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A case study of early alert reports in Midwestern community colleges

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A case study of early alert reports in Midwestern community colleges

by

Karen Reynolds

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Janice N. Friedel, Major Professor
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Joanne Marshall

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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DEDICATION

To

my husband

Keith

and our two children

Alex and Ashlyn
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ABSTRACT

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 this case study is to research the timing of the early alert report at community colleges in the Midwest, as well as the different types of follow up, the policies and incentives for faculty and the perceptions of administration and faculty on using the report. The research is presented in two parts: the results of a survey of community college chief academic officers, and a case study of one community college’s early alert system. The 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 some supporting documents provided by the college. Both sets of research can be used as a guide or example for choosing the early alert system that best fits a college’s needs. In most cases, the selected comprehensive early alert system will have no specific due date or deadline for collecting the report; rather, it will be used to identify and provide early intervention for targeted at-risk students.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Retention is the Goal for Early Alert Systems

It is the first semester of her first year of college and Kay, a student, found out that she was getting one D, one F and had two other courses that were satisfactory. Kay had just received what her college called an early alert grade report (also called early warning system, midterm report, early intervention and early grade report). Kay started to panic. She thought she was going to flunk out! Kay thought, “I must not be smart enough for college.” She thought about how her parents were going to be disappointed. Her advisor encouraged her to meet with her instructors before dropping. In her meeting with the instructor for the course that she was failing, she was informed that her grade was too low at this midpoint in the term, and even a perfect score from that point forward would not warrant enough points to receive higher than a D in the course by the end of the term. Now what to do?

This scenario happens all too often across college campuses. Kay did not drop out, but that could have been the outcome. Without that notice at midterms, many students would not have been alerted to the problem. Many of these students would not have set up a meeting with their instructor, especially without the early alert warning. Kay also set up a meeting with the instructor of the course in which she is getting a D. In that meeting, the instructor discussed her grade, the reason for the D and what Kay needed to do from this point forward to succeed in the course. The advisor had also reminded Kay to talk with financial aid before making any decisions such as dropping a course. Kay dropped the course in which she was receiving an F, worked hard at her other three courses, and finished her first semester of her first year of college with 3.0 GPA from her nine credits, and one W on her transcript for dropping a course before the end of the term. Kay went on to receive a 4.0 in
her spring semester, and received a small scholarship for her success in her first year. Kay can be viewed as a success, and, as the author of this dissertation, went on to bigger and better things. However, almost half of all college students fail to graduate from their intended degree program. How can we help these students who are at-risk of attrition?

Students are attentive to the early warning/early alert grade report when the message given by sending the student the report is clear that they are not successfully performing in their academic course. The early alert system is designed to promote communication from the instructor of a course to any student whose progress is unsatisfactory in their college course at a midpoint in the semester or term. This communication is a way for the student to understand that they need to make changes to their current study habits, course load and/or efforts or else they will face receiving an unsatisfactory grade at the end of the term. After receiving the report, the student has the option to drop a course. Without that information, there are classes in which students do not know if their progress in their course is satisfactory. Some students will drop a course when in fact they are achieving high marks in the course, just because they do not know their current grade (Reynolds, 2017).

Students have conveyed that the early alert report is very beneficial to them and their ability to improve (Reynolds, 2017). In a survey conducted of chief academic officers at Midwest community colleges, results indicated some key practices currently being used by their community college, such as keeping grades up-to-date using a learning management system (LMS), annual review of portfolio and achievements with supervisor, training faculty yearly, and having a policy for early alert grading (Reynolds, 2017). However, not all faculty complete the early alert grade report.
While not all early alert systems are the same, research could help to understand the differences between some of the current systems used in Midwest community colleges. In addition, the variety of options used at these colleges could support which systems are most effective for a community college to choose as their system. Early warning systems exist that may gather only one piece of information, such as grades or attendance. Some reports that collect only attendance are done in the first two weeks of classes to determine eligibility of financial aid awards. However, in this dissertation, the early alert systems in which grades and other information are collected at some midpoint in the college term to identify and get assistance for at-risk students are the type of reports studied. This dissertation study not only researches the time frame for the different policies at community colleges across the Midwest, but it also compares the different names used for this report, the follow-up done at Midwest community colleges, the policies around the expectation and incentives for faculty to complete the report, and the satisfaction levels of the chief academic officers with their current system. Then this dissertation will go into depth with one Midwest community college, showing the reasons for referring students, the comparisons of the number of referrals for a five year time frame, percentage of students who have not successfully completed the course who were referred to the early alert system, the percentage of students who were placed on warning or suspension who were not referred to the early alert system, and the percentage of faculty using the early alert report for students in the classes over the same five year time frame. In addition, interviews are conducted of faculty and administration at this case study community college to provide supporting college documents demonstrating the importance given to this topic as well as perceptions of faculty about the report’s strengths, weaknesses, and its value and importance.
Background of the Study

Findings of Astin’s (1977) research concluded that engagement for a college student increases the likelihood that the student will remain in college. Tinto (1982) identified instructors’ communication with students as a key factor in retention. Kuh (2006) identified early warning systems as an aid in student success. Astin, Tinto, and Kuh (2008) provided key insight into why early alert grading systems are effective at increasing retention. In a survey conducted by the Noel Levitz National Center for Enrollment Management, the findings revealed early alert systems and support can aid in increasing retention.

Research in this area dates to the 1980s, when colleges identified students using an alert letter communicating to students who were considered to be at risk of dropping out of college (Pfleging, 2002). Retention efforts focusing on first year students continued to grow. By 1987, surveys conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) revealed 37% of colleges reported “…taking steps to improve the first year.” In 1995, that number had grown to 82% of colleges (Barefoot, 2005). Early alert grade reports continued to gain popularity. By 2001, almost 60% of higher education institutions had implemented an early alert system (Lynch-Holmes, Troy, & Ramos, 2012). Even though the early alert system has continued to gain popularity, these systems are still relatively new as noted by Lynch-Holmes, Troy and Ramos (2012) who posited that standards have not been developed for these systems and how they are implemented. In a survey completed in one Midwestern state, 13 of the 15 community colleges reported having a policy for an early alert grade system (Reynolds, 2017).

Retention of students is an ongoing issue for community colleges as well as many higher education institutions. The goal and intention of these systems varies from college to
college. However, the overall purpose is to communicate to the students who are considered at risk. Lynch-Holmes, Troy, and Ramos (2012) perceived that the purpose of the early alert system is to support and identify those students who are at risk of attrition as early as the college can so that intervention can be made to those students who are struggling.

Nevertheless, what are the results of these systems? Does a student dropping a course, such as in the story at the beginning of this dissertation, mean failure? The goal of this dissertation research was to identify different options for the early alert systems to enable each college to select the early alert system that best fits their needs. In addition, the comprehensive early alert system has been an emerging popular type of early alert that involves many different people and departments from a college, and it identifies more than just grades for reasons of referring students to the early alert system. This comprehensive system has not only enabled more at-risk students to be identified because of the multiple reasons for referring students as well as providing more support to students from different areas of the college, but it is also the type of early alert used by the case study community college as highlighted in Chapter 4.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify common practices in implementing an early alert system and how an early alert system is perceived by college faculty and administrators. This study considered how an early alert grade report/communicating grades to students midway through a college semester/term can be done in many ways, such as the comprehensive early alert system as identified in Chapter 2. Further consideration will be given to examine the types of early alert systems that are available for colleges, particularly the method used in the case study in chapter four. In addition, the perception of
administration and faculty is highlighted in this case study regarding the impact the early alert system has on their students, their perception of their current system, and perceived reasons faculty do not use the early alert system are identified to aid colleges in considering the message about early alert and the type of system to implement.

Retention and graduation rates continue to be a struggle for many community colleges, while they strive for overall student success (Stover, 2005; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). For example, one Midwest community college has faculty complete an early grade report at six weeks in a 16-week semester to aid students in the knowledge of their progress allowing time to make a change. Is there a better timing for students than six weeks into a 16-week term? The goal of the research in this study was to demonstrate how an early grade report/communicating grades often and early to students can be used to aid the at-risk student, increasing retention and ultimately student success. Increasing retention in community colleges may be impacted by communicating grades to students early and often. Case study methodology was applied to examine the early alert system at one Midwest community college. This information may help faculty and administrators by providing an example of one early grade reporting system, and methods that can be used to communicate with at-risk students early in the term.

Early alert systems have been put in place at 13 (86%) of the community colleges in one Midwestern state (Reynolds, 2017). In a survey completed in March 2016 by Reynolds of the chief academic officers at 15 Midwest community colleges, quantitative data were collected which revealed common practices to communicate grades to students. An additional survey was conducted of the same community colleges for this dissertation research in fall of 2016 on the early alert grading systems, their timelines, the types of
referrals, and follow-ups made with the students after they are placed on the report (see Appendix A). Nine of the 15 Midwest community colleges surveyed indicated a willingness and interest in participating in additional research on early alert systems.

While nine community colleges participated in the follow-up survey, in the comment section of the survey, one community college volunteered to provide greater in-depth information to the researcher, which included responses, trends, and policies, which served as the case study community college. This college provided a meaningful example since it used the comprehensive early alert system, had no deadline or due date for reporting students, and subsequently provided statistical reports indicating increased usage from faculty and suggested increased retention of students consistent with the reduced number of those on warning or probation at the end of the term.

**Significance**

Not all colleges collect statistics about their early alert systems every semester to meet their retention goals. In an effort to aid that understanding, one community college’s methods have been collected in the case study to highlight one example of an early alert system. This dissertation research contributes to the body of research on student retention practices by examining the early alert system at community colleges in one state. In addition to collecting information on common practices, a case study method was conducted of one Midwest community college’s implementation of an early alert system. The study includes descriptions of the interviews with faculty and administrators about that process and their perceptions overall. While much research will be identified in Chapter 2 on the perspective of student’s value of the early alert system, little research has been done on the perspective of faculty and administration on the value, use and effectiveness of an early alert system. This
study attempts to fill in the gap of existing research on these attributes of early alert reports and their systems, and the corresponding impact that early alerts may have on student retention. Recommendations are provided at the conclusion of this study for the benefit the higher education community about early alert reports.

Research Questions

A survey was conducted of the community colleges in the state to guide the selection of the community college used for the case study. There are two overarching research questions that guided the questions used in surveys and interviews in this study:

1. What are the common practices in implementing the early alert system at community colleges?

2. How is early alert perceived by college faculty and administration?

While these two questions lead to the development of the survey questions and interview questions used in the research of this study. The following questions provide additional detail of the research involved in this study stemming from those two overarching research questions, and are questions used in the research for this study:

1. What is the early grade report time frame for each of the community colleges?

2. What are the reasons a student can get referred to the early alert system?

3. What follow up procedures are there in place for faculty to complete the early alert report?
   a. Is the completion of the report required, recommended, neither?
   b. Are there incentives to encourage faculty to participate?
   c. How often are the early alert results at a college reviewed?
4. What follow-up procedures are in place for students who have been placed on the report?

5. What is the chief academic officer’s perception of satisfaction with their current early alert system?

6. What is the perception of faculty who use the Early Alert System (Case Study)
   a. What do they like and dislike about their current system?
   b. What percentage of students do they perceive get assistance and are successful because of the early alert system?
   c. What are the reasons faculty refer students to the early alert system?
   d. What are the perceptions regarding faculty do not use the early alert system?
   e. Are increased participation from faculty and subsequent decreased percentages of students placed on probation/warning due to early alert?

**Limitations**

The community colleges used in this research from the Midwest are the only ones represented for this study, for time and cost constraints, and therefore only can be used as an example of community colleges. However, since there are no other community colleges included in this study outside of one state, policies and practices used in other states may not be represented, and therefore may not serve as an exact match for generalizing about the impact and effects of all early alert systems. This limitation should be considered when reviewing the results in this study.

Results provided by all community colleges are needed to ascertain the timing of the early alert report collection, the follow-up methods with students, and the policies for faculty around completion of the report so generalizations can be made about early alert systems.
These colleges cooperating in the study can be used as a guide or example for successful implementations of an early warning system. The colleges can also be used as guidelines for the importance and impact the early warning system can have on students.

The timing of these community colleges early warning systems varies; and, therefore, impacts the results. Mid-term grades are too late for students failing a course to recover and succeed (Cuseo, 2006; Kuh, 2007; Tinto, 1993). Many of these colleges have adopted the technique of reporting grades prior to the mid-point to allow adequate time for support and change (Simons, 2011). However, the results vary from community college to community college, and this timing limitation should be considered when viewing each college’s results.

Quantitative studies such as that conducted for this report do not share the reason for student actions. This study does not show, nor will it inquire about the student perspective, the reasons for the unsatisfactory grades, or the reason that these early alert grade systems may have a positive impact. This study was limited to only the quantifiable results of a community college survey, such as the percentage of Midwest community colleges who responded positively to the survey with regard to their satisfaction level with the current early alert system, and a case study example from one community college, their results and perspectives.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined for the study:

*At-risk Students:* Students identified by their instructor as receiving an unsatisfactory grade, not attending, or not having the basic skills needed for the course, which ultimately puts them at risk for attrition, meaning, students who are at-risk of dropping out of college.
**Attrition**: The exit of students from their higher education institution prior to completing their degree.

**Comprehensive Early Alert Systems**: A type of early alert system that involves multiple methods for reaching students who are at risk, and that uses multiple people at a college campus to reach those students and connect them with services and resources.

**Early Alert Systems**: The reporting system that collects information identifying at-risk students, and tracks follow-up and course completion for the student.

**First Year Experience**: The first-year experience is designed to prepare new college students with the skills and knowledge they need beyond academics to persist to completion and meet their individual goals.

**Learning Management System**: An online system for faculty to post syllabi, collect assignments, test students, and communicate grades to the students throughout their course.

**Retention Rate**: The percentage of the higher education student body that remain actively taking classes each proceeding semester until they achieve their degree.

**Satisfactory Grade**: Most community colleges consider a C- or lower grade to be considered unsatisfactory due to the inability to transfer those grades from the community college to a four-year higher education institution.

**Student Success**: Measured through the specifics of course outcomes (knowledge and skills), course completion, term-to-term retention, year-to-year retention, graduation, and can include the grade in a course of C or above to accomplish a successful transfer to a four-year institution.

**Term**: The length for college courses. These can vary greatly; however, many colleges have 16-week semesters.
TRiO: While it is not an acronym, it is a federal outreach and student services program in the U.S. that is designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Summary**

The goal of increasing retention continues to be a struggle for community colleges. One method most of the community colleges in this study are utilizing is the early alert system in which students receive a grade below a C at a mid-point in the semester are identified and notified. Reaching out to communicate with the student as to their progress has the intention of improving continued communication between that student and faculty member, and ultimately aiding the student toward actions and resources that could improve student success. These efforts have been increasing in popularity, however, statistics which reveal the validity of the system have been lacking for many colleges. Identifying what information should be collected and how to interpret the data to verify the value of the early alert system may have been part of the challenge for many colleges. This research was conducted to identify some key differences among some community colleges in the Midwest, how those reports are perceived by an administrator as well as the perceptions of faculty at one college. The findings may be used by colleges select the best early alert system and attributes to make a positive difference in improving retention.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to identify common practices in implementing an early alert system and how an early alert system is perceived by college faculty and administrators. This study considers how an early alert grade report/communicating grades to students midway through a college semester/term can be done in many ways, such as the comprehensive early alert system.

**Early Alert Programs**

Early alert programs have led to increased student success because they identify students early who are in academic danger (Varney, 2008). The literature identified for this chapter begins with the broad topic of engagement and involvement, identifying how that impacts student success. A literature map of the flow of the terms for this dissertation is provided in Figure 1.

Engagement and involvement as well as other foundational frameworks can use communication as the venue to achieve these goals. Communication among peers and between students and support services at a college campus can have a profound impact, but rarely is one type of communication more important to student success than the interaction between faculty and students. This communication can occur in multiple forms, one in particular is electronically through a learning management system (LMS). An LMS enables faculty to give feedback on assignments and most importantly to communicate the grade continuously throughout the term so that a student can monitor their progress making changes as needed. This constant evaluation method has enhanced the communication for students, and linked the institution for the student to other support services. Academic advising and learning communities also play a significant role in assisting students,
especially those students who struggle. However, the greatest impact on retention has been the early alert system (Bradley & Blanco, 2010). These systems identify students who are at risk of attrition, and intervene to encourage support services that may help the student to improve their grade in the course, and their student success overall. As illustrated in the literature map, the main idea is early alert, but it stems from student success and retention. In addition, the main themes of communication, campus services and support, advising, and faculty connections are prominent and will be explored in more depth in this literature review.
History

The early alert program, also called an early warning system or early alert report/system by some colleges, has been attributed to Astin (1984), who used the terms “early intervention” and “early warning systems” as early as the 1970s. Astin’s (1984) attention to attrition in higher education emerged from his theory that students succeed if they become integrated early. Astin believed that students’ first year is the most critical to their successful completion. Vital to a successful first year experience is social and academic interactions with other students or faculty. The name “early intervention” became renamed the early alert program or early alert system (Maack, 2001). These programs vary greatly in their practice, processes and responsible parties; however, their purpose remains similar. The goal of an early alert program is to identify and intervene with the students who are struggling/not succeeding, and are at risk for dropping out. (Astin, 1984; Beck & Davidson, 2001; Hanover Research Center, 2008).

Engagement has been found to be a strong predictor of academic success and development for students in college (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Involvement and engagement may be used interchangeably throughout this literature review as a foundation for understanding and achieving improvement of student success factors, such as retention and graduation.

