



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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Early alert reports are when faculty identify students at a midpoint in a college term to communicate unsatisfactory progress in order to intervene and aid in student success. The purpose of Dr. Reynolds' study below was to explore the perceptions of faculty at one community college in regard to their early alert system. The case study includes interviews of both administration and faculty on their use and opinions of the early alert system at the community college, as well as their suggestions for changes.

Not only do faculty share why they use the early alert report, but also share why they do not use it. This research can be used as a guide or example for choosing the early alert system to best fit a college's needs.

## EARLY ALERT SYSTEMS



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Early alert reports are a method of communicating grades from faculty to students. Communication between faculty and students has been researched to show improved student outcomes for college students (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018).

However, there are so many options for the early alert report that it may be difficult for colleges to determine which early alert reporting features are best.

In a survey conducted of chief academic officers (CAOs), questions centered around the features of early alert systems that are most commonly used by these Midwest community colleges (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018). CAOs were asked to identify not only the features of their early alert system, but also their satisfaction levels with their current system. In addition to the questions asked of CAOs, faculty and other administration at one community college were interviewed to provide input in to the perceptions they have about their early alert system. This case study college provided much insight as to what faculty value in an early alert system, as well as why they use this type of system, and why some faculty do not use these systems at their institution. This research is provided to aid instructional administrators in ways to best communicate the benefits of the early alert system to faculty, and which features are ranked as most valuable to college instructors.

Early alert reports are collected at some midpoint in a college term to identify the students who are at risk of not successfully completing their college course. Communicating the status of grades in a college course often and early has the benefit of improving college student outcomes, as the student has the information that a change is needed and time to make that change (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018). The purpose of this study was to identify the different types of early alert systems and evidence of successful programs as examples. Studies have shown that higher education institutions are encouraged to increase the communication with college students about the status of their grades using these types of systems (Reynolds & Friedel, 2018). While identifying those common practices used by colleges in one state using services such as the early alert report, one college emerged as an example to highlight.



Mid Valley Community College (MVCC), a pseudonym for a Midwestern U.S. community college, is a great example of how a higher education institution can use their early alert report in their effort to improve retention. In interviews with MVCC faculty and administration, several themes and threads emerged that will be featured in this article, such as addressing attendance issues, having no due dates, having limited time, and making the system available online. The interviews conducted involved ten faculty and two administrators at MVCC. The background of the faculty ranged greatly, starting with their education, which ranged from two-year technical degrees to PhDs.

The amount of college teaching experience of these instructors varied from one year to 30 years teaching at MVCC, and their previous experience ranged as well from working in their technical industry field for a business to teaching high school.

Approximately half of the instructors taught general education courses that were transferable to four-year colleges for students who were choosing to

go on for a bachelor's degree, while the other half taught two-year technical degree programs intended for students to enter the working world upon completion of the associate's degree. The administrators interviewed had master's degrees, and had been working in higher education for more than ten years. Each administrator interviewed had staff in which they supervised, and both supported the efforts of faculty for retention improvement, including the early alert system. While the genders were split evenly among all participants who were interviewed, the ages of those interviewed varied greatly. Each faculty member or administrator has a pseudonym to protect their identity, which encouraged candor and openness in the interview process.

The MVCC interviews yielded some surprising results in many ways. Faculty at MVCC were just as concerned with retaining the number of students at the college as the administration. In fact, at a strategic planning meeting fall of 2016, faculty were asked for ideas for improving retention at the college. Faculty brainstormed choosing the goal that participating in the early alert program at

MVCC would be the best way faculty could aid in retention. While not all faculty participated that academic year, the majority of faculty did utilize the early alert reporting system, and the college found positive results in some student success factors. Those interview results and factors are highlighted in this article.

The administrators interviewed, Jeraldine Smith and Jennifer Ferraro, had been working at MVCC for 27 and 16 years respectively. Jeraldine explains how the early alert process is not scheduled for any specific time frame during the college term like many colleges choose, centered around midterm. But, instead faculty can put a student on the early alert program at any time throughout the term that they identify the student is at risk of not being successful in the class.

Jennifer is responsible for the follow up calls to the students when they are placed on early alert.

While being persistent, Jennifer is not afraid to stop by a class or forward a message to a coach in order to reach a student. Jennifer's master's degree in mental health serves her well in this role, as students who have been identified by their instructors as at risk may share and discuss personal issues and problems when talking with her. While she keeps the details of the personal situation confidential from the faculty, she is able to aid students allowing the faculty to focus on their goals for the classroom. Having one person who is responsible for the follow up of student retention efforts has been studied in a College Board



survey. Sixty-two percent of higher education institutions indicated that they have an administrator with “responsibility... to act as a central resource for efforts to improve student persistence rates” (College Board, 2011).

### Designated College Staff

Many faculty at MVCC identify the fact that their system has a designated person who follows up on research as one of the reasons for the early alert systems success.

Danielle, who started out as a high school teacher and has been teaching at MVCC for seven years in the Liberal Arts area, shares that she relies on the system to aid those students who are struggling mentioning that she knows that the student is “not going to get lost, Jennifer will follow up”. Mark shared that he likes how the early alert system, “brings another voice into the conversation. Another person to follow up and make sure that the student is doing what they are supposed to.” Mark, who has been teaching at MVCC for 13 years, teaches courses that are not designed to be transferred to a Regent university, however many of his students will transfer to a

private school not far away to complete a bachelor’s degree.

