculty concern form: https://thrive.ucalgary.ca/Concern/Info
Student website: http://www.ucalgary.ca/ssc/advising/thrive


Educational Advisory Board (2014). The murky middle of project: Preliminary findings. Student Success Collaborative.


