**South Piedmont Community College Online Early Alert System**

**Introduction**

South Piedmont Community College, serving both Union and Anson County in North Carolina, provides academic instruction to over 6,000 students in both credit and non-credit courses. Developmental education is required for all students who wish to take credit courses, but whose College Placement Test scores place them at an aptitude below college level in English, reading and/or mathematics. Developmental courses provide remediation in those disciplines to prepare students for college level curriculum (Appendix A, Table 1).

Semester data from 2004 to present obtained from Datatel, SPCC’s student services database, indicates that approximately one-fourth of all developmental students fail the courses they are enrolled in and an even higher number do not return the following semester (Appendix A, Table 2). While not evidential, the attrition rate for developmental students (students who leave SPCC not completing their program of study) and the rate of failure in developmental courses closely correlate. “Academic factors have long been studied as a predictor of student attrition. Recently, studies conducted at community colleges have been consistent with the results from senior institutions.” (Summers, 5) For SPCC, during Fall 2004, 23% received a D or F in a developmental course and 29% did not reenroll; for Spring 2005, the percentages were 27% and 40%; for Fall 2006, the percentages were 21% and 26%. (Appendix A, Table 3).

A primary focus for the developmental education department at SPCC is to determine strategies to increase student retention. “Moreover, the profile of the typical community college student – a person who has a full or part-time job, lives off campus, and is taking classes on a part-time basis – makes retention a particular challenge for community colleges. In other words, unlike
residential university students, community college students are constantly balancing the social and academic demands of the college campus with the responsibilities of family and work.” (Zhai 5) Several factors contribute to student failure – absenteeism, tardiness, missed quizzes/tests, not turning in homework, or evening courses with limited instructor access. In addition, many developmental students are first generation. Chen notes in a study of 1,992 12th-graders enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 that “First-generation students, in particular, needed remedial help: 55 percent took remedial courses during college years, compared with 27 percent of their counterparts whose parents held bachelors or advanced degrees.” (Chen 12). First generation students do not come from an education-centered background and therefore require additional assistance for success.

Currently at SPCC, six full-time developmental instructors, ten full-time curriculum instructors, five staff (study-skills), and nineteen adjunct faculty teach developmental education courses (Appendix A, Tables 4 and 5). SPCC believes that instructor involvement in student success is key to increasing retention numbers. Swanson notes, “When faculty make a commitment to be actively involved in students’ academic planning, they contribute to quality education in all areas – and not just their academic unit.” (Swanson 6) Counseling services are available to aid students at risk of failure, but counseling cannot identify those students without faculty input. “Much of the literature on community college retention verifies the importance of a strong connection between student persistence and interpersonal bonds with peer, faculty, and their environment.” (Hagendorn 9) Currently, SPCC uses a paper form that is submitted by instructors indicating students identified as at-risk for failure due to grades, absenteeism, or other factors. Unfortunately, this tool is being underutilized.

Three major factors limiting the use of the paper alert process are:

1. Full-time instructor workloads are high.
2. Adjunct faculty are not aware of the process, or are not on campus at times convenient for invoking the process.
3. The process involves too many steps.
Full-time developmental instructors are required to have at least an 18-credit workload; often they are teaching 25 contact hours. In addition, instructors must maintain at least five office hours for assisting students, participate in nine professional development hours per school year, and often sit on two or more committees. While the desire to help students is there, time to fill out a form for each student and deliver it properly is often not feasible. Vivian agrees, “First, there is the question of available time...Faculty members are pulled in several directions by the institution and even the most well-intentioned person finds it difficult, if not impossible, to intensively mentor more than a few students at any given time.” (Vivian 337)

In addition, adjunct faculty receive limited training prior to entering the classroom. Adjunct faculty often find out at the last minute what course they will be teaching, and are given a textbook, course objectives and a handbook to get them started. While the past semester at SPCC has seen additional training initiatives for adjunct faculty, a few hours is insufficient to cover all processes necessary to aid in student success. “Adjunct faculty may lack sufficient knowledge about the institutional support services so critical to first-time-in-college students, and may be unprepared to identify at-risk behavior in students.” (Ronco 4) SPCC must train adjuncts and provide the tools necessary to aid in student success and retention in order to be effective. “The very definition of adjunct leads to dislocation and disconnectedness. It’s our job as leaders skilled in communication to link them to the organization. The students’ learning depends on it.” (Allen 1)

Finally, the current paper process involves too many steps: acquiring the form, understanding its intention, determining students who qualify for intervention, filling out the form, getting the form to counseling (determining where counseling is) and following-up. Time limitations for both full-time and adjunct instructors impede its use.