Foundational and classical research

Student engagement has been shown to be key factor contributing to student success. Student success can be student learning, retention, graduation and academic performance (Astin, 1999; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Astin (1984; 1993; 1999) believed that student development takes
more than just awareness, but that a student needs to become involved, interact with faculty, and with peers in order to increase student outcomes. Tinto (2006) addressed how students have choices during college, which influences their likelihood to persist, such as their choice to become involved academically and socially. He shares how instructors need to develop and create those opportunities in the class environment in order to help the student become involved (Tinto).

According to Kuh (2009), “…student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). Several studies have revealed that students who do not take the opportunity to engage in college activities and courses are not as likely to persist in college (Astin 1999; Baxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Pascarella, Siefert & Blaich, 2009). In addition, research has indicated how the more that students feel that they are a part of the higher education institution, the greater the chance that they will be successful with grades and persistence (Rendon, 1985; Rendon, Jamo & Nora, 2000).

**Communication**

Communication is a key factor in the engagement, involvement and interaction mentioned previously. Communication can be between students, or faculty to student. Harsha, Pillay, Pillay, Nippold, and Joffe (2015) completed a study done of the number of words communicated in a classroom and found that instructors spoke 15 times more words than that of the students. Habley (2004) believed that communication indicates to students that the faculty are interested in seeing the student succeed and, therefore, have a
considerable impact on whether that student remains in college and ultimately graduates. Contemporary higher education programs and instructors utilize a variety of teaching and learning tactics to incorporate the student into academia which helps the student experience and effectively develop into the classroom environment, the campus and the college experience (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). The drive to get students involved more has “encouraged educators to focus less on what they do and more on what the student does” (Astin, 1999, p. 522)

Communication among the institutional departments and services is key to providing the resources needed to deal with student issues (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008). Students need personal contact, from advising to classroom interaction, in order to feel supported as they begin their college journey (Noel, Levitz & Saluri, 1985; Tinto, 1987; Rendon, 1995). Students who interact with peers and faculty have a much greater learning opportunity, better knowledge acquisition, and rate their overall experience more satisfactory (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006).

In order to succeed at what Tinto (1993) referred to as “academic and social integration”, interactions have to occur between student-to-student as well as student-to-faculty (Barefoot, 2000). If designed intentionally, student connections in the first stages of enrollment through their first year can help channel a student toward academic success and graduation. (Krause, 2005). Choosing those services to give students the experiences is the challenging part. Although the time and effort students put into engagement activities is key, college campuses need to work hard to find effective ways to evaluate the engagement patterns in order to maximize campus efforts (Radloff & Coates, 2013).
Learning management systems

Electronic communication between faculty and students can be done via email or a higher education institution’s learning management system. While some faculty may argue that the use of a learning management system makes the need for an early alert report obsolete, others argue that the learning management system tracks performance and supports the initiatives of early alert reports (Alias, 2005). Technology has become a major player in the learning environment for college students today, and is an essential tool for engaging students and faculty communication (Educause, 2014). Advances in technology have peaked the interest of academia looking for ways to involve students in their learning, and to engage them to be motivated and to be active learners in their coursework (Hughes, 2009).

Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) identified how technology can be used to implement the seven principles of good practice for increasing student engagement. The seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education are listed as follows (Chickering & Ehrmann):

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Kuh (2009) illustrated how higher education can impact engagement by incorporating the seven principles within technology use, such as when using a college’s learning management system.
Legg and Wilson (2009) shared how instructors can build rapport outside the classroom through the use of technology to aid in motivating and interacting with students. Macfayden and Dawson (2010) identified how frequent feedback received by the student is a benefit of using an LMS. In addition, an LMS can be used to adopt an early alert report; this warning to students that they are at-risk is another benefit of the LMS (Macfayden & Dawson, 2010).

**Campus services and support**

A student’s success depends largely on the institution’s commitment to invest resources, promote involvement and enhance learning for student learning outcomes (Kuh, 2001). Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997) also addressed the need to incorporate those first-year resources on campuses to help students connect. College campuses can include services such as tutoring, clubs, activities, group study areas, as well as socializing opportunities. Tinto (1975) identified that as students are separating from their families and high school environments and peers, the need to aid them in the transition to college becomes even greater. This transition to college from high school includes connecting with new students, their environment/campus culture, and can develop a student’s need to increase self-awareness, autonomy and responsibility (Hiester, Nordstrom, & Swenson, 2009).

Tinto (1993) believed that college campuses need to include campus services to help students develop goals, involve themselves in the activities on the campus, and establish connections with faculty and other students. The success of those engagement activities shows the commitment that the institution places on investing in the services, resources and activities to promote involvement of students (Kuh, 2001).
Seidman (2005) suggested that identification early on for students who are struggling with social, personal, academic or other issues is the key to a successful retention program. Kuh (2006) agreed, pointing out that interaction with someone from the higher education institution has a big impact on the student’s choice to stay in college. These factors and others support the fact that as students feel that someone from their institution cares about their success, the students tend to utilize campus resources, be more satisfied with the academic career choice and achieve more success in their classes (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). When students perceive that they are important and that someone does care about them, they tend to retain at higher rates and graduate in higher percentages. Early alert systems help to first identify the student who may have academic or even social problems, and then connect them with college services that may help them eliminate their obstacles and empower them to continue in school (Kuh, 2002).

**Policies and resources**

In a College Board survey, 62% of higher education institutions indicated that having an administrator whose “…responsibility was to act as a central resource for efforts to improve student persistence rates” is very important to promoting student persistence (College Board, 2011, p. 16). Additional results from that same survey indicated that only 47.6% had someone on staff who indicated they had either “some” or a “great deal” of influence toward retention efforts.

Previous research has identified the relationship between unsatisfactory performance in college courses with the student’s exit from the class, and the longer the amount of time a student performs poorly, the greater the chance of losing that student (Araque et al., 2009). Early alert systems help to identify students who may exit from the class or college, which is
comprised of advisors, faculty, academic and student life staff, support services and retention staff (Kuh, 2002).

Kuh (2009) recommended institutions pay closer attention to and assess the quality of engagement experiences by researching proven practices that can build student engagement and increase student persistence. Links between learning community student participation and engagement were found to be positively related and significant with involvement when participating in learning communities (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2010). Kuh (2008) posited that learning communities are a powerful learning opportunity and have a high impact on success in the student’s educational experience.

Astin (1993) also noted that student-to-student connections are significant to the college student experience, sharing that a “…student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Barefoot (2000) took note of the power that peer influence has and shares with educators to manage or channel that while preparing and conducting classroom learning efforts. Faculty may not have to be the lifeline to every student, but by creating those opportunities to grow peer relationships, faculty can again make a huge impact on retention.

A large number of first-year programs are geared toward building those student-to-student relationships (McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013). In addition, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) developed the Completion Agenda, an agreement among community colleges in which their goal is to graduate 50% more students with degrees and certificates by 2025. The AACC has encouraged the nation’s 1,200 community colleges to take their initiation of a 50% increase in student completion over the
next decade. (McPhail, 2011). The goal is lofty, yet frameworks were provided directing the community colleges toward this increase in graduation rates.

One strategy that developed from these discussions was by McPhail (2011) who addressed 10 broad suggestions to increase retention and graduation rates. Among these strategies is to improve student engagement and support services. The Completion Agenda plan calls for colleges to track student progress toward their degree. Colleges are encouraged to strengthen their internal and external communication to improve alignment with four-year institutions and improve curriculum, as well as to consider early alert programs as one of the best practices to help increase student retention and graduation rates (McPhail).

**Academic advising**

Academic advisors are the resource that many students are sent to for support after receiving notice of their unsatisfactory performance (Heisserer, 2002). Academic advising has been shown to be a key source of assistance to the student in need, and coordinates with other resources on campus for the student (Nutt, 2003). The reason that some students leave college before graduation may be due to poor academic progress and lacking clear goals and motivation (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010).

Traditionally, retention committees and the academic faculty have separate goals and may not coordinate their activities (Kluepfel, Parelius, & Roberts, 1994); however, more traditional approaches involve a number of departments to help with retention efforts. Faculty who are generally not involved are incentivized to help in support activities. Admissions departments in community colleges allow open access, and work with development services and other support services to help some students succeed (Kluepfel,
Parelius, & Roberts,). Advising is not only a key component to the success of the student, but can also be the link between academic faculty and support services.

**Faculty connections**

Building those mentor relationships with faculty or other staff on a campus can help guide a student who needs direction. Faculty are often the most obvious link to the student. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that student-to-faculty connections have a large impact on student success factors such as retention and graduation. “Students who have frequent contact with faculty members in and out of class during college years are more satisfied with their educational experience, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact” (Cross, 1998, p.7).

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that faculty behaviors “…affect students profoundly, which suggest that faculty members play the single most important role in student learning” (p. 176). Faculty members who make contact often with their students have students who are more satisfied with their educational opportunity, are less likely to quit, and have the perception to have learned more than students who do not have interaction (Astin, 1984, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Faculty-student interactions are more strongly linked to academic success such as grades and graduation than any other interactions on campus (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Thompson (2001) addressed how faculty who once struggled when they were students can relate to students who struggle. Higher education institutions that give support to student-faculty experiences tend to make gains in retention efforts due to the engagement created for students (Jaeger & Hinz, 2008). In a study of unprepared students in
community colleges, Engstrom (2008) noted: “Faculty who knew their students well and served as their ongoing cheerleaders and advocates contributed to students’ increased confidence and motivation to succeed in college” (p. 16). Students have indicated higher levels of institutional engagement when they have teachers who use interactive learning techniques and engage them in the learning experience. (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

College campuses are facing the challenge of developing ways to connect at-risk students who need support in order to improve student persistence and success (Cano & Castillo, 2007; McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013). Faculty can reach out to at-risk students to connect them with institutional people who may be able to help them. (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifer, & Pascarella, 2006). Identifying those students at-risk and increasing their faculty interaction can help prevent student attrition (Williams-Chehmani, 2009).

**Peer influence/Learning communities**

Students who are in their junior or senior year are being recruited to welcome new students to aid them in transitioning to college (Amey, 1999). This shift from how freshmen were treated in the past by upper-class students is a positive change. According to Cavanaugh (2012), upper-class students now work with incoming students as orientation leaders, peer tutors, and academic mentors. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011) noted institutions that create systems and programs where seasoned students support incoming students to help them integrate into the culture of the campus can also motivate them academically, and help build that institutional commitment.

Offering students an opportunity to be part of a learning community in a cohort fashion has been shown to build a solid relationship due to nature of these cohorts linking several students in consecutive classes together (Gonyea & Kuh, 2009). Students
participating in related academic learning communities have higher social connections and less academic fragmentation. (Barefoot, 2000; Cavanaugh, 2012; Coates, 2013). Students involved in technical programs at community colleges tend to get these informal communities of learning, as the majority of their classes end up being taken together if they start the program at the same time. Transfer students who are predominantly completing only their general education requirements before moving on to their major, have not had an opportunity to be a part of a learning community. Zepke and Leach (2010) addressed how college’s focus on retention has to go beyond academics and realize that outside influences can harm success of a student if the students are not made to feel that they belong.

**Student retention**

Approximately 83% of high school graduates enroll in some form of college, but only 52% of those students graduate with a college degree (Goldberger, 2007). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 40% of high school graduates go on to complete only three years of college (Mann, Hunt & Alford, 2004). Student attrition and retention grew in popularity through the 1960s (Morrison & Silverman, 2005). Literature related to increasing student success in higher education has grown considerably since the early 1980s when we first heard this issue of focusing on retention and graduation rates (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

**Strategies to increase retention**

Former president Barack Obama inaugurated the National Completion Agenda. “By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. Through this plan, we seek to help an additional five million Americans earn degrees and
certificates in the next decade” (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong). This initiative to increase graduation rates illustrates the importance of retention at higher education institutions.

The National Completion Agenda pushes for community colleges today to improve retention. Higher education institutions have found that they must improve the product that they offer in order to respond to the demands of parents, students, employers, media and politicians (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Colleges are measured in their credibility by the institution’s overall retention rate (Stover, 2005).

Astin’s (1970; 1984) research provided institutions with the finding that a student’s first year is the most important and then colleges need to focus on integrating and assimilating the student to achieve success. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) suggested that colleges must create opportunities for faculty-to-student interactions through their first-year experience programs or first-year seminars. Milem and Berger (1997) added that a student needs to become connected within the first two months of college, or risk attrition. These early time frames indicate that any efforts to improve persistence in college students needs to happen right away for new students. Retention initiatives have become almost commonplace on college campuses (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

**First-year programs/Orientation**

Findings of study by Cohen and Brawer (2008) revealed that, within the first four weeks of college, 71% of community college students thought about dropping out. Students who successfully complete their first year of college with high levels of success typically graduate with few barriers (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). Becker, Cooper, Atkins, and Martin (2009) noted that academics is one of the strongest factors influencing student
retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) addressed the fact that academics, overall, has the greatest impact on graduation and retention rates.

The American Freshman, a Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) publication at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, studied students in their first year of college, and found that if students connected with instructors particularly in their first year, students were more likely to build relationships that led to mentoring and persistence (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2013). Early alert systems are among the best new strategies utilized by colleges to attack this retention problem (Bradley & Blanco, 2010).

Reason (2009) illustrated the connection between students’ sense of belonging and institutional commitment, which he adds is a key to retention even though it may be one of the oldest indirect benefits of a college education. Terenzini and Reason (2005) pointed out that peer relationships shape the campus environment, as well its values, beliefs, attitudes and expectations for the student body. Intervention strategies that occur early in helping to identify and correct the problem early have been shown to improve student success (Gilmer, 2007).

Tinto (1999) addressed how students enter college with expectations, and Pascarella (2001) offered the understanding that students begin their college experience tending to behave in certain manners. This new environment can be new and scary, so students may struggle to find their way in the beginning. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified the fact that nearly two-thirds of the knowledge, cognition, and social skills developed in college happen in the first two years. First year students are the focus of many retention efforts, as studies show that a large percentage of students do not complete their degree (DeBerard, Speilman & Julka, 2004; Swail, 2004, Tinto, 1993). The first-year student today thinks
more like a consumer, having a sense of entitlement and believing that they can shop for the best college deal (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010; Knutson, 2012).

Establishing Early Alert Programs

Colleges are being scrutinized to be accountable for their retention and graduation rates. With this push for accountability, retention and graduation rates are being used to indicate success and academic quality (Dingman, Madison, & Madison, 2011; Trowler, 2010; Wyrick, 2014). At large institutions, the midterm grade has traditionally been the first sign of academic trouble for a student. However, Kuh (2007), Tinto (1993), and Cuseo (2006) posited that midterm is too late for students whose struggle is more severe.

Simons (2011) noted that early alert reports are tending to move to a point earlier in the semester to provide feedback in order to have adequate time to allow students time to recover. While early alert reports are widely popular, Lynch-Holmes, Tory and Ramos (2012) cautioned these systems are relatively new, and few clear best practices have been developed and implemented. Some systems have been created by the college, while others are professionally developed, commercialized and sold to colleges. The following commercial products were available for purchase in 2016:

- **DropGuard™** is an early warning system with customizable warning flags for identifying at-risk students.
- **(Jenzabar) Early Alert Retention Software™** is a software program that can be purchased with a traditional software license or set up a service agreement
- **Colleague (Ellucian) CRM Advise/Retention Alert™** is a monitoring system that helps identify at-risk students by considering HS GPA, sport affiliations, grades,
attendance and financial aid anticipating issues early then triggers a process for alerting the student and campus staff.

- Grades First™ is a web-based student performance monitoring system providing automated student services and communication to student and campus staff.
- Insight Early Alert™ is an enterprise student support service for early alert to identify and track at-risk students, streamline appointment management and pinpoint predictive factors.
- MAP-Works™ is a comprehensive student support and retention system used as an early alert system to identify at-risk students.
- Starfish™ Early Alert System is a tracking system that works with your current leaning management system (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle) to identify at-risk students.
- Pharos360™ is a retention tool helping colleges and universities identify at-risk students, manage interventions, and build campus-wide collaboration for early alert.
- Campus Labs™ provides data collection software that enables colleges and universities to make data-driven decisions. One feature is the early alert in which the data indicates the students at-risk and directs them to campus services and resources.

Early alert reporting systems identify and intervene with students who have problems achieving the standards and expectations set by the college, and offer them resources and services to assist them in improving (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005). Although many colleges are utilizing early alert reporting systems, Schwartz (2010) noted there is still a lack of support, shortage of resources and funding for staff or technology to implement and monitor it. Fletcher (2012) agreed with this assessment and identified that these varying levels of support have caused institutions to question whether an early alert program is worth
it. Colleges need to refocus efforts on the goal of the early alert program, which is to identify and intervene.

**Identify and intervene**

Identifying and intervening are two common themes found in research of early alert programs. Early intervention in higher education refers to identifying and contacting or communicating with the at-risk student to address awareness as early as possible (Seidman, 2005). The goal of the process is to identify, intervene and stop the at-risk behavior (Donnelly, 2010, Wasley, 2007).

Early intervention can provide a successful opportunity for those students who may not reach out on their own (Varney, 2008). Generally, early alert programs or similar systems refer to the formal, direct plan to identify and contact students who are at risk in order to monitor their success in their academics (Cuseo, 2004). Early alert reporting systems represent an institutional commitment, deliberate at identifying the students who are facing challenges academically (Singell & Waddell, 2010). Identifying and reaching out to those students who are not engaged and who would not seek support on their own is the key to focusing on success factors such as retention and graduation rates which are justification for appropriations (Amey, 2006; Carey, 2007). Even one intervention can make a difference for a student. Research findings have indicated that colleges are striving to develop intervention systems to give early alert reports that can lower attrition and raise academic performance, engagement, and graduation rates (Bradley & Blanco, 2010).

