Early Engagement and the Success of Students: Starfish and Why Early Alert Programs Work

Overview: An Integrated and Meaningful Model of Support:

Due to the rapid advancement in academic technologies, Early Alert Programs (EAP) have been in use for the last decade. The success of Early Alert Programs such as Starfish is dependant on the regular and integrated use of the system by faculty members, counselors, and learning support faculty and staff. **"Closing the Loop" is intrinsic to the design and success of the system as "early alerts" triggered by faculty create targeted and personalized responses by advisors, by identified programs such as FYE, EOPS, and Athletics, and by Learning Support Services.** Early Alert Programs intervene in less successful student behaviors with positive and integrated support. These behaviors range from absenteeism to the noted lack of academic preparation for specific courses at different points of the semester. Faculty, Advisors, Counselors, and learning support staff and faculty, in turn offer specific support so that students may meet both personal goals of success and the benchmarks of persistence and retention set by the institution. Key research on student engagement presented in this document demonstrates the need for such an integrated strategy to meet the diverse needs of students in a community college. In addition to academic support, the social and psychological support empowers the success of students and integrates support services in meaningful ways. As technology, EAP presents the opportunity to create an integrated and meaningful model of support.

Key Research Findings:

The research on best practices in community colleges entitled, "What Works in Community Colleges" (2002) proposes that that the one factor impacting the success of EAPs is student perception of the value of the system and of the targeted help that students receive. **When colleges make students aware of their academic difficulties and point students toward available support services, students are more likely to successfully complete the course in question and to persist over the long term (*Matter of Degrees*).**

The focus of EAP programs like Starfish are especially effective in the community college context, where leveraging technology can:

- **Differentiate efforts between informal and integrated communication**: Faculty communication and mentorship is a key to student success (Mentorship Matters 2012). EAP systems makes it possible to create collaborative, not siloed, efforts and to support these communications and

interventions with specific support mechanisms such as just-in-time tutoring and advising.

- **Student Ownership of their own learning and progress**: Students are able to identify both the specific challenges of their chosen courses, as well as the effective advising, academic, and learning support resources that are available to them.

- **Student understanding of the relevance of academic and support services**: Learning support resources can be underutilized as for example when students do not visit a tutoring center until they are underperforming in a course, or make an appointment with an advisor when they have not placed themselves in the correct course progression or effective pathway. Early alerts make it possible for students to connect their academic and learning needs with the vast array of available resources that are offered both face to face and online.

- **Student retention and persistence**: Research since the 1970s has demonstrated that students succeed in an academic environment when learning is connected with a social and cultural environment that supports their efforts (Tinto). The Tinto model identifies the major factor of persistence as being how well the student in integrated into the college. This is particularly true of the community college environment where the majority of students are first generation students.

Student Retention and Persistence:

Student success is at the heart of EAP systems, in quantitative terms, but especially in qualitative terms. The impact of student communication with faculty, with advisors, with tutors and peer mentors creates an institution that is focused on student success. Retention and student success studies demonstrate the need to individualize support for students whose needs are diverse. Moreover, such efforts promote equitable access, fiscal responsibility, and the ability to calibrate academic and learning support with the needs of specific students. Such efforts shift the focus away from what students are perceived as lacking, to what measures will make colleges more effective and efficient in their abilities to provide support and timely interventions. These efforts support the open access mission of California Community Colleges and serves the economic growth of communities

According to the *Final Report of Advancing Student Success in California Community Colleges The Recommendations of the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force (2012)*:

> Of the students who enroll in community colleges, 70% are under-prepared. A majority of students are first generation college students, low-income, and/or are from underrepresented groups. These students face the most challenging obstacles for success and, unfortunately, have the lowest completion rates in the system. In addition to factors like equitable access, fiscal responsibility, and the contentious move toward outcome based funding in higher education, retention and persistence speak to factors that address the quality of the educational experiences offered by a school, and to a focus on individualized student support and meaningful connections with academic and learning support (Student Success Task Force, 2012).

The same report redefines student success beyond the achievement of degrees and identifies key "momentum points" as markers of student success. These points can be supported by EAP systems.   The path to success goals are marked by a number of key momentum points associated with an improved probability of success. Each time a student progresses beyond a momentum point the likelihood of reaching his or her educational goal increases. The recognition of these momentum points guided the work of the Task Force and helped structure recommendations aimed at improving completion rates. Examples of progression metrics include:
- Successful course completion
- Successful completion of basic skills competencies
- Successful completion of first collegiate level mathematics course
- Successful completion of first 15 semester units
- Successful completion of first 30 semester units

Momentum points adopted by the college can be adequately supported by the college's adoption of an Early Alert System (Starfish), as well as support students in specialized programs like EOPS and Athletics. Early Alert Programs have a critical role in tracking student progress with multiple educational goals including completion, earning a certificate or degree, transferring or achieving transfer readiness, and the total number of degrees and certificates awarded in a time period..

Evidence/Literature Review:

1. In the 2010 Report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, students report barriers to returning to and succeeding at college at a considerably lower rate than faculty perceptions of the impact of traditional barriers to student engagement and success.