So, what must be done? Approximately sixty percent of all community colleges maintain some type of early alert system for notifying counseling and/or advising of students at risk of failure. What process for early alert is most effective? At SPCC, it appears that the old paper process is
not; however, it is clear a process must be in place. “The identification of students likely to drop out allows for the delivery of intervention services prior to withdrawal with the expectation of reversing the dropout decision.” (Summers, 9) Terrence Willett in his study on the impact of follow up counseling on academic performance and persistence determined, “Students contacted by and visiting the counselor were statistically more likely to persist than other students.” (Willett 1)

Several colleges have turned to online systems providing an easy way for faculty, full-time and part-time, to fill out a web-based form and automatically submit it. “At the most basic level, computerized records help counselors use their time more effectively by making information upkeep and retrieval much less time consuming. However, many colleges have looked beyond applications that simply assist the counselor to more innovative uses of their computer technology. Some colleges have begun to use their data systems for student advising and retention interventions.” (McKinney 1) Colleges are taking new approaches to early intervention. Identifying key points in the semester and sending out electronic reminders to all faculty to utilize the Early Alert system for failing student identification prompts student/faculty interaction and increases intervention opportunities for counseling. “One sign that the systems such as these are working is that…the systems that have been implemented are prompting greater communication between faculty and students and between faculty and student services personnel about the students’ work.” (Petrides 1)

“What Works in the Community Colleges: A Synthesis of the Literature of Best Practices” by Bourdon clearly illustrates the importance of an effective Early Alert System:

Compared to students who were not involved in such a program, students involved in an early alert program:

- Are more likely to successfully complete the course in which they were having academic difficulty
- Maintain higher rates of continuous enrollment by the end of the academic year
• Have higher persistence rates for two or more consecutive semesters
• Exhibit higher persistence rates four years later (including transfer students)
  (Bourdon 18)

As evidenced, Early Alert Systems are an effective counseling tool when utilized by faculty to identify students at risk for failure. An online system allows for ease of use and accessibility by both campus-based and part-time instructors.

This study will examine improving developmental student retention at South Piedmont Community College through the rollout of an online Early Alert System replacing the current paper process.
Problem

South Piedmont Community College currently uses a paper-based form for instructors to alert the counseling office when developmental education students are in danger of failing. Twenty-five percent of all developmental students failed a course in spring of 2006. While the paper-based form is adequate, it is underutilized. The process for submitting the form is time consuming. Hectic schedules, large teaching loads, and additional campus obligations make form completion and submission on a per-student basis difficult. In addition, SPCC employs more developmental education adjuncts than full-time faculty who have limited access to campus resources. In addition, lack of intervention plays a role in lower retention rates. The retention rate for developmental students for Spring 2006 was seventy-six percent; twenty-four percent of developmental students did not return for fall semester.

Question

Would the availability of an online form increase instructor participation in alerting counselors to developmental students in danger of failing? Would an online form be an easier and more accessible solution for adjunct instructors thereby increasing usage?

Hypothesis

An online Early Alert Form will increase full-time and adjunct instructor notification of failing or high-risk developmental students to counseling allowing for increased early intervention and retention.

Variables and Outcomes

Independent Variables

- Number of instructors – full-time, part-time, staff and adjunct
- Technology – access to computers, type of computer, connection to internet
- Counselor availability
Dependant Variables

- Early Alert Form design
- Access to form
- Communication of form purpose/use
- Use of form by counseling

The outcomes of this study will prove that increased instructor use of an online Early Alert form identifying developmental students at-risk of failure to counseling will enable earlier intervention, thereby aiding retention.

Key Terms

*Online* - connected to a main computer and accessible from computers attached to the Internet.

*Full-time instructor* - instructors employed by SPCC on a full-time basis who teach developmental students either exclusively or as part of their overall workload.

*Adjunct instructor* - a person working at SPCC as an instructor without having full or permanent status

*Notification* - the act of reporting an occurrence

*Failing* - students at risk of earning a D or F for the semester in a developmental course

*Developmental Student* - student enrolled in developmental course(s).