Is academics the only concern for retention? Cuseo (2004) explained that poor performance in a course is a strong sign that a student is in jeopardy. Failing to offer assistance and strategies to aid students in recovering from academic struggles poses a threat
to retention rates (Swecker, Fifolt & Searby, 2013). Early alert programs address student
development, engagement, and even persistence as the message sent to the student is that the
college, or someone at the college, cares about their academic success (Bradley & Blanco,
2010; Swail, 2004). The notable factors of early alert programs are the academic skills and
performance, goal development, and acclimation to the college environment (ACT, 2010).

Early Intervention systems have increased in popularity nationally as a way to
remarked that early alert programs and intervention initiatives are at their highest in
popularity. Focusing strategies for early intervention on students who are at-risk greatly
improves retention and completion rates (Gittleman, Joseph, and Zhang (2012).

It is important to note that intervention is more effective the earlier it happens in the
term (Rienks & Taylor, 2009). Findings of a study conducted at Stellenbosch University by
van Schalkwyk (2010) revealed that the first-year student needs structured support, and
coordination of resources and support services at the campus, which has a positive impact on
success at their campus. Are comprehensive approaches that coordinate services the key to
early alert systems’ success?

**Comprehensive early alert systems**

Comprehensive systems for early alert reporting have garnered attention from other
colleges in higher education due to their success and increased retention rates. Some of these
systems incorporate multiple departments, as well as multiple methods of contacting the
student. Students may be referred to early alert programs due to attendance, academics, or
even mental health and social classroom behaviors (The Hanover Research Council, 2007).
A comprehensive approach for early alert follow-up utilizes the services of a variety of people on campus from faculty, staff and student services, to para-professionals, administrators and upper-class students, and use a several approaches to make personal connection, such as email, cell phone calls and text messaging (Wasley, 2007; Tampke & Shirley, 2009). Since colleges are scrutinized for their retention rates, higher education institutions must continually improve and justify their product. (Carey, 2007, Huisman & Currie, 2004; Kirwan, 2006). Follow up studies have indicated when personal contact follow-up is made by means such as postcards, face-to-face contact with the students who are struggling, it improves student involvement and engagement (Cuseo, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Tinto, 1993.)

According to Chappell (2010), college staff who work together as a community will make an early alert system more effective and appreciated by all. In a study conducted by Richie and Hargrove (2005), students who were at-risk primarily due to low attendance were contacted via phone at midterm. The students were told that they had been contacted because their instructor indicated they had missed a significant number of classes in their freshman English course, and campus services were offered to aid them such as advising, counseling, and encouraging them to meet with their instructor. The effect was significant. On one hand, the group improved, with an average of 2.7 fewer absences (down almost 50%), 77.5% of the students in the course were retained where only 62% were retained in the control group who did not receive the phone call intervention, and the mean of the grades for the group contacted by phone was 2.7. On the other hand, the GPA for at-risk students in the control group was 1.54 at the end of the term. Information collected at the end of the semester evaluations also indicated that the intervention made the students feel supported from the
phone call, and gave them information about resources on campus that they had not realized were offered (Ritchie & Hargrove, 2005).

In addition to intervening with students, early alert reports assist students in improving their academic performance in their courses (Beatty-Gunther, 1994; Perez, 1998). Studies about these different types show some interesting factors, such as that more than half of the early alert programs in community colleges were implemented by student affairs, and more than two thirds were coordinated by a staff member of an office with other campus duties (Fletcher, 2013, Simons, 2011). Overall, although these early alert programs may have been structured differently, they were generally initiated by faculty members who identified and referred the students to other staff who intervened to help the students. Some early alert programs were very structured with specific periods for reporting student progress, while others were less structured and referrals could be made at any time (Cuseo, 2004; Maack, 2001; Varney, 2008).

A very common method for identifying students who are at-risk of attrition includes monitoring academics, such as the student’s GPA. (Bean, 2005; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Tross, Harper, Osher & Kneidinger, 2000). When instructors utilize early alert programs to identify and monitor student’s performance in their classes, they are better able to develop new teaching strategies and forms of instruction, creating overall better instructional programs (Safer & Fleischman, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Providing feedback to students creates an enhanced college atmosphere while fostering academic competence (Tagg, 2003).

Chickering and Gamson (1987) generated a guide, entitled Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, to aid higher education institutions to improve student
development in college. While these principles have influenced higher education institutions for decades, the key points still ring especially true, such as the principles of encouraging student and faculty interaction, developing cooperation among students, and providing prompt feedback to students (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These levels of interaction support the concept of early alert programs reaching out to students to provide support.

**Successful retention efforts**

Some colleges have exhibited success using early alert programs or similar systems to communicate grades to students who are not receiving satisfactory grades at an early to midpoint timeframe in the term. By viewing case studies of successful implementation of the early alert system, higher education institutions are able to select from the systems they perceive will best fit their own institution’s needs. One example is St. John Fisher College, which developed its own early alert system utilizing three levels of monitoring students (Ghera, Erklenz-Watts, Lynd-Balta & Ambrosetti, 2012). In the first step, faculty submit midterm grades to advisors who hold meetings to discuss student progress. Second, a committee of faculty and staff monitor students’ class performance. Last, a student behavioral team of staff makes inquiries to assist students who are struggling (Ghera, Erklenz-Watts, Lynd-Blata, & Ambrosetti, 2012). These types of homegrown systems are predominantly found at smaller institutions (Wasley, 2007).

Since there are differences between early alert programs at unrelated institutions, the most appropriate recommendation is for each institution to determine its goals and target audience, which will help the institution select the best process and feedback system (Lynch-Holmes, Troy & Ramos, 2012). The University of North Texas, a large institution with enrollment of 36,000, began a course-centered effort focused on poor performance and
absences (Tampke, 2010). An early alert type of system was embedded with PeopleSoft Campus Solutions in which data were accessible to faculty, advisors, and students. The data indicated positive results from their system of linking campus student records, notifying advisors, and tracking student’s progress (Chappell, 2010). While the institution was still looking to make the system more effective, the early alert had helped to make the institution feel smaller and more personal due to email contacts and outreach as a result of the early alert system (Tampke, 2010).

Hanover College, a religious-based Indiana institution with an enrollment of 1,000 students, designed and utilized their own system in which five campus officials comprised an Early Alert Team (Wasley, 2007). This team was made up of staff and administrators, who encouraged the campus to identify students who were struggling and needed intervention. The process’s goal was to assist students, keep them in college, communicate with advisors and admissions personnel, and collect and interpret the data (Habley et al., 2012).

Paul Smith’s College boasted that their early alert system had a 12% increase in retention, and that 91% of faculty participated (Starfish, 2011). Their intervention system was employed early enough to give students ample time to impact their own success through early outreach, targeted programs, and voluntary support (Taylor & McAleese, 2012). Paul Smith’s College used the Starfish™ early alert system in which historical data as well as test scores were applied to identify at-risk students. By applying the Noel Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI) data, and intended major (Starfish, 2011), the college obtained an increase of 15% for the students who received satisfactory grades, 24% less D grades, 33% less F final grades, which indicated a 25% decrease in the student percentage receiving a D or F final grade, and a 23% increase in graduation rates (Taylor & McAleese, 2012). The college also
received nearly a $2 million net in student revenue due to increased retention since 2010 (Taylor & McAleese).

**Determining the best early alert program for retention at your college**

The goal of early alert programs is to understand the intervention system as a tool that colleges can use to detect at-risk students and provide systems and support (Yeager & Walton, 2011). According to Singell and Waddell (2009), it is unclear whether the benefits are greater than the costs in order to help at-risk students. Simons (2011) pointed out that although higher education institutions have developed methods to identify and intervene, they do not have the tangible statistics to track and monitor outcomes to those initiatives. Some colleges have early alert programs that are well coordinated with other campus services (Hamilton, 2013), while others do not work together to share information or lack support from faculty, academic affairs or student affairs.

Swail (2004) noted that implementing comprehensive early alert programs requires commitment of the entire college, including campus leaders, faculty and staff. According to Stanford-Bowers (2008), institutions have recognized the cost-benefit analysis of incorporating these systems. Hudson (2014) explained the early alert programs to be a way to “close the loop” by allowing faculty to include other campus members and services to assist struggling students. The newest trend in early alert programs has been to partner with technology vendors who work with student retention to improve data collections and manage the data for student performance in order to make resource allocation decisions (Hobson, 2008; Lee Greenhouse Associates, 2008).
Summary

Engagement and involvement are key foundational factors that impact student success which is important to higher education institutions. One of the ways to increase engagement or involvement is to encourage more communication between faculty and students, and between students and their peers (Reynolds, 2017). Communicating with students has a positive impact on retention. Communication can take place in technical environments, such as learning management systems (LMS). Learning management systems have been arguably the reason for making an early alert report unnecessary, as well as for signifying importance of students knowing their grade early and throughout the term.

Campus support can also be utilized as a way to increase student success, such as an early alert form communicating a student’s grade in a course. Students have access to services that can assist them when they struggle, which enables them to feel institutional commitment. Communicating grades often and early can increase student persistence and reduce attrition. One of the academic services that colleges can provide is an early alert program. Early alert program reports have been directly linked to positive increases in student retention, and other student success factors, such as GPA. Determining which early alert program is best for one’s institution can be challenging as there is no one best method, and there is much variety among programs.

Comprehensive early alert systems have been shown to have the best promise for retention improvement. Monitoring the progress of one’s student body using early alert report data can help determine if an early alert program is best for one’s college. While the research is strong in supporting that students perceive the early alert report to be beneficial; nevertheless, there is a paucity of research from the perspective of faculty regarding
completing the early alert report as well as the different policies and methods utilized by community colleges.

The gap in the research on the early alert reporting system provided impetus for the current dissertation study. The next chapter provides the methodology applied to conduct the study, and includes the design of this case study and methods for data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to research the types of early alert programs utilized at community colleges, which is part one of this research study. The survey served as the starting point of this research, which was emailed to the chief academic officers, but was first pilot tested. The first part of the study was comprised of a pilot test group of PhD candidates who were students in the higher education doctoral program in which researcher tested, which ensured clarity of the survey questions. In the second part of the study, one community college volunteered to have its early alert program and statistics analyzed as a case study to illustrate its approach, timing and reasons students are given an early alert referral. That community college was used as a case study to examine one approach in depth. The goal of the study was to make recommendations for community colleges regarding options that are available to better utilize early alert systems to identify and provide appropriate interventions for at-risk students.

Research Questions

Research on student engagement and involvement concludes that colleges reaching out to students to interact about their academics is beneficial to students (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 2006; Kuh, 2009). Research done from several institutions across the US have indicated that early alert systems have a positive impact (Tampke, 2010; Wasley, 2007; Taylor & McAleese, 2012). However, many institutions are unaware of all the options for an early alert reporting system in order to select the most appropriate options for their college.

The current researcher analyzed the results from the survey of Midwestern community colleges, with an emphasis placed on what schools can do to enhance early timing of the report, justify reasons to refer a student for help, and conduct follow-up
measures based on statistical analysis that will be beneficial to the community college system. A questionnaire survey developed by the researcher was sent to the chief academic officers at 15 Midwestern community colleges. The survey aligned with the research goals of this dissertation.

Two overarching research questions guided the questions used in surveys and interviews in this study:

1. What are the common practices in implementing the early alert system at community colleges?
2. How is early alert perceived by college faculty and administration?

While these two questions led to the development of the survey questions and interview questions used in the research of this study. The following questions provide additional detail of the research involved in this study stemming from those two overarching research questions, and are questions used in the research for this study:

1. What is the early grade report time frame for each of the community colleges?
2. What are the reasons a student can get referred to the early alert system?
3. What follow up procedures are there in place for faculty to complete the early alert report?
   a. Is the completion of the report required, recommended, neither?
   b. Are there incentives to encourage faculty to participate?
   c. How often are the early alert results at a college reviewed?
4. What follow-up procedures are in place for students who have been placed on the report?
5. What is the chief academic officer’s perception of satisfaction with their current early alert system?

6. What is the perception of faculty who use the Early Alert System (Case Study)
   a. What do they like and dislike about their current system?
   b. What percentage of students do they perceive get assistance and are successful because of the early alert system?
   c. What are the reasons faculty refer students to the early alert system?
   d. What are the perceptions regarding faculty do not use the early alert system?
   e. Are increased participation from faculty and subsequent decreased percentages of students placed on probation/warning due to early alert?

A survey sent fall 2016 to the chief academic officers at the community colleges. There were some specific questions about the different names used for this report, the timeframe for deadlines for faculty to complete their college’s early alert report, how the students were to be contacted when they were not successfully performing academically, and the kinds of incentives or repercussions for faculty who do not complete the early alert report. The complete survey is provided in Appendix B.

After the community college survey results were compiled (Part One), a follow up email was sent to the community college that indicated willingness to share their compiled results from their early alert reporting system (Part Two). In a follow up phone call, the chief academic officer (Jeraldine) explained more about the process used, and sent an email to additional staff and faculty who agreed to being interviewed and give their perceptions and explain more about the use of the reporting system.
In the second part of the research, the interviews with faculty members were completed individually, primarily by phone. Using a phone application called TranscribeMe, I was able to preserve the interview results for review at a later time. Coding was done by compiling all common responses into Excel, a software program, which allowed me to identify patterns. I was able to review the transcriptions and compile patterns, themes and eventually saturation of concepts. The emerging themes were identified after the interview portion. The case study results presented in Chapter 4 provide more specific information for each community college, its early alert system, and improved participation as revealed in the results for each college’s early alert system.

**Methodological Approach: Case Study**

Merriam (1988), author of the book: *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*, highlighted in the preface that case studies have long been a part of research in the history for studying psychology, anthropology, management, social work sociology, and political science. She illustrated how education has recently joined those fields of study to use case studies for insight into policies and practices. Using case studies is a “legitimate methodological option for researchers to consider when designing a study” (Merriam, p. xi). Merriam also cited previous researcher Erickson’s *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, titled *Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching*, and shared how this form of research that Erickson called “interpretive” research is needed in education. The reasons for this need in education are:

1. To make the familiar strange and interesting again- everyday life is so familiar that it may be invisible.
2. To achieve specific understanding through documentation of concrete details of practice.
3. To consider the local meaning that happenings have for the people involved in them—“Surface similarities in behavior are sometimes misleading in educational research.” (pp. 121-122)

4. To engage in comparative understanding of different social settings—“considering the relations between setting and its wider social environments helps to clarify what is happening the local setting itself.” (p. 122)

5. To engage in comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting. (Merriam, 1988, p. 122)

These reasons provide a “…crucial perspective in assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative case studies” (Merriam, 1988, p. 166). Case study research has five major components as suggested by Patton (1980; pp. 340-342):

1. Purpose of the evaluation

2. Methodology

3. Presentation of the data

4. Validation and verification of the findings

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

“What makes the case study work ‘scientific’ is the observer’s critical presence in the context of occurrence of phenomena, observation, hypothesis testing, and triangulation of participant’s perceptions, interpretations and so on” (Kemmis, 1983, p. 103.). The case study approach is appropriate for answering these research questions because this structure from purpose to recommendations is congruent with the specific research questions for this study. Therefore, these major components suggested by Patton are addressed in this dissertation research.

**Validity and Reliability: Triangulation**

*Triangulation* is defined as using multiple sources of data or methods to confirm emerging findings (Denzin, 1970). Nevertheless, using multiple sources can sometimes result in inconsistencies or contradictions. Therefore, one may need to rely on an “…holistic
“understanding” in order to best construct a “plausible explanation about the phenomena being studied” (Mathison, 1988, p. 17). In this dissertation research, triangulation was attempted by using data compiled in the early alert report from one community college, which was comprised of the number of students, the reasons for referrals, and percentage of students who were referred to the early alert report but did not end up on warning or probation. These reports were triangulated with information from interviews with administrative personnel, and faculty at the same community college.

**Data Collection**

*In Part One, the collection, tabulation and analysis of the survey results was accomplished using Qualtrics, which is an electronic software for survey design and implementation (see Appendix C). I created the survey at Iowa State University for the purpose of conducting this dissertation research. The survey was pilot tested with a group comprised of six PhD students and faculty and was revised appropriately. The revised survey was emailed to the chief academic officers at 15 Midwestern community colleges September 28, 2016, and remained open for eight weeks, with reminders sent bi-weekly to encourage a high participation in the survey.*

*The description of the data set procedure entailed tallying the results of the survey after completion by the community college chief academic officers using Excel, which was part one of this research. The data from the community colleges survey results were uploaded into Excel for analysis, preservation of the results, and for comparison of the information. In Part 2, a follow-up phone call was completed with the community college who expressed interest in sharing their college’s results and who were willing to be a case study and have administrators and faculty interviewed for this dissertation research.*
Population sample

In Part One, 15 community colleges in the Midwest that were invited to participate in the survey. All of the Chief Academic Officers for the community colleges had completed a survey previously for another research project in which I inquired about the topic of communicating grades to students (Reynolds, 2017). This previous research included the methods used in order to communicate grades, such as if the college has an LMS, if the college has an early alert report, if faculty can post grades on bulletin board, overhead, etc. (without disclosing student identities, and their colleges expectation for keeping grades up to date in their LMS (Reynolds, 2017).