Questions	Student	Faculty
It is *likely* or *very likely* that working full-time would cause you (students at this college) to withdraw from class or college	38%	83%
It is *likely* or *very likely* that caring for dependents would cause you (students at this college) to withdraw from class or college	28%	73%
It is *likely* or *very likely* that being academically unprepared would cause you (students at this college) to withdraw from class or college	19%	79%
It is *likely* or *very likely* that lacking finances would cause you (students at this college) to withdraw from class or college	48%	74%

What is startling about the research data from the CCCSE is that the students are more motivated to succeed despite traditional barriers to success. The strategies for success outlined in the report can be supported by an integrated early alert program adopted by a college.

Current high-impact initiatives for higher education presented by the report include integrating student support into learning experiences. The four strategies are outlined below:

- Strengthen classroom engagement
- **Integrate student support into learning experiences**
- Expand professional development focused on engaging students
- Focus institutional policies on creating the conditions for learning

The full report can be accessed at the following web address

https://www.ccsse.org/center/resources/docs/publications/2010_National_Report.pdf

2. Alerts and Interventions have been identified as High Impact Practices by the Center for Community College Student Engagement.

In *A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success (A First Look) (2012),* CCCSE also identifies High Impact Practices that improve student learning and success rate. These practices can be divided into three stages: planning for success, initiating success, and sustaining success. Alerts and intervention are

Planning for Success	Initiating Success	Sustaining Success
Assessment and Placement	Accelerated or Fast-Track Developmental Education	Class Attendance
Academic Goal Setting and Planning	First-Year Experience	**Alert and Intervention**
Orientation	Student Success Course	Experiential Learning beyond the Classroom
Registration before Classes Begin	Learning Community	Tutoring
		Supplemental Instruction

The full report can be accessed at the following web address:
https://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees.pdf

3. In *Advancing Student Success in California Community Colleges: The Recommendations of the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force (2012),* recommendations focus on expanding definitions of student success to include attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and practices.

> A student's readiness for college is based on several factors in addition to their academic proficiency in English and mathematics. College readiness includes other variables that can influence a student's ability to successfully complete credit-bearing, college-level coursework. The extensive work done by Dr. David Conley's Education Policy Improvement Center at the University of Oregon defines four dimensions of "college knowledge" critical to student success:
> (1) Key cognitive strategies, including analysis, interpretation, precision, problem solving, and reasoning
> (2) Specific types of content knowledge, most importantly the ability to read and write critically
> (3) **Attitudes and behavioral attributes, including study skills, time management, awareness of one's performance, persistence, and the ability to utilize study groups and**

(4) Contextual knowledge about college resources and expectations and how to successfully adjust to navigating the college environment. *(Strengthening Support for Entering Students, Recommendation 2.4)*

In this section, the recommendations include such concepts as awareness of one's performance, persistence, ability to use study groups, and contextual knowledge about college resources and expectations. These measures can be adequately supported by Starfish.

In recommendation 8 of the report there is an acknowledgment of the need to align resources with student success recommendations.
> Helping students to successfully master basic skills requires a range of interventions, from innovative pedagogical strategies to proactive student support services. The right combination of interventions varies across colleges and across student characteristics-- there is no "one size fits all" model. In addition, the intensity and timing of interventions needed to help students progress in basic skills acquisition also varies considerably (Recommendation 8.3)

The full report can be accessed at the following web address:

http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/Executive/StudentSuccessTaskForce/SSTF_Final_Report_1-17-12_Print.pdf

4. Research on retention theories focus more on the individual student and creating programs that can successfully meet the students where they are. Such efforts recognize a need to integrate classroom experiences with academic and learning support with the goal to meeting the equity, fiscal, and quality goals of an institution. The emphasis is not on the perceived weaknesses of students, but on the specific mitigating support offered to students.

As noted in Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski's study (2012):
> Programs and initiatives designed to support undergraduate retention should address both formal and informal student experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Habley (2004) found that the interactions students have with concerned individuals on campus (faculty, staff, advisors, peers, administrators) directly influence undergraduate retention. **To this end, Tinto (2004) suggested that to improve undergraduate**

retention all institutions of higher education must offer easily accessible academic, personal and social support services. The interactions students have on campus with individuals in academic, personal and support service centers can influence a student's sense of connection to the college or university as well as their ability to navigate the campus culture, meet expectations and graduate. A university that holds high expectations and actively involves students in their learning creates an environment where students are more likely to succeed. (*Integration, Motivation, Strengths and Optimism: Retention Theories Past, Present and Future*)

The study can be accessed at the following website: https://studentsuccess.unc.edu/files/2012/11/Demetriou-and-Schmitz-Sciborski.pdf

<u>Conclusion:</u>

The Early Alert Management Program (Starfish) adopted by Santa Barbara City College and by the California community college system recognizes the role of the college as a student-learning centered environment. Faculty have a critical role in early alerts that are communicated to the student and to advisors and learning support staff. Such a system presents just-in-time support that partners both faculty and students with academic and learning support, allowing the institution to be more effective in outreach to students. Success can be redefined by discrete goals as well as by effectively aligning recommendations with resources.

Moreover, in reaching beyond the faculty-student communication the feedback loop of the system enables quick and timely communication and interventions that actively support students. The EAP supports faculty members in their ability to appropriately respond to student needs by providing tools, and by encouraging self-efficacy and other successful academic and learning behaviors.

<div align="center">References</div>

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