### Reasons to Refer

Attendance was mentioned by all ten faculty interviewed as a main reason that students end up referred to the early alert system. However, having multiple reasons why a student can get referred increases the percent of students who can get help and remain in college. Beth, who has been teaching transfer courses for 15 years at MVCC for students who want to go on for a bachelor’s degree, shares that about a quarter of the students she refers show up for class, but don’t turn in their work. When she refers students to the early alert report, she finds that about 80% of those students successfully complete her course. Pam, who has been teaching at MVCC for six years teaching just one technical course and the remaining as transfer courses, tries to reach out to students who are struggling, but finds that sometimes students stop coming to class. She refers them to the early alert report when she cannot talk to them herself. She also shared that while most of the students she refers are for attendance issues, she also has some for low grades or other reasons. She knows that the

majority of students are helped to get back on track attending class, but some “may have other reasons, such as emotional well-being.” She shared the story of one student who approached her after being referred exclaiming, “You told on me!” However, the student went on to share that being approached about his attendance helped. “That was the fire lit under me,” he stated in sharing that he needed the referral to early alert to get him back on track. While Pam admits that she realizes not every student will make it their first time around in college as they have just removed themselves from high school, she attributes much of the success of those who struggle to early alert.

### Ease of Use

One of the biggest attributes that MVCC faculty like about their early alert system is the ease of use. David remembers when the form was not online, and “it was a paper form that could be lost. Now I get feedback for a student pretty quick.” David came to MVCC because he loves helping people.

He admits that while he may have come from a “trade school diploma” background, he pursued this field of post-secondary education because he loves working with the students and has been at MVCC for 16 years teaching a technical degree program. Rosa and Pam also appreciate that the form is online. Pam addressed that the form has even been improved since it was first used at the college in 2013. “In the past, you would get an error message, which can still happen, but most of the time it works really

well. Alvin was among the group who developed the online early alert product that is used currently at MVCC. While he admitted that it was easy to use, there were still faculty who had a negative attitude about using an early alert form.

Alvin started as a faculty member in 2014 at MVCC, after working with the development of the early alert and other IT products for three years prior to teaching. He admits that their first online version at MVCC needed some improvements, but that it was hard to understand the limitations it had until it was used. But, now he agrees with other faculty that the form “is easy to get to, easy to fill out. It doesn’t ask much information. You get a confirmation message that it submitted.” He explained how the system would bring up the instructor’s class list, and all they would need to do is check by the name of the student, check the reason on the next screen such as attendance or low test score, and there would be a textbox to fill in additional detail for the student’s follow up. Matt, who has been teaching a career and technical education (CTE) program at MVCC for 20 years, indicated that he also remembers the paper form that “you had to fill out and walk it over to the right office. This is much easier.” Matt observes that in his classes, approximately 80-90% of the students “who are put on the report make the positive changes to succeed” in his class.

### Reasons Faculty Don’t Use

Why are there faculty who do not use the early alert report? Beth hypothesized that faculty who had never used the early

alert form when it was on paper, probably will not start using it even when it is online. But several of the faculty addressed the limited time that faculty have for completing extra forms such as the early alert referral. Mark shared, “We’re busy! It’s one more thing in our workload to do. So, early alert ends up at the bottom of the pile.” However, David feels, “Some teachers shouldn’t be teaching. To them it is just a job and they leave right when class is done.” Pam has heard some faculty say that they feel that the student is responsible for their own success, not the faculty. She has also heard comments like, “This is college. You are adults now. Grow up and do it. Sink or swim.” She shared that some faculty think their focus should be on the students who are in class, not the ones who are not. Rosa mentioned that she would find that time would “get away from her” in the semester. “Some students could have been referred sooner, but time is short, so it would end up happening later. Or maybe you would think that the student is going to turn it around on the next assignment.”

Brenda thinks that the faculty who do not use the report don’t have an education degree, and therefore do

not understand the important impact. However, Megan and Danielle both feel that sometimes they get caught up in their own deadlines. Danielle admitted that a student can get forgotten and since there is no one specific time that instructors need to complete the referral, faculty can likely forget about early alert. Since there is no due date, Megan shared that it is viewed as optional. “No due date means no referrals”.

### Suggestions for Early Alert

For administrators who are reading this article to make changes to their current early alert system, faculty gave their advice on how they would change the early alert system. Rosa shared that she would like to know what has happened after she had made a referral. While she may see students return to her classroom, she feels that a step in the report in which the follow up is shared would be nice, so that she can hear “where the issue stands”. Beth shared that she would also like to know what Jennifer has done when she receives the referral. She would like to have an automatic response that the student was contacted and/or helped.



### Increased Participation Means More Students Helped

Overall, it is clear that the faculty at MVCC place value on the early alert system, and that was shown in their increased participation results at the end of that year. In fact, in the 2016-2017 academic year, 44% more faculty utilized the early alert system, referring 40% more students than in previous years. The increased participation from faculty is obviously related to the percent of students not placed on probation or warning at the end of that term. Fifty-four percent of the students who were referred at the end of the 2016-2017 academic terms were not on warning and were receiving satisfactory grades by the end of those terms. By helping more than half of the students who were struggling at a mid-point in the term to be able to complete the course satisfactorily, MVCC is improving their retention and graduation rates.

Higher education institutions have the tools to utilize systems like the early alert system. Examination of colleges like MVCC give instructional administrators strategies such as:

- Use designated staff to focus on the follow up for early alert referrals
- Have a system that recognizes multiple reasons for referring students including attendance
- Make the system an online and easy system one for faculty since faculty are busy with multiple other objectives and agendas to attend to
- Use a system that fits the goals and mission of their higher education institution. These systems can include no deadline or due date, systems that have built in follow up that is sent to instructors on the actions taken, and many other ideas. But, the most important advice from this researcher is to include the faculty in the decision so that not only do you get the best product for

your institution, but it will also increase buy in and therefore participation of your faculty to use the product.

### References

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