Nine of the community colleges had indicated interest in seeing the results of that survey, so they were sent a follow up email with the results. Four months after the results were sent in the follow-up email, the survey for this dissertation research was sent to the same 15 chief academic officers at the community colleges. Thirteen responses were received for this survey during the following eight weeks; however two appeared to have duplicate IP addresses for their anonymous response, indicating a strong possibility that they were from the same community college.

After sending reminders to all 15 community colleges, chief academic officers from two of the community colleges may have thought that this was a new survey or did not recall if they had completed this one originally. Since all results were anonymous, I was unable to verify any location if the survey had been completed. Nevertheless, I chose not to omit the duplicate responses for certain questions, but to actually include those seemingly duplicate responses for some questions due to the different nature of the responses. Since there could be potential duplication, resulting in only 11 of the community colleges reporting, some
questions pertaining to the number of colleges omit the duplication to better represent the community college percentages in which those responses were received. This was indicated in each survey question and noted in the number of participants included for each question.

One of the final questions on the survey was an invitation to share results, asking for the community colleges who might be willing to be contacted for follow-up or inquiry about this topic and to share their college’s data. When answering that last question, one community college indicated willingness to share the results of their early alert retention program. This led to Part Two, which was comprised of a case study for this dissertation research.

In Part One of the research, the demographics of the data collected from the survey of administrators about the early alert report is based on responses of chief academic officers at Midwestern community colleges. The response rate from the community colleges who completed the survey afforded me the opportunity to share the variety of data responses on the timing, types or recommendations, different ways to conduct follow up, and variations in policies and practices for encouraging faculty to complete the early alert report.

**Data Analysis**

**Measures**

The measures used from the survey results yielded the frequencies of the community colleges that have early alert systems and details around those systems. Analysis was done to show the frequency of colleges who had earlier reporting time frames, who had stronger policies of either incentives or repercussions for faculty to complete the report, and the follow up methods related to the colleges who were satisfied with their early alert reporting system.
Survey results were compared of the timing of the early alert system with the satisfaction rates of the community colleges with different timeframes to see if there is a trend between satisfaction with the early alert report and the timing of the report. Similar comparisons were also made of the early alert reports policy and practices, such as incentives or repercussions of faculty for completion of the report, as well as other variables compared with satisfaction to see if there is a pattern.

**Descriptive statistics**

This study used descriptive statistics tallying the most common answers from the survey, which indicated frequency for Part One of this research study. The data analysis procedures for the survey concluded at this point. The purpose of the survey was to provide information about the common practices of the early alert report for community colleges. After the research indicating common practices, the goal in Part Two was to solicit a case study college for further research and investigation.

The types of statistical software that were used began with Qualtrics, a survey software. The procedure included college data uploaded to Microsoft Excel. The data could then be statistically compared and analyzed using Microsoft Excel allowing for preservation of the results, verification and testing.

**Limitations**

The only colleges included in the survey were community colleges in one state in the Midwest. While there are other community colleges were potentially available, limiting the data collection to only the community colleges in one state may inhibit some generalizability aspects for community colleges across the country, as well as limit the scope of the results.
In a previous survey conducted of the 15 community colleges (Reynolds, 2017), only 9 indicated interest in receiving information about this topic, which may have been the reason for less than 100% of the community colleges response to Part One of this research study. In addition, this small sample of surveyed participants who held the position of chief academic officer may not provide the diverse results on this topic as a larger range of people in varying positions at the colleges could have provided.

Last, there was no true control group, as almost all of the 15 community colleges in this study have an early alert system for communicating grades to students. Therefore, the only true differences are past results prior to the early alert system (which may be contaminated by other changes made at the college) and faculty who are not completing the early alert system.

In addition, a true study would ethically be called into question if some students should be receiving communication about their unsuccessful performance in a course but are not given that notice for the purpose of a study such as this. Lives could be altered for students who drop out of college due to the fact that communication did not take place. These limitations should be considered when reading the results of the data for this study.

**Part Two: Data Collection for the Case Study**

The case study data were collected in a Midwestern community college in the United States. To preserve anonymity, this community college has been given the pseudonym Mid Valley Community College (MVCC). The *population sample* for the interviews conducted at MVCC began with the administrators for the early alert report. Jeraldine Smith, chief academic officer, volunteered to be the first interviewed about the early alert system, as well as Jennifer Ferraro, Director of Student Development. After the first interview, Jeraldine
forwarded the author’s email to faculty asking for volunteers to be interviewed about the early alert report, encouraging them to email this author to set up a time for an interview. Initial volunteers lead to recommendations and additional faculty volunteers to interview. MVCC has approximately 40 full-time faculty.

The demographics of the population that are relevant to this research focuses on the faculty’s professional background. Only full-time faculty were interviewed, with a range of years of experience from one year to almost 30 years. The career fields ranged from technical or vocational fields to the arts and sciences, while professional experience also ranged from working in industry to teaching high school. In addition, education levels ranged from two-year vocational degrees to doctoral degrees. The demographics for Part Two, descriptions of the administration and faculty, are also provided in detail in Chapter 4.

Interviews were used as the type of data collected. All faculty interviews were conducted individually with faculty and recorded using TranscribeMe to preserve the data. In two interviews with administration, both administrators were present in the same interview, however four interviews were conducted total for the administrators, therefore, each administrator was interviewed individually as well.

Triangulation was conducted from interviews with administrators, interviews with faculty, and documents provided by the case study community college. Document analysis was then conducted of statistics reports and early alert data, and were provided to me, serving as additional validation of themes and recommendations (see Appendix D),

**Document analysis**

*Document analysis* was conducted on the reports provided by the case study community college. Document analysis is the method of reviewing and evaluating data
provided in documents, both printed and electronic, that requires the data be analyzed and interpreted in order to provide meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Documents used in document analysis can be comprised of many forms including meeting minutes, advertisements, reports, agendas and event programs. Coffey, Atkinson and Omarzu (1997) explain documents as “social facts”, which get shared, organized, produced and used. The data analysis of the case study includes analysis of the interview results compared to statistics reports of the early alert report. To verify validity of this data analysis, triangulation was conducted.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation was used to verify the qualitative data in this study, decreasing the risk of misinterpreted data and, therefore, reducing the chance of potentially incorrect or inaccurate data. Triangulation is the “…act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 146). According the Yin (1989) triangulation is used to promote validity by using multiple sources of evidence in data collection. The goal is that the triangulation results in stronger validity and reliability of the research study (Merriam, 1998). I used triangulation for sources of interviews of administration at the case study community college, interviews of faculty at that community college, and documents from the same community college compiling data on early alert, as well as other reports from the case study college listed in the appendices.

*Data analysis* of the interviews was coded by this author, compiled using Excel and Word, and reiterated in chapter four. Themes were identified based on the interview questions asked of each faculty member, and are listed in the same order as presented to faculty.
Ethical considerations

Human subjects need to be given respect and ethical treatment when used in research studies. The approval provided by the IRB (Institutional Review Board) identifies the care and responsibility this author and IRB has taken in ensuring that this study followed the procedures and protocol necessary for a dissertation from Iowa State University. See Appendix E for IRB training and approval for a non-exempt status research topic, including modification. In addition to the training and approval process, this study was conducted using additional procedures to ensure that the data and the participants were protected. The procedures used in this study were consistent with those recommended to students in the PhD process at Iowa State University.

Providing anonymity is an important step to ensure that a community college chief academic officer’s responses to a survey will not cause the college undue negative attention or harm in any way. One way to ensure that no community college is identified is for the colleges to be anonymous as they respond to the survey questions. As the researcher, information that is unknown does not create an ethical dilemma, as there is no secret to keep based on responses given by one community college. While the anonymity created a challenge when duplicate IP addresses were identified from the responses, the safety from being identified was more important and outweighed the desire and need to know which colleges responded to the survey.

In addition to the anonymity of those surveyed, the anonymity of the case study college was also protected by providing a pseudonym, or false name, of Mid Valley Community College. By allowing this case study college to remain unidentified, it protects that college from future researchers who might be interested in digging deeper to follow up
in future years to see if the statistics have continued to be strong, or to conduct new studies since this college had been open to being researched in the past. While this helped the case study college administration to know that the research inquiries will be completed with the writing of this dissertation, they also protect those faculty and staff from being identified, questioned or criticized for their responses to the interview questions.

The names of the administrators and faculty provided in this study are also pseudonyms. In most cases, the faculty or administrators chose their pseudonym; however, several indicated that they did not have a preference allowing the author to choose one for them. This protection was designed to not only keep them from additional inquiry, which may have helped to encourage their candor in their responses, but it was also designed to protect them from scrutiny. The faculty interviewed should not fear that their responses could lead to repercussion in their workplace from administration, nor should they fear scrutiny from fellow faculty students or the community. Thus, the pseudonym not only gave them the peace of mind that they could be candid, and free from additional questioning, but that they will also be anonymous.

Using triangulation, by comparing the responses from faculty, themes were identified. In addition to faculty sharing many of these themes, administrators also mentioned many of these same themes, confirming the findings from the interviews. While the research done for this literature review confirmed many of these themes as important aspects of the early alert report, having the results from this community college’s early alert report show consistently increasing participation from faculty, and corresponding reductions in students on warning at the end of the college term. These findings consistently comparable to the literature review supports this author’s final recommendations.
Summary

The methods for collecting the data for this dissertation research started with a survey (see Appendix C) emailed to the chief academic officers at the 15 community colleges located one Midwest state. The results of that survey were tallied for frequency to verify the most common practices used at the community colleges for early alert systems, such as the timeframe for completing the early grade report. In addition, the survey prompted participants to volunteer to have the researcher contact them for further inquiry. This community college served as the case study college. The survey included the number of students referred to the early alert system from 2012 until spring 2017, as well as the number of faculty referring students, the reasons for the referrals, and the percentage of students who are placed on probation/suspension, and if they received an early alert notification.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Part One: Community College Survey

Early Alert Report policies

A survey link was sent to 15 community colleges in the Midwest addressed to the chief academic officers. Of the 15 community colleges, results indicated that 11 community colleges in the Midwest completed the survey on the Early Alert Grade Report (see Appendix C for complete list of questions). The chief academic officers were the chosen recipients of the survey since a previous survey about communicating grades to students had been sent to them with 100% of the colleges responding and 9 out of 15 (60%) indicating interest in further research on the topic (Reynolds, 2017). For this survey on early alert report, there were 13 responses received for this survey; however, two responses were received from identical IP addresses and thus the researcher believes that only 11 community colleges participated. Since the results are anonymous, it is hard to verify that this is a repeat from a chief academic officer. The chief academic officer may have designated a colleague at their community college to complete the survey, and after reminders to complete the survey were sent to the chief academic officer by the researcher, both ended up completing the survey from the same community college.

This researcher has chosen to keep all 13 responses for analysis for two reasons. First, the responses with identical IP addresses are not identical in their responses, and in fact one was almost opposite in their responses to questions such as the questions about satisfaction with their current system, which leads the author to believe that the responses came from different sources at the same community college. Second, the dates for each of the two sets of matching IP addresses are completed six weeks apart, so attitudes about their
current system or some aspects of their current system could have changed. Eliminating the possibly duplicate community college responses could omit valuable opinions and perspectives. Therefore, all 13 responses were reserved and used for some questions in the purpose of this research. However, one respondent dropped out before completing the entire survey, so only 12 responses have been provided for some of the survey questions that are discussed near the end of this dissertation.

Responses to the survey

Survey Item 1: Names for the early alert report

The first survey item asked participants to indicate the name(s) that their college uses for the system or report in which at-risk students are identified at some mid-point in the term in order to reach out to those students offering services or resources. The question was worded as follows:

*Q1. Early alert reporting systems indicate to students the quality of their performance at a midpoint in a term by collecting grades for this report. However, these reports can go by many different names. Please indicate the name(s) used at your college:*

- early alert grade report (1)
- early warning system (2)
- early intervention report (3)
- midterm report (4)
- Other (5) (specify)_______

As mentioned previously, there are numerous names given for the early alert report that indicates the performance of the student’s progress academically in the class typically at a midpoint in the college term. Of those who completed the survey, the largest number of community colleges referred to this report as the Early Alert Report. Additional responses to this survey question revealed that one community college called the report the early warning system. The responses are provided in Table 1.
Table 1. Responses for Survey Item 1: Name of the Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Early alert (grade) report</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Early Warning system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Early Intervention system</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Midterm (grade) Report</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other (specify): _________________________</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text=&quot;Midterm report, Retention Alert, the alert system, multiple names&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=13

Several of the community colleges used a couple of different names for their report, which is why Table 1 reveals more than 100% total for the percent of responses. While 5 of the 13 community colleges (38%) referred to this report as the Midterm Report, even though not all colleges collected the data in the middle of the term, the largest percent called it the Early Alert Report. For the respondents who indicated “Other” as their response, a text box was provided for their individual text feedback. One community college indicated in its text feedback that they called the report the Retention Alert, and one respondent indicated that they just call the report the alert system. For consistency, the report is referred to as the “early alert report” (or “early alert reporting system”), or sometimes simply referred to as “the report”.

Survey Item 2: Reasons for Reporting

The second survey question asked what the reason(s) are that a student can be referred to the early alert system and placed on the report. Multiple responses were allowed. Nine of 13 (69%) respondents indicated multiple reasons for referring students, which is why the percentages total more than 100%.
Q2. This survey is focused on grades only, not attendance collections. Please answer the following: Our college's faculty/staff collect and report all of the following information for the Early Alert System: (Please check all that apply)

- Students at risk for not passing the course (1)
- Students who are receiving C-, D or F only (2)
- All students’ grades are reported regardless if satisfactory or not (3)
- Classroom Behavioral issues/Social concerns (4)
- Other (please specify) (5) ____________________

As shown in Table 2, nine community colleges (69%) indicated on the survey that students are placed on the early alert report for the reason of poor grades; they are at risk of not passing. Eight of the 9 respondents from the community colleges who placed students on the early alert report for risk of not passing also place students on the early alert report for additional reasons and those results will be indicated later. Four of the 13 (31%) community college respondents indicated that their college students are placed on the early alert report by their instructor if the student is receiving a C-, D, or F in the course. However, 8 of the 13 (62%) community college responses indicated that grades are determined and reported for all students regardless if the student is receiving a satisfactory grade or not. Seven of the 13 (54%) community college respondents indicated that classroom behavioral issues or social concerns are also reasons that a student may be placed on the early alert report.

Table 2. Responses for Survey Item 2: Reasons for referrals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response*</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1). Student at-risk of not passing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Students receiving a C-, D or F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) All students’ grades reported</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Classroom behavior/social issues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other (specify):________________________</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text= “multiple reasons”, “automated”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=13
As mentioned previously, 9 of the 13 community college respondents indicated more than one of the reasons indicated for why a student is placed on the early alert report. One respondent marked all of the above reasons for a student being placed on the early alert report. One community college respondent who indicated “Other” shared this text answer in response to this question, “…we have automated reports/emails that get sent to students and advisors once a student falls below a certain percentage in the class. It is preset to 60% but instructors can change that to their preference.”

Survey Item 3: Timing of the Report

The third question on the survey inquired as to the timing for when the report is collected from faculty during the term:

Q3: Our college’s Early Alert Report is submitted by faculty for the following timeframe:
- at the midpoint (halfway through) the term (1)
- at 4 weeks into the term (2)
- at 6 weeks into the term (3)
- N/A- our college does not report at-risk students (4)
- Other timeframe or multiple timeframes (please explain) (5) ______________

While most of the community colleges who responded to the survey have 16-week terms, there are a few different schedules offered at several community colleges. While some of these colleges do not require the early alert report to be collected for shortened terms, but only for their 16-week courses, some community colleges who do not have a specific time frame for their early alert referrals use early alert for all terms, eight-week, 12-week and 16-week (See the case study example at the end of this chapter for more information on this example). Further research could be done to survey these colleges for more detail on the exact percentages of courses overall that are offered by these community colleges in shortened terms, and if those other terms are exempt from early alert. However, the results from this survey question about timing are indicated in Table 3.
As indicated in Table 3, three of the 13 (23%) responses to the question about timing of the report indicate that their community college collects the early alert grades at a midpoint approximately halfway through the term, however one of those three colleges indicated that a student can be placed on the report at any time in the term as well. One community college collected the grades for the report at six weeks into the term. Two community colleges indicated that they complete the report twice—once at four weeks and once at eight weeks in the semester. Only 1 community college shared that they do not report at-risk students. Six of the community college responses (omitting the duplicate response) representing 5 of the 12 colleges (42%) shared that their college has an ongoing reporting system. Therefore, no one time frame is set that faculty must adhere to for this report, as faculty may place students on the early alert grade report at any time during the term. This option will be explored further in the case study portion of Chapter 4.

Table 3. Responses for Survey Item 3: Timing of the Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) at the midpoint (halfway)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) at 4 weeks into the term</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) at 6 weeks</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) N/A- our college does not report</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other timeframe (explain)= None</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other= None required, usu. midterm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=13

Survey Item 4: Financial Aid Implications

The fourth survey item inquired about financial aid in connection with the early alert system. The responses are indicated in Table 4 for those who responded about financial aid being tied to this early alert report.
Q4: Is Financial Aid contacted or attached to this early alert report?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- It depends. (please explain) (3) ________________

Three of the community college respondents did not receive the question on their survey asking if financial aid is tied to the early alert report, as the Qualtrics survey was set up so that only certain respondents would be asked Survey Item 4. Those who responded by selecting either the answer that attendance is collected and reported, or the respondent indicated that the student is at risk, receiving either a C-, D or F in their course.