*Intervention* - a third party (counseling) coming between two parties (instructor/student) to mediate a situation (failing course)

*Retention* - retaining students for the duration of their designated program

Subsequent Research

Additional research will be required for the following:

- Affirmation of increased intervention/retention rates for failing developmental students
- Effectiveness of training for full-time SPCC faculty and adjunct faculty on early alert system
- Role-out of early alert system to all instructional departments

**Research Methods**

Research will be completed in three phases:

**Phase 1:** Employee survey and training on Early Alert System

**Phase 2:** Fall 2007 semester rollout of the Early Alert System

**Phase 3:** Assessment of usage/effectiveness of Early Alert System for Fall 2007 semester

**Phase 1:**

Research will be conducted during professional development training for all SPCC instructors (full-time and adjunct) for Spring 2007. Instructors will participate in the following:

1. A survey to determine current use/knowledge of the paper-based Early Alert System (Appendix B)
2. A short hands-on training session demonstrating the purpose of an Early Alert System and both the online and paper version of the system. See the following:
   - Agenda – Appendix C
   - Early Alert Online Form – Appendix D
   - Paper-based form – Appendix E
3. A survey to assess which method of alert instructors believe will be most effective (Appendix F)

Note: surveys will be created using Microsoft Word. The Online Early Alert System will be created using Macromedia Dreamweaver. Tabulation of survey results will be done using Microsoft Excel.

**Phase 2:**

Instructors will be given access to both the Online Early Alert System and the paper-based alert form.
1. Instructors will receive an Early Alert packet that includes copies of the paper-based form and instructions for accessing the Online Early Alert System prior to the first day of the Fall 2007 semester. (Appendix G)

2. Emails will be sent out every four weeks beginning the second week of the semester reminding instructors to identify all developmental students in danger of failing using either the online or the paper-based form. (Appendix H)

3. Counseling will tabulate all forms received both electronically and paper-based.

**Phase 3:**

At the conclusion of the Fall 2007 semester, counseling will complete a review of the effectiveness of the new Online Emergency Alert System.

1. A follow-up survey will be sent to all instructors to gather feedback on the early alert process. (Appendix I)

2. Counseling will compare Spring 2007 submissions of paper-based alerts with the Fall 2007 paper-based and online alerts.

3. Counseling will determine if the online system was more widely used and tabulate results of follow-up survey.

4. Counseling will make a recommendation as to whether the Online Early Alert System should become the standard for SPCC early alerts.

5. Counseling will speculate based on comparison of developmental student failure rates and attrition rates for Spring 2007 versus Fall 2007 if the Early Alert System had an impact on retention and student success.

**Design**

**Phase 1:**

All faculty, full-time and adjunct, are required to attend professional development training prior to the beginning of a new semester. At the training, two hours will be dedicated to instruction on the Early Alert System. Prior to beginning training, all instructors will complete a survey using a Likert rating scale to identify their current knowledge of the paper-based early
alert form. Instructors will then participate in a two-hour hands-on presentation where they will learn the purpose and benefits of early alert, and will have the opportunity to work with both the paper-based form and the online form. After completing the training, instructors will fill out an additional survey using the Likert rating scale to identify their preference of mode (online or paper-based) for early alerts. Results of both surveys will be tabulated and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. These responses will be compared with actual usage numbers at the end of the semester.

Phase 2:
Prior to the first day of the semester, all instructors will receive a packet that contains twenty copies of the paper-based Early Alert form and instructions on how to access the Online Early Alert System via the Internet. Emails will be sent at four-week intervals throughout the semester suggesting instructors review their grading sheets and rosters and fill out appropriate early alerts. (Instructors will not be instructed which method to use, but will be reminded of the two options.) Counseling will tabulate all early alerts received indicating the format, instructor and student in an Excel spreadsheet. Counseling will follow-up on early alerts with students.

Phase 3:
At the conclusion of the Fall 2007 semester, instructors will receive a follow-up survey using a Likert scale rating providing feedback on the effectiveness of the early alert system and their preferences of form type. Using the data collected, counseling staff will determine the effectiveness of the early alert system and identify which method (online or paper-based) was utilized most often. In addition, they will tabulate and compare the three surveys to determine if faculty preference indicated in the surveys translated into faculty usage of that type of form submission throughout the semester. Finally, based on comparison of early alerts submissions with previous semesters and determination of the preferred method of early alert, counseling staff will make a recommendation as to whether the Online Early Alert System should become the standard for SPCC early alerts.
Works Cited


Datatel, Student Services Database, CIS System Administration, South Piedmont Community College. L.L. Polk Campus - P.O. Box 126, Polkton, NC 28135 Phone: 704.272.5300


<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/2a/2a/90.pdf>.


Additional Works