As shown in Table 4, of the 9 responses received for this question, 4 (44%) indicated that financial aid is not tied to the early alert report, and 5 respondents (55%) indicated financial aid is contacted or is attached to this early alert report. Follow-up questions could be asked in future research about how these reports indicating low grades could impact certain financial aid awards or why they are reported to financial aid for students placed on early alert. No written text responses were provided by respondents for this question.

Table 4. Responses for Survey Item 4: Early alert tied to financial aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) It depends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Other (specify):_____________</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other= None provided</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=9

Survey Item 5: What is done after the student is placed on the report?

The fifth question on the survey gave the respondents an opportunity to address the procedure at their community college, starting with what happens after a student is placed on
the report. One respondent from the community colleges dropped out of the survey or skipped this question, thus only 12 responses were received for Item 5.

**Q5: What happens after a student's name has been indicated as at-risk by faculty? (Check all that apply):**

- An email is sent to each student who is placed on alert letting them know they are at-risk in their college course, encouraging them to seek help. (1)
- A letter is sent to their home address encouraging them to meet with their instructor or advisor. (2)
- The student’s advisor is informed that their student has been identified as struggling in a class. (3)
- Later, a 2nd attempt to reach the student is made after the first contact to indicate to the student they are not receiving satisfactory results in a course. (4)
- Other (please specify) (5) _______________

As shown in Table 5, nine of the 12 respondents (75%) for the survey indicated that when a student is placed on the early alert report, an email is sent to that student indicating that they are falling below a satisfactory level in a course. One college has a letter sent home to the student encouraging them to meet with their advisor or instructor. Nine of the 12 respondents (75%) for the survey indicated that the student’s advisor is informed. Of the 6 responses that indicated answer Other, 1 shared this as their text response:

“alerts are attached to advisor and student (this is automated), but instructors can also add addition alerts which get directed to different parts of campus, such as the tutoring center, so that they can reach out and assist student”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Email, encourage student get help.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Letter home, meet instructor/advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Student’s Advisor is informed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) 2nd attempt to reach student made</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other (specify): ______________________________</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=12
One college has an email automatically sent to the student when a student falls below 60% in that course; however, faculty can adjust that percentage for their course alerting a student of unsatisfactory work. Of the nine community colleges that send an email, eight of those nine also send a notice to that student’s advisor.

One respondent who indicated Other as an answer to this question wrote in text, “We have early alert specialists who work to contact the student.” This response is similar to another who had written, “The college’s early alert specialist follows up with the student and faculty who report.” One community college respondent indicated, “Faculty inform students, as possible, before filing the alert”. Two respondents (17%) wrote in their text portion that follow up phone calls are conducted.

Five respondents indicated answer (4) in response to Survey Item 5 about what happens after a student is placed on the report. This question response was, “Later, a 2nd attempt to reach the student is made after the first contact to indicate to the student they are not receiving satisfactory results in a course.” The reason for this response option was to find out about the follow-up, and that a second attempt is made to reach the student. Since contact made with the student is such a crucial piece to getting the student help, a follow-up question was asked. For those who responded positively that a second attempt is made to reach the student, those respondents were given survey item 6 (below). In addition, those who responded “Other” were also given survey item 6 in order to catch those who responded that several methods were used to reach the student.

**Survey Item 6: A Second Attempt**

Only those respondents who indicated a second attempt is made to reach the student (response number 4 from survey item 5) and those who responded “Other” (response number
5 from survey item 5) received survey question item 6. While the total should be 11 respondents who received survey item 6, two respondents had indicated both number 4 and number 5 on survey item 5. This duplication of respondents means that only a total of 9 respondents received Survey Item 6. The question about the second attempt asked the respondents:

**Q6: The 2nd attempt to reach out to the student after the initial message, is made by the...**

(check all that apply):

- **Student’s academic advisor (1)**
- **The instructor of the course who identified them as struggling (2)**
- **A staff person or committee who coordinates the early grade report follow up (3)**
- **Other, please specify or explain (4) ____________________**

As follow-up and additional attempts are possibly needed in many cases to reach a student who has been placed on the early alert report, second attempts can be a very important aspect of this early alert report. Table 6 provides the results from Survey Item 6.

Table 6. Responses for Survey Item 6: Second attempt follow-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1). Student’s academic advisor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) The instructor for the course</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Staffing/committee for early alert</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Other (specify): ______________</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=9

Nine (66%) community colleges sent a second attempt message to inform the student of their unsatisfactory academic progress. Of those nine who make additional attempts, four (44%) indicated that the student’s academic advisor was contacted to attempt to reach them. Two respondents (22%) indicated that the instructor who referred them attempted to reach
the student. Five of the community colleges have a designated person at their community college who follow up with the students who are placed on early alert. None of the community college respondents indicated “Other” as their response; therefore, no text responses were provided giving individual feedback on this question.

**Survey Item 7: Media for Follow-up**

When a respondent answered survey item 5 about a second attempt with response 4 or 5 (same as survey item 6), they were prompted to answer Survey Item 7. This information was allowing additional media options to show the variety that can be used for early alert referrals. Nine respondents should have been given this question; however, only eight responses were marked, indicating that one respondent dropped out of the survey at this point or skipped this question.

**Q7: The follow-up contact made after the initial report to the student, is made via (check all that apply):**

- Telephone call to the student (1)
- Postcard / letter sent to the student (2)
- Additional Email (3)
- Text message is sent to the student (4)
- Other (please indicate) (5) ____________________

In order to receive this survey question, the respondent had to have indicated that a second attempt was made to reach a student who had been placed on referral on Survey Item 5. Survey Item 5 gave the respondent a chance to indicate what happens after a student is placed on referral, but this survey item allowed the respondent to indicate their next steps in the early alert process, indicating which media form is used in their second attempt to reach that student.

As shown in Table 7, eight of the 13 (62%) surveyed responded to Survey Item 5 with the response that a second attempt was made or “Other” for Survey Item 5. This indicates that
Table 7. Survey Item 8: Grade Reporting System for Early Alert

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Telephone call to student</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Postcard/letter mailed to student</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Additional e-mail</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Text message student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other (specify): ______________</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text=""Midterm report, Retention Alert, the alert system, multiple names"

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=8

their college most likely did a second follow-up for students who had been placed on the early alert report in an attempt to reach the student. These respondents, therefore, received Survey Question 7 about which media method they used for follow-up. Of those 8 community colleges, all (100%) made a phone call in addition to an email; however none of the community colleges mailed a postcard or letter as a secondary follow-up. Four of the 8 community colleges (50%) sent a text message to the student, and 1 community college (12.5%) who had indicated “other” as a response to this survey question indicated that they used multiple methods “until that student has been reached”.

Survey Item 8: Grade Reporting System for Early Alert

Survey Item 8 asked respondents to indicate the origin of their early alert report, such as was it locally developed or purchased from a vendor. The purpose of the question was to determine the frequency of community colleges in the Midwest creating their early alert systems versus purchasing programs to determine the most common practices.

Q8: The eighth question in this survey to chief academic officers at Midwestern community colleges is about their college’s early alert system. The question asked was, *Is the system that you are currently using for the early alert grade report:
- made at the college--a system we created just for our purposes here at the community college. (1)
- purchased from the company that provides our learning management system. (2)
• **purchased from a vendor advertised to aid with retention. (please indicate which one): (3) ________________**

• **Using existing systems: Our learning management system and our current grade reporting system are used. (Faculty enter the information in to our grade reporting system from their gradebook/LMS) (4)**

• **Other, please explain (5)**

While many colleges may need to upgrade their early alert system, it may be difficult to know what options are available in terms of an early alert system. The following responses indicate where some of these community colleges had obtained their current early alert system. One respondent did not answer this question; therefore, only 11 respondents answered Survey Item 8.

As indicated in Table 8, when asked about the community college’s reporting system for early alert grade reports, one community college did not respond to this survey question, but 11 responses were received. One community college indicated that they had purchased their early alert reporting system from the company that provides their LMS. Five of the 11 (45%) respondents shared that their system was one they created internally for the purpose of the early alert grade report. The remaining five community colleges indicated that they have faculty enter the grades from their current grading system (such as their LMS) into another grade system that they use for this early alert report, as well as communicating and storing

Table 8. Responses for Survey Item 8: Early Alert System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) made at college-we created for our purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) purchased from co. that provided our LMS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) purchased from a vendor, (indicate:_____)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) use our existing systems (LMS/our grading)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other= none provided

*n=11*
grade information. The use of two systems, one for grading such as an LMS, and one for reporting and record keeping was researched in a previous survey indicating the challenges of this option (Reynolds, 2017).

**Survey Item 9: Frequency college reviews the system**

The ninth question in this survey inquired about the frequency that each community college reviews its current early alert system.

*Q9: How often is the data reviewed of the students who receive the report and their progress?*

- Every semester (1)
- Yearly (2)
- Every couple years (3)
- Not often enough, we would be interested in a researcher reviewing our data. (Please indicate a contact person here): (4) __________________
- Never (5)
- Other (6) __________________

As many colleges may wonder if they need to update their early alert system, one survey question asked how often these community colleges review their current system. One community college respondent had dropped out of the survey by this point, thus only 12 responses were received for Survey Item 9. The responses are summarized in Table 9.

When asked how often this report gets reviewed, one community college shared that this report gets reviewed online once a year, but that they also meet face-to-face to discuss the results one other time per year. One community college indicated that their report rarely gets reviewed. One respondent did not answer this question (had dropped out of the survey early) but the remaining eight community colleges (66%) shared that their early grade report is reviewed every semester.
Table 9. Responses for Survey Item 9: College Reviews System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Every semester</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Yearly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Every couple years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Not often enough, please visit (email)_____</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Never</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Other = “Rarely”, “online by term, F2F yearly”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12

Survey Item 10: Policy for faculty to complete the Early Alert Grade Report

To determine the level of commitment that the community college gives with regard to this early alert report, question ten on the survey asked the community colleges what message is sent to faculty about completing the early alert grade report.

Q10: Faculty are communicated that completing the early alert report is...

- required/an expectation from the college (1)
- strongly encouraged by the college (2)
- encouraged as it is a benefit to their students/ may increase retention in their classroom (3)
- other (please explain) (4) ____________________

As shown in Table 10, 7 of the 12 respondents (58%) indicated that the report was a requirement or expectation, while another four community colleges (33%) listed the early grade report as strongly recommended. Of the 12 responses received for this question, only 1 indicated response 3: that the report was only “encouraged because it will help student retention”. However, one community college indicated “other” for this question, and wrote a text response that the report was an expectation, but that the faculty were also given the explanation that this report is a benefit to students. In actuality, there eight of the 12 responses (67%) indicated that this report was a requirement or expectation.
Table 10. Responses for Survey Item 10: Early Alert System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Required/an expectation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Strongly encouraged by college</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Encouraged that it benefits students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Other = “an expectation that benefits students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=11

Survey Item 11: Incentives for faculty who complete the report

To encourage participation in this report, some colleges offer incentives or follow-up with their faculty to encourage completion of the report. If respondents indicated either response 1 or 2 to survey item 10 indicating that their college either has an expectation or strongly recommends completion of the early alert report, those respondents received the next survey question. Thus, 10 respondents were asked the following question:

Q11: Faculty who do not complete the early alert report... (Check all that apply):
- Are sent one additional reminder (1)
- Are contacted and possibly talked to by their supervisor at their review (2)
- Are followed up with until the report has been completed (3)
- N/A, we do not track which faculty have/have not completed the report (4)
- Other (5)

Only the respondents from survey item 10 who responded favorably with answer 1 or 2 were given Survey Item 11. Thus, there were only 10 responses (see Table 11). Of the ten community college respondents who received question 11 on the survey, only one (10%) responded that the faculty are sent one additional reminder. One of the respondents (10%) indicated that the faculty are contacted, and are possibly talked to by their supervisor at their review. Only two (20%) responded that they are followed up with until the report is complete, and five (50%) indicated that their college does not track which faculty have or have not completed the report. Three (30%) responded “other”; however, no individual text responses were given.
Table 11. Responses for Survey Item 4: Incentives for faculty who complete the report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Are sent additional reminder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Contacted/talk to supervisor at review?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Followed-up until report complete</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) N/A- do not track completion of report</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Other= None provided</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=10

Survey Item 12: Incentives for faculty who complete the report

Some colleges offer incentives for their faculty to encourage completion of the report.

In an effort to understand what incentives are offered, Survey Item 12 was asked. Twelve respondents completed Survey Item 12. Table 12 provides the results to this survey item.

Q12: Incentives that are given to faculty for completing the Early Alert Report are...

- Indicated in their faculty annual review (1)
- Certificate / email recognizing accomplishment (2)
- Personal satisfaction and increased retention in their classes (3)
- No incentive is given (or needed) (4)
- N/A- no report is done / no tracking is done of faculty who reported (5)
- Other (Please indicate) (6) ____________________

As shown in Table 12, one community college (8%) indicated that faculty can include the completion of the report in their annual review. Another community college indicated that they give faculty a certificate of completion when the report is complete. Two community college respondents (16%) shared that they feel that the incentive for completing the early alert grade report is personal satisfaction and increased retention in their classes.

Five of the community colleges (42%) indicated that there is no incentive given, which technically includes the two colleges just previously mentioned as well, resulting in seven out of the 12 (58%) responding school representatives indicating that there are no specific or recognized incentives for completing the early alert grade report. One community
Table 12. Responses for Survey Item 12: Incentives for faculty who complete the report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Indicated in faculty annual review</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Certificate/email for accomplishment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Personal satisfaction/increased retention</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) No incentive given</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) N/A- no report done/no tracking of faculty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Other= None required, usu. midterm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12

college (8%) shared that there is no tracking of faculty in order to award incentives, which
could be viewed as a similar response to the previous question, indicating that eight out of 12
(67%) had no incentives for faculty to complete the early alert report. One college shared
that the “early grade report is indicated as one of the faculty members roles in advising—to
identify early the at-risk students”, which is also another college that does not have
incentives for their faculty, indicating that nine out of 12 responses (75%) indicated no
incentives for faculty to complete the early alert report.

**Survey Item 13: Satisfaction with the Early Alert System**

The Chief Academic Officers were asked in the survey to rate their satisfaction with
their community college’s Early Alert Grade Reporting System on a Likert Scale from very
satisfied to very unsatisfied. Question 13 on the community college survey asked:

**Q13: Please rate your current Early Alert System:**
- Very Satisfied (1)
- Somewhat Satisfied (2)
- Neither Satisfied, nor unsatisfied (3)
- Somewhat unsatisfied (4)
- Very unsatisfied (5)
As shown in Table 13, two community colleges indicated that they were very satisfied with their current system, but 5 community colleges indicated that they were somewhat satisfied with their Early Alert Reporting System. Thus, 7 of 12 (58%), or more than one-half of the community college respondents, are on the positive end of the scale in terms of their satisfaction with their current system. Three respondents of 12 (25%) indicated a score of neither satisfied, nor unsatisfied with their current Early Alert System. One community college (8%) reported that they were somewhat unsatisfied, and 1 indicated feeling very unsatisfied with their current early alert grade reporting system.

Table 13. Responses for Survey Item 4: Satisfaction with the early alert system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Very satisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Somewhat satisfied</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Somewhat unsatisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Very unsatisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12

Survey Item 14: Additional research and follow-up

Survey item 14 asked the respondents to indicate whether their community college would be interested in follow-up from this researcher to share additional information. The amount of additional information that the community college was willing to share was offered as options from receiving the results of the survey to being interviewed.

Q14: Since this research is for the purpose of writing a dissertation (the community college names are omitted), our college would be... (check all that apply)

- Interested in receiving the results of this survey. (Indicate your email address here) (1)

- Willing to let a researcher give us advice on how/where we might improve our retention results (include email address here) (2)
- **Willing to share our success results to be used in your dissertation (indicate contact person's email)** (3) ____________________
- **Able to contact our college with any follow up questions/clarification. (contact person's email):** (4) ____________________
- **Willing to be part of a qualitative research (such as phone or in-person interview): email address here:** (5) ____________________
- **Not interested** (6)

As shown in Table 14, even though there were only 7 respondents who answered any portion of this question, a non-answer was also considered as an answer to this type of question. Therefore, the number of respondents who were still completing the survey as of the last question are also considered in the number for Survey Item 14. However, two shared identical IP addresses, so the number of respondents considered for this question is ten.

**Table 14. Responses for Survey Item 14: Additional research and follow-up**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Interested in receiving survey results</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Would let research give advice to us</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Will allow college’s results to be used</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Willing to provide follow-up info</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Willing to be interviewed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Not interested</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses allowed; n=10

Six of the community college responses (which was more likely only 5 colleges, as one college shared an identical email address as a previous response) indicated an interested in received a summary of the results from this survey. Two of the community colleges expressed an interest in having author analyze their current system and give advice on how they might improve their current system. None of the community college indicated that they were willing to share success results, and in fact, one community college admitted that they did not feel that they had success. One other community college agreed to share their results,
but did not want to label theirs as success. (See the Case Study portion next for more details from this community college.)

Three community colleges gave a response that the author may contact them for follow up or clarification on any responses, however one of them provided a duplicate email address as a previously completed survey. Therefore, only two community colleges gave contact information for follow-up or clarifying questions for this author. When contacted, one of the two who had shared their email address repeatedly responded to this researcher that he had completed that survey already, such that researcher ceased further questions or inquiry of this respondent as abnegation was apparent. The researcher contacted the remaining community college for further inquiry and research. (See the latter portion of this chapter for the case study on that community college.)

Statistically reports and documents provided by MVCC included some additional data that should be shared, such as that the average retention rate over the last five years for students who received at least one referral to the early alert system was 21%. The retention rates broken down by semester for MVCC of the students who received referrals are shown in Table 15.

As revealed in Table 15, the retention percentages are not high, but fluctuate from semester to semester. These retention rates only reflect the retention of those students who receive an early alert referral. The retention rates of the cohort groups of first-time students is not just the students who have received referrals, but instead represents the retention rate of all students at this community college. The national average for retention rates for community colleges is 49.9% (Community College Week, 2013). In a survey of community college presidents in one Midwestern state, the majority of them (52%) estimated their
Table 15. Retention rates for students who receive at least one referral to early alert

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Fall (%)</th>
<th>Spring (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012 – 2013</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 – 2014</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 – 2015</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 – 2016</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cohort (First-time college students) Retention by Year (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Retention (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MVCC statistical reports.

graduation percentages below 50% (Hobsons, 2016). The average graduation rate given for these Midwestern community college is 41%, and the average retention goal indicated by community college presidents is 47%.

**Implications and discussion**

When looking at the most common practices from the community colleges in one Midwestern state, there are a few evident consistencies, and several inconsistencies when it comes to the Early Alert Grading Reports used by these community colleges. Looking at both the consistencies and inconsistencies will help other community colleges make decisions about their own early alert grade report.
Consistencies

One consistency is that eight of the 11 (73%) respondents to the survey question about how often their early alert grade report is reviewed indicated that they review the report every semester, which implies that this information and report are important. When it comes to follow-up to the students who are placed on the report, while nine of 13 (69%) send an initial email, more than two-thirds (67%) also send a message through an additional medium. Nine out of 12 (75%) respondents indicated that the student’s advisor is also notified, which allows for more support and communication to the student. And seven out of 12 (58%) community colleges have a “strongly encouraged” or “required expectation” of their faculty with regard to completing the early grade report. Even though there are not many colleges that offer incentives or repercussions for faculty for missing completion of the early alert grade report, the majority of community colleges surveyed are satisfied with their current early grade reporting system.

One interesting aspect of the survey results is the comparison of the colleges who rated their satisfaction high compared with the timing and type of reporting done by that community college. Of the six community college respondents who indicated a positive response to their satisfaction with their current system, all six (100%) responded that their college has an expectation/requirement or at least strongly encourages faculty to complete the early grade report. In addition, all six of those colleges who reported favorably toward their current system contact the advisor as well as the student as follow up for the student being placed on the early alert report. In addition, all of those community colleges who reported favorably toward their current early alert system are using multiple methods to contact the students and have multiple reporting reasons.
Inconsistencies

One inconsistency is the timing of the report at the different community colleges. Based on the literature, this researcher hypothesized that the colleges who reported early would have more favorable results and attitudes toward the early grade report because of the potential positive impact in their classes and on retention. However, of the two who rated their system the highest, both report at the middle of the term (for example eight weeks for a 16-week semester), which is later than some of the other community colleges who have reports collected at four and six weeks.

Another inconsistency that this author expected was to see that the colleges who review their system results often from the early grade report are finding better results and therefore more in favor of their current system. However, the opposite appears to be true in some cases where the community college that rarely reviews their early alert report indicated very favorable attitude toward their current early alert grade reporting system, and community colleges who indicated frequent reviews indicated unfavorable attitudes toward their early alert system. One future research question that could be asked on this topic is how often these early alert reports are changed or modified. As a result of frequent review, these community colleges could be frequently making changes to the report, which may point to the reason for lower satisfaction levels with their report. In addition, when the community college started using an early alert report could be included in future research, as the colleges that started, modified, and refined their process years ago may have less need for frequent review of their system, and therefore would be consistent with being the same colleges who are satisfied with their current early alert system.
Limitations

The survey sent to the community colleges in the Midwest has many limitations in the results due to limited size of the sample. In addition, interpreting the survey questions always leaves room for different understandings of the meaning of questions, such as the concept of review. Some of the community colleges may interpret review of their early alert systems to mean their whole system analysis such as determining if changes should be made to the system. However, another interpretation could be that the college views the reports, follows up with the students and then analyzes if the student passed the course by the end after all. More qualitative information regarding interpretation of questions and more will be provided from MVCC in the Case Study portion of this chapter.

Part Two: Case Study of a Midwest Community College’s Early Alert Reporting System: Mid Valley Community College (MVCC)

Rationale for case study in education research

A case study can be a great way to convey a message and analyze qualitative information. A summary of each participant will be provided first in this section. Then, by following the order of the survey questions asked in the interviews, this research hopes to help guide the information in a clear manner in this dissertation. The case study portion of this chapter will provide the answers given in each interview in the same order for each participant in which it was presented. Each participant was not only asked these questions in the same order, but the wording of the questions was provided consistently from one interview to the next. Throughout this next portion, in the order of the survey and therefore themes, is the information provided by one Midwestern community college in this case study portion.
Discussion of the case/issue

Mid Valley Community College (MVCC) has approximately 1600 students, 65% of which are in transfer programs with the intention of transferring to another higher education institution to complete a bachelor’s degree. MVCC has approximately 24 career/technical education (CTE) instructors, and 16 arts and science instructors in their full-time faculty. New faculty are given an orientation, which includes training provided by MVCC’s Director of Student Development, Jennifer Ferraro, in which her training includes the use of the early alert system. MVCC started using the early alert system as a paper referral system in 1994. In 2009, the form was moved to an electronic form. MVCC’s early alert program is used for all terms and for all length of courses, which are eight-week, 12-week and 16-week courses at MVCC.

This early alert system has multiple reasons why a student may be referred. As shown in Appendix D, students are referred for reasons such as attendance, inadequate preparation, low test or quiz scores, or other reasons, such as social problems or classroom behavior. This early alert report is different from the attendance report collected after one full week of classes, which is tied to financial aid awards for students at this community college. The largest percentage of the students referred to the early alert report are for absences. MVCC’s early alert system could be considered a comprehensive early alert system because of the multiple reasons and times that a student can be referred. However, a comprehensive system also refers to the early alert system that uses multiple methods to contact the student. MVCC also uses multiple ways of contacting the student, initiated by Jennifer Ferraro.
The community in which this community college operates has a population around 7800. There are several larger employers who employ a large percentage of the population in the area, and the current student population has an average age around 20 to 21 years of age. There are two outreach centers (a center that is connected with MVCC, offering limited courses for the community college in an effort to reach a larger percent of this community college’s district) who offer a few classes each evening.

The Midwestern case study college, Mid Valley Community College (MVCC), shared data from their previous ten semesters (five years) from their early alert grade reports, Fall 2012 through Spring 2017 (See Appendix D). Even though the early alert report has been used at this institution since 1994, in a strategic planning meeting Fall 2016, Mid Valley Community College faculty were asked for ideas for how to reach one of the college’s initiatives to improve retention. Faculty decided a goal for how to reach that initiative in the 2016-2017 academic year to improve retention was for all faculty to participate in the early alert program. While MVCC finds that the majority of the faculty participate in the early alert reporting process, the college would like to see participation from all faculty. See appendix E for the 2016-2020 initiatives.

While the faculty have verbally agreed and in practice have been adopting the early alert system, administration have also been viewing the early alert system as a way to improve retention, and had been identifying aspects of its practices in many school reports. While administration shared a report with the author, disclosure of the full report was asked to be omitted from this dissertation to maintain anonymity of the college. However, here are a few highlights of excerpts from that report.
In the accomplishments report shared with the Board of Directors regarding the 2011-2014 initiatives, early alert was identified several times for its contribution to those initiatives. For example, in 2011-2012, MVCC hired a part-time retention specialist to work with high risk students, develop academic plans, and correspond with instructors regarding students in need of academic assistance. In addition, during the 2011-2012 academic year, one of MVCC’s outreach centers made a policy change to reach the at-risk student. The new practice was that students were contacted after one absence if they had not contacted the instructor or Center staff in advance of that absence. The student success rate (graduated, re-enrolled, not on academic suspension or financial hold) at that outreach center increased from 44.4% in spring 2012 to 77.5% in spring 2013.

One change made in the 2012-2013 year was that “Student Support Services staff required program participants to complete a mid-term grade check with their advisor.” In the 2013-2014 academic year, faculty submitted 154 early alert referrals to the Director of Student Advising based on the student’s class attendance, exam scores and other factors. These students were contacted to assist them in identifying strategies for academic success. Of those referrals, 74% were absenteeism and 51% of those receiving an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning or suspension.

During the 2014-2015 year for the report supplied to the board, MVCC identified that the early alert process had been improved. The system was upgraded in its electronic form to work more efficiently by allowing faculty to use a course roster to check off a student’s name who was being referred to the early alert system. This was an improvement from the old process in which the faculty member had to log in each individual student by name.

Using a triangulation approach, it is helpful to compare some of the above findings and results with the statistics shared for each of these years (or to compare each year’s results
one year after these new initiatives) to verify why percentages of participation can fluctuate from year to year. Table 16 illustrates the number and percentage of faculty, students, and the percentage retained for each of the last five years.

While all of these accomplishments are important to the Board of Directors, the opinions of the administration and faculty have a larger impact on the value and importance placed on the early alert report and its use, or lack of use. The interviews to follow allow the perspectives and opinions of both administration and faculty to be brought to light about the early alert process used at their community college.

Table 16. Statistics for Early Alert Report: Percentages by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Referrals</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students ((5) Students received referral, not on warning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fall / Spring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 – 2013</td>
<td>17 + 21</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 – 2014</td>
<td>18 + 18</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 – 2015</td>
<td>23 + 14</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 – 2017</td>
<td>13 + 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=41

Interview setting

Jeraldine and Jennifer

In addition to completing the survey mentioned previously in Chapter 4, Jeraldine Smith, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, was also personally interviewed by the author along with Jennifer Ferraro, Director of Student Development. Mid Valley Community College’s early reporting system is not unlike many others used in the Midwest by community colleges. The questions asked of administrative staff members Jeraldine Smith and Jennifer Ferraro were:
1. What is your background (years in position, experience/education prior?)

2. What are the reasons that a student is placed on the early alert report at MVCC?

3. At what point in the 16-week semester are faculty completing the early alert report?

4. What is the follow-up process after a student is referred to the early alert report?

5. How often is the data from the early alert report reviewed and how is that data used?

6. What do you like and what would you like to change about your current early alert system?

The interviews with faculty members were all done individually, primarily by phone. After the phone conversation, researcher was able to review the transcriptions and compile patterns, themes and eventually saturation of concepts. The emerging themes will be identified after the interview portion. The faculty members were asked the following questions in their interviews:

1. What is your background (years teaching, program, technical or transfer)

2. What are the reasons that you personally refer students to the early alert report?

3. What percent of students in your classes do you refer to the early alert report?

4. How many of those students turn it around and receive a satisfactory grade before the end of the semester?

5. What do you like best and what could be improved in your current early alert system?

6. In your opinion, why do some of your fellow coworkers not refer students to the early alert system?

**Discussion of key elements**

The 12 participants provide some of the key elements of the interviews of the administrators and faculty at the case study college whose pseudonym is MVCC. The two administrators and ten faculty members were given pseudonyms to conceal their identity.
Administration

Jennifer has been working at MVCC for 16 years and came from a mental health counselor position. She started at MVCC doing counseling and advising for her first three years. She shared that when she took the position, she was “just going to do this ’til something else opens up.” Later, disability services were added to her duties, and then registration. Assessment was added as one of the latest pieces of her current position as Director of Student Development. She is in charge of all advising related duties, including training of faculty and staff on advising. She directly supervises four staff members. After a student is placed on early alert, the student’s name is sent to Jennifer, who is responsible for follow-up with that student. Jennifer’s name will come up several more times in the interviews with faculty, as she plays an integral role in the early alert process.

Jeraldine Smith has been at MVCC for 27 years. Starting out as a business instructor and coach for ten years, she then became the Director of the Small Business Development Center. She was in that position for three years and then became the Dean of Students. After just over five years, she became Vice President of Instruction, which is her present position today.

Faculty

In this study there were ten faculty from various programs at the community college. Each were given a pseudonym to conceal their identity.

Brenda has been working at MVCC for over ten years. She started in a career technical program, and then decided to go back for her master’s degree. She continued teaching at MVCC while completing her doctorate as well.
Danielle started out teaching at a high school or seven years prior to teaching as an adjunct at MVCC and another community college for about six or seven years. She has been full-time at MVCC for ten or eleven years teaching courses that are transferable to a regent university if students decide to pursue a bachelor’s degree after completing their courses at the community college, even though there are students who take her courses who are vocational degree students.

Megan started teaching at MVCC in the 90’s, and after completing her master’s degree, she became the head of her technical program. Megan does not use the early alert system, but instead uses a similar process that has the same effect as the early alert system, but is even more structured in some ways than the early alert. While the goal of helping the at-risk student is met by this alternative process at MVCC, those students and the faculty in her area are not included in the numbers shown at the end of this report that include the number and percent of faculty who are using the early alert system, nor are their students counted in the percentage of students who received an early alert notice. This separate process will be addressed in the final portion of this study, as well as a recommendation for this community college for a method of including those faculty and students in the early alert numbers.

Rosa is a CTE (Career and Technical Education) instructor and has been at MVCC for one year, but taught at a high school for 12 years prior. In addition to teaching the technical courses, Rosa teaches one community college transfer course in which students can transfer to a regent university for a bachelor’s degree after completing the two years at the community college.
Pam has been teaching college transfer courses at MVCC for six years, but also teaches one technical course as well. She shared that she is continuing on for her doctorate because she sees so many teachers that she wants to help to improve engagement, and “not just teach from a textbook, which is boring”.

Matt has been teaching a technical Applied Arts and Science (AAS) program for 20 years. Contained in the program that Matt teaches is a diploma (one-year) program for students to complete. Matt is not afraid to provide help to students in need and has his own philosophy for how to make sure he can keep the line of communication open right from the start with the student, and even with the parents. Matt shares how at orientation, students are presented with the FERPA paperwork to sign giving their parents permission to talk to the school and vice versa. He explains to the student at orientation, that if the student has an illness or something else, if the form is not signed, he cannot talk to the parents about how they are struggling in classes due to the illness. So, by having such a large percentage of the students sign the form, Matt feels he is better able to help his students in situations that could mean getting them referred to the early alert report.

Having worked in industry first, David came to MVCC because he loves helping people. He may have only had a “trade school diploma” when he first started teaching at MVCC, but that didn’t stop him from pursuing this field of post-secondary education because he just “wants to help, and loves working with the students.” David “has been at MVCC for 16 years now.”

Mark has been teaching a combination of technical and transferable courses at MVCC for 13 years. He shared that even though some of the courses are not designed to be transferred to a Regent university, many of the students who take his classes will transfer the
courses to one of three private schools not far away, and finish at the private college to get a bachelor’s degree. Mark likes to see the students go on for the bachelor’s degree, and is invested in seeing the students succeed at the community college.

One instructor, Beth, who teaches only transferable college courses for students who are working toward their Associates of Arts degree, has been teaching at MVCC for 15 years. Beth feels that the small town and small community college aids in success of the student. “Having that small town feel increases the success of the early alert report.”

Alvin worked at MVCC for the past six years at the time of his interview. Alvin first worked as a database administrator for MVCC, and was the designer of the early alert system in 2011. For the last three years Alvin was a full-time instructor. Prior to working at MVCC, Alvin was a Java programmer. He has a master’s degree in education leadership, and is finishing a master’s in computer engineering.

**Administrator interviews**

**Jennifer**

In an interview with Jennifer Ferraro, Jennifer shared that she generally calls the student for the first follow-up, but if she cannot reach the student by phone, she will then try email. Jennifer also shared that the college used to mail letters to the student’s home, but the only time they do that now is if the student is still in high school. Jennifer has also been known to stop by the class or forward a message to the coach if the student is an athlete. Sometimes, depending on the issue, Jennifer may follow up with the faculty member, especially depending on the issue or in situations where a student is referred multiple times in the semester since faculty can put a student on the report at any time. This persistence by
MVCC to follow up with those students who are referred may be the reason for their increased faculty participation in the early alert report.

Jennifer Ferraro’s master’s degree in mental health serves her well in this role as the discussions with students can evolve into discussion about the struggle that students are having in their personal life, which may be affecting their ability to make it to class, to complete assignments, or to just maintain their focus. When asked what Jeraldine Smith likes best about their current early alert system, Jeraldine replied that she likes that it can happen at any time in the semester—immediately when there is a problem rather than at a pre-set time, and that the students receive a phone call from Jennifer immediately.

Jeraldine

One of Jeraldine’s duties is leading the in-services, in which she addresses the topic of early alert referrals. Jeraldine shares a report that has been compiled by Jennifer Ferraro that identifies the total number of students referred to the early alert system, the percentages of students who were referred but who were not on probation or suspension at the end of the term, and the number of students who are placed on probation or suspension and whether or not they were referred to early alert. This Statistics Report (see appendix D) also includes the number of faculty who have made referrals, which helps to identify if MVCC has reached its goal of all faculty using the early alert report. As mentioned previously, in fall 2016 at the faculty in-service meetings, the initiative to increase retention was agreed upon by the faculty of the goal for all faculty to use the early alert system for at-risk students. (see Appendix E)
Faculty interviews

Brenda

When interviewing the faculty member, Brenda, about the early alert report, she shared that there are three reasons that she refers students to the early alert system. Brenda refers student for attendance, low grades on their first exam (below a C), and overall grade in the course below a C. She feels that about 99% of the students she refers are for those first two reasons, of either attendance or low score on the first exam, which she admits go hand in hand together. Brenda goes through the list of students after the first exam is complete filling out the early alert referrals, which means it is usually done in the first few weeks. Brenda refers students another time in the semester, the second one happening after they take their midterm exam.

When asked what percentage of her students she refers in her classes, Brenda feels it is approximately 20-25% of her students who she refers to the early alert report during the semester. When asked if many of those students are able to turn their semester around to a positive outcome before the end, Brenda said, “Of the 10-15 students who I refer, most are turning it around. Those that are flagged early can get the help needed.”

Brenda was asked what she likes best about the current early alert system. Brenda shared that she likes that their system is electronic. Brenda mentioned that Jennifer does a great job of “conditioning faculty” to use the form. She also mentioned that the form is easy to use since the faculty submit the name of the student, then it is a list of checkboxes, which makes the form and process easy to use. When asked what she would suggest changed in their report, she had nothing that she would recommend changing for the current early alert system because Jennifer, TRiO (who help provide tutoring), and the faculty can communicate
with each other if there is something they can do to help a student. Brenda shared, “Jennifer will communicate if there is a personal problem, not sharing what it is, but just to let the faculty know why a student may be struggling, Or TRiO may call to say something, or faculty can go to TRiO.”

One question asked by the researcher is why some faculty do not use an early alert system for struggling students. When interviewed about their opinion on why fellow faculty members may choose not to refer at-risk students to the early alert report, Brenda shared that in her opinion, those who do not use it do not have a background in education nor have they worked in jobs where attendance is important. She feels that they do not understand the value of the report.

**Danielle**

When Danielle was asked about the number of students she refers, Danielle shared that she believes that only about three to six percent of her students are placed on the report, mainly all for the reason of attendance. However, Danielle shared that she will call students personally who she feels she knows and has built a relationship with, which reduces the number of students who are referred to the early alert system, however they are still being contacted and receiving that interaction and help that may help them to turn it around before the end of the term. She may also contact TRiO or an athletics coach for a student, such as a baseball athlete from Puerto Rico who has lower than average English speaking skills.

In addition, Danielle shared a story about a student who had mental health issues. “I was concerned about his safety, so I bypassed the report because it was too important.” These students do not get counted in the total number of students from MVCC who are referred to the early alert system, however, Danielle feels that they are being reached out to,
which is the goal of the early alert system. This issue of not being counted will be addressed later. Danielle shared that in her opinion about 30% of those who are referred to the early alert report are able to complete the course with a satisfactory grade of C or above, however many of the students drop the course. Since Danielle is the only faculty member who teaches the face-to-face section at this location for a general education course required for most programs at the community college, she would likely see those students again who have dropped the course and take it in a subsequent semester. Danielle shared that she does see quite a few students who have dropped the course previously re-taking her course, but it is not a large percentage of the students who have dropped.

Danielle also feels that the early alert system is set up in an easy-to-use way because of how faculty select their course, then the students, and it is easy from there. She also feels that one thing that she really likes about their system is that the information is “…not going to get lost, Jennifer will follow up.” The only thing that Danielle would change is that she would like it if this information did not go on that student’s education record.

When asked why she believes some faculty do not use the early alert system, she shared that another faculty member mentioned to Danielle that “these are college students (adults) and it is the faculty member’s job just to teach the class.” But, Danielle also admitted that there have been times where she herself gets busy and a student gets forgotten. She does not refer them to the early alert report even though they are struggling, because she is caught up in her own deadlines. She feels that it is possible that since there is no one specific time that instructors are to refer students, that faculty like her can forget about the early alert system and therefore do not identify the student in need.
Megan

Megan admitted at the start of the interview that she does not use the early alert system, but instead has a different internal process that is used in their program. “Students in their first year of this technical degree program receive a referral similar to the early alert report in which the instructors of the program, who also serve as advisors, meet with each student one to two weeks before midterm to show the students how they have been doing as far as attendance, coursework, etc.”

Megan shared that almost half of the students are not at a satisfactory level of 75% or better when they meet to talk about their progress. She also shared that after they meet with their advisor, about 20% “turn it around” before the end of the term. Many more than 20% of the students drop the course sometime over that 2nd half of the term, because they have up until the last Friday before finals to drop a course, which is when about 5% of the students in this technical program drop. Megan feels that dropping a course does not necessarily mean a failure on the part of the student or the college, “it is just not a good time for that student to be taking classes, or may be the wrong degree program for that student.” While Megan shares that their 50% attrition rate in their program does not sound good, it is still above or right around the same for other programs and other community colleges.

For second-year students in this degree program, the process in this technical program is slightly different at MVCC. Since students have a history with the college, Megan shares that the faculty can print off the academic results from that student’s first year. Those printed records are then used for meeting with the second-year students who have below average numbers in any area. About 20% of their second-year students are met with to discuss those private records on the first day of class. In that meeting, they can address potential poor
habits, or make suggestions for future classes, such as getting a tutor, to help the student, identify challenges that the student may face again to discuss options, and let the student know that the faculty want to see them succeed. Megan points out that in her technical program, students get dropped if they miss 20% or more of their classes for a course, and are only given another chance if they appeal. After completing an appeal, the faculty in Megan’s program get together and discuss the extenuating circumstances for a student to determine if keeping them in their classes is the best idea.

In addition to these formal processes, instructors may also call students when they see grades or attendance dropping even if it is outside the usual meeting time of midterm. While this process improves retention in this technical program, none of it counts toward the early alert report used at this community college, even though the outcome is effectively the same for retention of students. Megan shared some similar thoughts about why an instructor may not use their current systems for students who are at risk of falling below satisfactory levels. Megan felt that sometimes instructors get busy and should refer a student, but they do not have time. She also shared that when it comes to the early alert report at MVCC, having no due date may have an impact on how many instructors use the report. “No due date means no referrals”.

**Rosa**

Attendance is the first reason that students are referred to the early alert system by Rosa; however, that is not the biggest reason that students are referred. Rosa says that about 80% of the students she refers are due to low grades, but only 10% are referred for attendance. She shares that an additional 10% of students are referred for other academic issues, such as handwriting, but the main issue for her students is poor grades.
When asked how many of the students she refers who are able to successfully complete the course with a satisfactory grade by the end of the term, she shares that approximately 80% of the students she referred to the early alert system this past year were able to “turn it around before the end” of the term. In fact, she shared that she even helped an adjunct who is not as technology savvy enter the referrals in the computer for students that he felt were struggling in his class. She feels that being a new teacher, but able to help another instructor shows how easy the form is to use.

The best thing that Rosa finds about MVCC’s early alert system is that it is online. She says that it is easy to fill out, so therefore it is quick. She also shared that she likes “how someone else follows up with it”. As for what could be improved, she shared that “after the report, it seems that there’s no follow up unless the student comes to me”. Rosa shared that she would like to hear “where the issue stands”, to know what happened afterward. She expressed concern in wondering why one student was able to turn it around, but another did not. She feels that some reporting, such as information that the student has been given tutoring, etc. would be good for faculty to know.

Rosa shared her perspective on why some faculty do not complete the early alert report. She admitted that for her this year, time would get away from her. She feels that for some faculty, it is most likely due to the fact that they do not take the time to do it. She admitted that “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.”
Pam

Pam said that the two reasons she refers students to the early alert report is attendance and low grades. “Attendance is the biggest factor, in fact 85% of the students are referred for attendance.” She says, “Students just stop coming. Maybe they are struggling with being in school.” Pam shares a story of a student who had missed the entire second week of classes, and part of the third week. Pam put him on the early alert report, and a few days later ran into him in the hallway. He approached her stating, “You told on me!” While she was concerned at this comment that he might have felt she did something wrong by referring him to the early alert report, it ended up having a positive effect. He told her at the end of the term, “That was the fire lit under me” referring to the early alert report. He was a successful story of a student put on the early alert report who turned it around to a positive outcome before the end of the term. While only 15% of the students she refers are for low grades and other reasons, Pam said that those are more of the exceptions. She shared that while most of the students who are referred are due to low attendance, these 15% “…may have other concerns, such as emotional well-being.”

When Pam was asked what percentage of her students in her classes who get referred are able to turn it around and are successful before the end of the term, she feels that at least 65% of those who are referred make a positive change. She feels that some of that may be due to her interaction with the students in the classroom, and the popular course that she teaches. But, she accepts that not every student will make it their first time around in college. She shared that some students have just removed themselves from their high school environments when they come to the community college. She tries to also connect with the students herself, not just referring them to the early alert report. She will try to contact them,
usually in person, but sometimes she will just run into them in town. She shares that she only uses the early alert form sometimes when she cannot find the student herself, such as when “they are not showing up in class anymore.”

When asked what she likes best about the current early alert system that is being used at MVCC, she shared that is it a user-friendly form. She admits that the form has been improved. “In the past, you would get an error message, which still sometimes happens, but most of the time it works really well.” As for her answer to the question what would she like to see improved or changed about the current system, she thought that it might be nice if it went to the Dean of Students or other instructors who have that same student in their classes, so that they could see a pattern or trend for that student. She feels that since it does not go to more people, it is harder to help that student. She knows that there is an attempt to reach the student which is usually successful, but wondered if there is a way to also send a copy to the student of that form with the detail provided by that faculty member or why they were referred.

While Pam can agree that not every faculty member will use the report, she feels that some of the reasons are time and belief. She thinks that many instructors feel they get too busy, and have a difficult time seeing a way to fit in this one more thing. However, she also has heard some faculty share that they feel the student is responsible, not the faculty. She has heard comments like, “This is college. Grow up and do it. Sink or swim.” She follows up by adding that those faculty feel that they will just focus their time and energy on the students who are there in class, not the ones who are not.
Matt

Matt has found that “attendance is the biggest reason for students needing referred to the early alert system”. In fact, he feels that 90% of the students he refers are due to poor attendance, and only 10% are due to low grades. He has his own personal policy that if a student misses 3 days in a semester, he sends them the early alert notification.

Matt feels that “a large percent” of his students “who are put on the early alert report are able to fix the problem and turn it around before the end of the term”. In fact, he feels that it is approximately 80-90% of his students “who are put on the report make the positive changes to succeed” in his class.

The best aspect of the early alert reporting system is that it is convenient. Matt likes that he can access it through the internet, which makes it simple. He remembers when the form was a hard-copy paper form. He said, “Back in the day, you had to fill out a paper form and walk it over to the right office. This is so much easier.” When asked what he would like to see changed, Matt came up with the idea that someone in administration should meet with them. Matt feels that if an administrator were to, “come down and talk to the student, the student might take it even more seriously.”

One of Matt’s impressions about faculty who do not use the early alert report is that they get too busy. However, Matt feels it is part of the job to reach out to those struggling students. He understands that not all faculty share his perspective. He wants “to see the student do well”. He does not like that some faculty he feels are being lazy by not being motivated to take the time to refer students who are in trouble of not succeeding. He sticks strictly to his own policy that any time the student reaches three absences, no matter what the reason, her refers them to the early alert system. He admits there have even been times when
a student has a valid reason for missing three times, but he will pull them aside during or right after class and let them know that he has referred them, and why. He does not want anyone to get lost.

David

When asked why David refers students to the early alert system, he shared that attendance is the biggest issue for about 90% of the students he refers. He says that in his class, if attendance is an issue, their lab grades and test scores will suffer. He also shares that he is not one to let the students leave the class early. He says, “There is always another chapter, topic, discussion or assignment that we can discuss, so if a student misses class, they may miss more than just the planned activity or lecture.” David also shared that even if the student is receiving “a decent or passing grade”, he “may put them on the early alert report because they are not reaching their potential”. David mentioned that he likes the early alert report. He shared, “We as teachers have a responsibility to get that (early alert report) out.”

David refers about 10-15% of his students to the early alert system in his classes each semester. He feels that about 50% of those students are able to make it before the end of the term. He knows that he cannot help them all, but feels the report is having a positive impact on retention, because there are students who are succeeding and making positive different action after they are referred.

When asked what he likes best about the current early alert system, David shared that it was not online five or six years ago. “It was a paper form that could get lost. Now I get feedback for the student pretty quick.” As for improvement in the current system, David shared that he would like to see something done in which the student does not get their
financial aid award up front, but instead see if given out throughout out the term based on continued attendance.

David understands that not every faculty member will use the early alert report. In fact, he shared:

“Some teachers shouldn’t be teaching. To them it is just a job. They may be very knowledgeable, but some are lazy. They leave right when class is done. There are some great passionate teachers, but there are some who need to return to industry. They have so much knowledge, but no common sense. Every industry has dead wood.”

Mark

Mark uses the early alert system to “keep students on track”. For example, he has had students who have a language barrier, which is the biggest reason he has referred students to the early alert report. Mark wants to “get them resources to get them help.” One other example of a student referral he had done was for a student whose father-in-law was in an accident and lost part of his leg. The referral created dialog with different areas of the college to make arrangements to “keep the student on course”, and still allow her to be able to make hospital visits.

Mark feels that it is probably only about 5% of his students who he refers to the early alert system. He admits that he uses many “informal channels” to address issues, and does not always use the early alert system. However, of those students that he refers, he feels that 80-90% of them are doing satisfactory work in his class by the end of the term.

What Mark likes best about the early alert system is that it “Brings another voice into the conversation. Another person to follow up and make sure that the student is doing what they are supposed to”. If he could improve the early alert system, he would like to “figure
out a way to be more careful, be judicious when using it. It can freak out the student, singling them out. Some students take it as criticism.”

When asked why he feels that some faculty do not use the early alert report, Mark shared,

“We’re busy! It’s one more thing in our workload to do. So, the early alert ends up at the bottom of the pile. I guess some faculty think that these students are adults, and they should be responsible for themselves. Yes, some students need a nudge, but there is a point where you have to stop the babysitting.”

Beth

Beth believes that she refers most of her students for attendance. She says that they either do not show up or have periodic attendance. About a quarter of the students that Beth refers to the early alert report show up for class, but do not turn in their work. However, approximately three quarters of the students have low attendance or both low attendance and low scores in her class. Beth feels that she refers about 20-30% of her students to the early alert report out of all students in her classes. Of that percent, she perceives that about 80% of those students are able to make a change in their behavior and successfully complete the course.

Beth feels that the best aspect of MVCC’s early alert report is “We’re small. I know Jennifer. I know what she will do with the information I put on the report. The more info I include, the easier it is for her to help that student.” Beth also likes that the current system is easy to use. “It automatically fills in. It’s easy and quick. The LMS is connected to the report. The only thing I have to enter is my phone extension.” When asked what she would like to change about the system, she shared that she does not know how Jennifer has
contacted them, or when. Sometimes Jennifer tells the faculty, “if she sees them”. Beth would like it to have an automatic response that the student was contacted and/or helped.

When asked why she believes that some faculty do not use the early alert report, Beth shared that she thinks there are faculty who have never used it, so they will not start. Beth said:

“Maybe they think they can do it better themselves. However, we in this department, understand how the process works, so passing this off to someone else to take over the next step is the right thing to do. Or maybe some faculty don’t feel they have time. Some programs actually have their own support person who can help them out, but we don’t have that in our department. So, we use the early alert report.”

Alvin

When Alvin started working as an instructor in 2014, Alvin used the early alert system to refer students who were not showing up to class, or were consistently tardy, by as much as 20-30 minutes. First, Alvin would address the tardiness with the student in person after class. But if the behavior did not change, then he would place them on early alert. About 70% of the students he referred were due to attendance, while the remaining 25 percent of the students referred were due to poor grades or other reasons. “One student that I referred to the early alert system was because the student had trouble following the class rules. He was disruptive.” The grade cutoff that Alvin considered to be low grades and would prompt a referral from him in his classes is the grade of a D or below. He estimates that only refers about 5% of the students in his classes; however, he feels there is a great percentage of students who are helped by it.

“About two or three students per year who were referred in my classes did not return.” Alvin’s perception of the success of the early alert system was that about 70 percent of the students he referred were successful by the end of the term. “I would call those
students a success of the early alert system, because they came to class on time, or at least improved communication after they were referred to the early alert system.”

One of the best things about the early alert system according to Alvin is that it is very easy. He expanded on that statement by explaining,

“It is easy to get to, easy to fill out the form. It doesn’t ask too much information. And you get a confirmation message that it submitted. Also, sometimes Jennifer would personally email to confirm that she received it and was following up.”

However, when asked what he would change about the early alert system, Alvin admitted,

“The form has limitations. You had to write out everything, other than the checkboxes for attendance, etc. But you would have to write that the student was tardy or disruptive. In addition, if you checked both grades and attendance, there was only one comment box at the bottom, so you would have to explain which comment went with which reason checked above, which meant a lot more writing. As the designer of the early alert system, I did not have faculty input prior to its development. Afterward, some feedback was provided, and we tweaked it for the next year, but having never been faculty, I didn’t really understand those limitations until I used the system.”

When asked why Alvin believes to be the reason some faculty do not use the early alert system, Alvin simply replied, “They don’t care. Their program is big enough that they can lose one or two students, and they don’t care.” Alvin feels that the message of the importance of using the early alert system has to come from administration. Alvin also hypothesized, “Most people hated the original early alert system that we had. When I adapted it to online, it was easier, and they even could do it from their smart phone, but the attitude about the system was still there.”

Alvin mentioned the early alert system initiative voted by the faculty just one year prior, but he addressed an additional reason that he felt could be contributing to some faculty’s lack of participation. “Faculty supported the initiative to use early alert, but the
faculty would have had to fill out another form. The higher learning commission wanted an additional report that the school couldn’t collect.”

Themes: Key findings and discussion

Deadlines

One theme that emerged from the faculty interviews is that of a due date or deadline for referring students to the early alert report. This is one of the most intriguing themes since MVCC does not have a due date or deadline when faculty are expected to refer students who are struggling and at-risk of not succeeding in their course. However, without having an imposed deadline set by the college, many of these faculty have set a self-imposed deadline or specific set of circumstances that triggers the reminder to the faculty to refer students to the early alert system. In fact, the faculty who report the largest percentage of students for follow-up have self-imposed dates or circumstances, such as Brenda who contacts any student receiving a C or below, Danielle who contacts students after the first big exam who did not receiving a satisfactory score, Megan who uses a separate internal process, and Matt who contacts students who have missed 3 classes in a row.

Attendance

While there are many reasons why a student may be referred to the early alert system, attendance is by far the largest reason for faculty at MVCC to refer the community college students to the early alert system. In fact, every faculty member interviewed mentioned attendance, most of them identifying it as the number one reason for the referrals. While many faculty may have also indicated other reasons for referring students, many faculty also addressed that attendance may have been part of the scenario to impact the other reason that the student is referred.
Feedback

Jennifer Ferraro, Director of Student Development, shared that if she could make a change to the current system, she would like to have more time and the opportunity to follow-up with faculty to indicate what had been done for a student, however, she does not. In addition to Jennifer’s making this recommendation, several other faculty at MVCC also indicated this same recommendation for improvement to the current early alert system. One faculty member indicated that one improvement could be if the current system had a checkbox with a date that Jennifer could fill in as she finished reaching and helping a student who had been referred. If this date were automatically in the system that faculty could view, at least the faculty could check to see the date that the student was contacted and offered services and resources to assist.

User-friendly system

One overwhelming theme that emerged from the faculty at MVCC was that their current early alert system is easy to use. Some faculty interviewed had been at MVCC long enough to remember the paper system that preceded the current one, such as Matt, Brenda and David, who shared frustrations with lost or slow paperwork that was cumbersome to complete and deliver for assistance. The current system has been tied to MVCC’s LMS, which allows faculty to select from a drop-down list, and makes ease of completion an attractive feature.

Time is short

Another consistent theme that emerged from comments made by faculty is a lack of time. Time is both a reason why they feel some faculty do not complete the report, but also used an explanation by faculty as an admission as to why they may not have more students
placed on the report, such as was shared by Danielle, Rosa, Matt and Mark. These faculty expressed feeling very tight on time, and that they have multiple priorities going on at all times, so a report like that could be viewed as optional since there is so specific due date, the early alert report may be the item that ends up at the bottom of the stack, last in line, or forgotten.

**Informal and other ways to connect**

Megan shared that her program uses their own internal process for reaching out to students who are struggling, and staying in contact throughout the two year program. Many faculty shared a similar theme about reaching out to students on their own without the use of the early alert system, such as Danielle shared in her example of the student athlete. Therefore, the faculty member would take it upon themselves to reach out for that student to get them resources, advocates, counseling, tutoring, and other forms of help. While the objective of helping the student is met, it may not reflect how well overall that the community college’s early alert report is helping retention at the college, because all of these informal methods of getting the student assistance are not counted in the total participation percentage of faculty. Incentives could be provided for faculty to track the students who are referred regardless of which system they use.

**Comprehensive system**

MVCC’s early alert system is used to reach out to the students who are referred in many ways. While students are contacted first by phone, Jennifer may try email or other methods, such as stopping by their classroom to connect with those students. A comprehensive early alert system is one in which the methods for reaching students can vary, as well as the reasons for referring students. While most students at MVCC may be placed
on the early alert report for poor attendance, there are still multiple reasons why a student may be referred, making their system a comprehensive early alert system. Many faculty appreciate this system for the multiple ways to contact and multiple reasons a student can be referred. Beth confirmed this thought when she shared her thoughts on why faculty may not use the report, and Alvin confirmed the appreciation of the comprehensive system when he shared his story about the student who was referred for not following class rules.

**Persistence toward reaching students**

One consistent theme that emerged during the interviews with both administration and with the faculty at MVCC was the tenacity this community college takes in pursuing interaction with the student who may need help midway through the semester. Every student is reached somehow if at all possible. Jennifer Ferraro shared that sometimes a student just disappears, and they cannot seem to reach them. But, most of the time there is always a way to reach out to the student to offer help. Even in Megan’s technical program in which they do not use the early alert report but instead use their own system at MVCC is very thorough in meeting with every student who is falling below satisfactory levels and identifying where the student needs improvement, such as attendance or low scores. These instructors will make recommendations of other resources available to them on campus for other support, much like the early alert reporting system. This persistence is evident in the interview with Mark when he shared that he likes how “another voice is going to be in there” when he refers a student, because much like Beth confirmed, Jennifer will do her best to reach the student.
Limitations

Small population

Some of the limitations of this study is the size of this institution. While having faculty numbering only around 40 members, the pool of potential interviewees is limited. In order to reach the author’s goal of ten faculty interviews, recommendations were solicited from each faculty member at the end of their interview. As faculty were recommended by previous faculty for contact to interview, potentially the candidates may share similarities in personality and therefore a similar perspective. The connections made via this method could lead to like-minded results, as friends or those who have similar perspectives may have been recommended to this author, therefore skewing the overall perspective presented.

Related to the size of the institution, the size of the community may have impacted the outcomes and perspectives shared by faculty. Several times faculty and even an administrator mentioned that by being in a small community, they were able to reach out to the student outside of the campus offering to aid them in improving their success in their courses. The ability to reach a student at their work accidentally or on purpose, and the option to reach students through mutual acquaintances increases the potential to connect with a student that larger communities may not have, therefore skewing the success or perceived success of helping the students get the resources and services needed, and therefore improving student success factors such as retention.

Opinions only

The perspective of the faculty on the percentages of students is indicative of their perception of how helpful the early alert report is for students. However, while their perception is what impacts and motivates their actions, those numbers shared of the
percentages of students who they refer, and the percentage of those referred who turn it around before the end of the term receiving a satisfactory grade are not real numbers that should be used for any statistical analysis or percent of participation. Those numbers only reflect an opinion or perception made by the faculty, and should be viewed only as such.

In addition, the perception of why faculty do not use the early alert report to refer at-risk students is strictly an opinion made by that faculty. While the reasons shared by faculty may reflect their own challenges and reasons that they may not refer students as often as they would like to or as often as they should, those perceptions of reasons are strictly guesses. Those reasons provided should not be used as a basis for making decisions about faculty’s lack of participation. Instead, those insights are only to be used to aid in understanding some possible reasons, issues and concerns that impact faculty’s inactivity toward this report.

**Participation does not equal retention**

Lastly, while increased participation from faculty in the early alert system may have a positive impact on retention, limited information was provided in this case study, and therefore no generalizations can be made about a college’s use of an early report such as this guaranteeing any increase in retention. The suggestions are to be viewed as options that can be chosen to aid, but cannot be taken as evidence or proof for increased retention rates.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

The goal of this study was to find out the common practices of community colleges in the Midwest around the topic of the early alert report. In addition, one community college was to be analyzed more in-depth to provide a case study perspective on this community college’s early alert reporting system. Within that case study, perspectives of both administration and faculty were to be addressed to provide insight in to the reasons behind not only the use or non-use of the report, but also to provide the reasons for faculty’s support or lack of support for using the early alert report. This information can be used as a guide to other higher education institutions when choosing the attributes, policies, and timelines for their early alert reporting system.

Reflections

Community college survey

The first point raised in the summary in the data collection section of this chapter was that the results of survey would be analyzed pertaining to the strictness of the college’s policy about early alert and the college’s satisfaction level about their early alert system. As shown in Table 17, the overall scores of those colleges with strict policies are higher in satisfaction about their current early alert systems than those who have more lenient or open policies.

Similar analysis was done using the timing of the early alert report for colleges compared to their satisfaction levels with their early alert report. As shown in the Table 18, the colleges who had no timing policy at their college for when to report early alert referrals
Table 17. Satisfaction level compared to strictness of policy for early alert system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Strictness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Required/an expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Strongly encouraged by college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither satisfied/unsatisfied</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Encouraged it benefits students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unsatisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Other = (explain) Text = “an expectation that benefits students”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12

Table 18. Satisfaction level compared to timing of the report (due date/deadline)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction level</th>
<th>Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>(1) at the midpoint (halfway) 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
<td>(2) at 4 weeks in to the term 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither satisfied/unsatisfied</td>
<td>(3) at 6 weeks 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unsatisfied</td>
<td>Other = No due date 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=12

rated their system higher in satisfaction than those who had a set date for timing. In addition, those colleges who had the deadline of six weeks and midpoint rated their system lower on the satisfaction survey than those who had no timing deadline.

The analysis of the satisfaction level from the chief academic officers is informative for readers to determine the best early alert system for their college. However, the perspective of the faculty has a greater impact on the amount of use of the reporting system, which is the reason for the case study interviews of faculty in the section to follow. If faculty are satisfied with their current system, they are more likely to use the system, and therefore will refer more students. As shown in the case study portion, the number of referrals has a direct portion on the percentage of students who are able to receive communication and
support from the college in order to turn their results around to end up with a positive academic outcome before the end of the term.

Similar comparisons were also made of the early alert reports policy and practices, such as incentives or repercussions of faculty for completion of the report, as well as other variables compared with satisfaction to see if there is a pattern. However, there did not appear to be any pattern in the colleges who had incentives and those who ranked their early alert system high. However, a limitation that should be mentioned is that a more accurate comparison should have been what percent of faculty participation are there for the early alert report compared to the incentives of completing the report.

**Early alert system**

MVCC is one example of an early alert system that is comprehensive in nature. The faculty support the use of the report, as shown by the decision at the strategic meeting in August 2016. The measure approved by the faculty vote was the initiative for faculty to use the early alert report in the 2016-2017 academic year. While MVCC may not have had 100% participation in the report, they do have a majority of faculty participating, and an increase in referrals in the 2016-2017 academic year, particularly in the fall of 2016 when the initiative was freshest on the minds of the faculty. See Appendix D for early alert statistics for 2016-2017 academic year.

**Discussion**

**Methodological framework**

Case studies have been identified by Merriam as having the opportunity to engage in comparative understanding of different social settings, “considering the relations between setting and its wider social environments helps to clarify what is happening in the local
setting itself” (Merriam, 1988, p. 122). An additional opportunity identified was to engage in comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting (Merriam, 1988). This case study approach has been able to do both of those goals.

In looking at the local setting, the case study researched for this study can be viewed as an example for any smaller rural community college in determining the most appropriate early alert reporting system. The significance of the study is that the comprehensive system used by MVCC is easy to use if set up in a user-friendly online system, and may provide similar results for other community colleges that were found with MVCC.

**Themes**

**Deadlines**

Several of the Midwest community colleges surveyed indicated that they have a policy at their college for when the early alert report is collected. The majority of the community colleges responding indicated a time before or at the midpoint in the term as the time to get the names of the students who are at-risk. However, in the case study done at MVCC, there is no deadline imposed by the community college. Both Brenda and Danielle, faculty at MVCC, mentioned that they take the time to think about which students need referred at the midterm for the semester, and Brenda adds that she also thinks about which students need referred after the first big test or assignment as their attendance and low grade indicate they need help. By setting their own personal deadlines, both of these instructors are successfully using the early alert system.

**Attendance**

As briefly touched on in the previous theme, attendance is an issue. The survey conducted of the Midwest community colleges indicated that one of the major reasons
identified for students referred to their early alert system is attendance. In fact, nine of the 13 (almost 70%) survey responses indicated attendance as a factor. As shown in the data from MVCC from fall 2012 until spring 2017, the overwhelming reason that students are referred to the early alert system is due to poor attendance. The faculty interviews conducted support this phenomenon illustrating what a key issue attendance is for community college students, and how it negatively impacts their success in their courses. All of the instructors interviewed from MVCC indicated that attendance is an important aspect of the early alert referrals, and most of the faculty shared that the number one reason for referring students to early alert is attendance.

**Feedback**

Once the early alert report is generated, how that information is used is important to gauge. In the survey conducted of the chief academic officers from Midwest community colleges, 10 of the 12 colleges (83%) indicated that the early alert report is required or strongly encouraged by the college, while 7 out of the 12 (58%) offer incentives to their faculty for completion of the report. These community colleges also indicated a follow up done by the college for faculty who have not completed the report. In addition to follow-up of the faculty the Midwest community colleges were asked about a follow up for the students after they are placed on the report. Nine out of 12 colleges (75%) send an email, and only one sends a letter. Six of those nine who send an email will send a second attempt to inform the student of their unsatisfactory progress, and of those six, two will attempt a phone call to reach the student.

The person who conducts that follow-up varies slightly among the community colleges, from advisors to faculty and even additional staff. At MVCC, Jennifer Ferraro, the
Director of Student Development, follows up with the students after they are placed on the report. Having a designated person at the community college to follow up with the student ensures that the follow up is done, and takes the burden off faculty. Many faculty at MVCC still conduct the follow-up personally, and some are not even referring students to the report, as they take the approach that their relationship with the student is key in making successful communication of the issue to the student. When asked what the faculty would change about their current early alert system at MVCC, two instructors, Rosa and Beth, indicated that one change they would like to see is that their current early alert system would give them feedback when the student has been contacted.

**User-friendly system**

The best system in the world is worthless if no one uses it. Therefore, making any early alert system user-friendly is key. When the chief academic officers were asked if they were satisfied with the usability of their current early alert system, seven out of 12 (58%) indicated a positive response of either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied. Three responses indicated neither positive or negative satisfaction levels with their current system, while only two indicated negative responses of somewhat unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their current early alert system. Similarly, most of the faculty at MVCC had more positive responses about their current early alert system; and had few changes that they would like to see made to their current system. In fact, of those positive responses, all faculty members interviewed indicated that what they liked best about their early alert system was that it was online, easy to use, easy to access and fill out, and, therefore, quick.
Time is short

Midterm is a stressful time, for both students and faculty. Faculty have the task of being prepared for each class, and grade assignments and tests that were submitted in the previous class. In addition, reports such as the early alert report add another burden on to the instructor’s already full load.

Having adequate time is a struggle that many faculty at MVCC shared in their interviews with the researcher regarding the early alert report. Many faculty at MVCC shared that this lack of time is the reason that some students do not get referred, or do not get referred as early as they should.

Informal and other ways to connect

While all but one of the community colleges surveyed have an early alert system, there are faculty who do not use the early alert report. Some faculty simply reach out to the student themselves, rather than formally referring the student. While those faculty are not included in the overall percentage of faculty who participate in the early alert report, these connections are important due to the contact made with the student and the faculty’s offer of assistance. This scenario is not the only one in which faculty are providing help; but are not formalized, or are they included in the early alert report percentage. As mentioned previously, at MVCC there are some faculty who pick up the phone or stop by Jennifer Ferraro’s office asking her to follow up with a student who is at risk, such as Megan whose program uses their own system. Some faculty mentioned that they would use the early alert report if they were unable to reach a student on their own, such as Pam, Matt, and Mark. Some faculty, as well as Jennifer Ferraro herself shared that there are faculty who may go directly to Jennifer and not complete the early alert form. Other faculty have shared that they
may feel that an issue is too important to just fill out the form, such as Brenda who will refer them directly to TRiO, or Danielle who will call them personally herself. Unfortunately, these informal methods may meet the needs of the students, but don’t allow the college to gauge how well their early alert system is helping student retention.

**Comprehensive system**

Gaining popularity among higher education institutions is the comprehensive early alert system in which follow-up is offered by a variety of people in multiple ways, from email to a phone call, for a variety of reasons when a student may struggle in classes.

MVCC’s early alert system resembles that of the comprehensive early alert system. While having multiple reasons that a student can be referred to the early alert system, MVCC also used multiple ways to reach a student.

**Statistical reports from MVCC**

The Early Alert Statistics reports (Appendix D) provided by MVCC compare the use of the early alert report by percent and number of faculty, as well as the percent and number of students. These students placed on early alert are given the opportunity to make a change in their attendance and academic efforts in order to successfully complete the course by the end of the term. The percentages of students not placed on warning at the end of the term shows the students who made that successful turnaround, completing the course with satisfactory grades by the end of the term. In viewing these statistics reports more thoroughly, one can see that the number and percent of faculty is increasing overall over the five years. Correspondingly, the number and percent of students is also increasing overall over those same five years. It is not surprising that the number and percent of students not on
warning at the end of the term is also increasing, therefore giving evidence that the early alert system is helping to make positive changes for students in successful completion.

**Implications/Issues**

Use of the early alert report reduced the number of students placed on probation or suspension (called warning in MVCC’s system). In the Early Alert Statistics from 2012 (Appendix D), only 20% who were placed on probation received an early alert referral. In fact the majority of students (55%) who were placed on referral that spring ended up successfully completing the semester and were not placed on probation. Looking at more recent statistics shows the same results. For fall of 2016, 33% of the students who were placed on probation were also sent an early alert referral, as many of the students who were given a referral successfully completed the semester. In fact, 51% of those who received a referral were not on probation at the end of the semester by successfully completing their courses that term.

In addition, there were more referrals that term than in all semesters the previous five years; the administration suspects this is due to the recent commitment made by faculty that August to use to early alert report. Twenty-two instructors made 164 referrals for 97 different students in the fall of 2016 (Appendix D). This same semester the results for the students correspond to these increased numbers. The number of students referred in 2016 - 2017 academic year was 238 referrals for 154 individual students. At the end of the terms 54 percent of those who were referred were not placed on warning by the college, meaning that they were able to turn it around by the end of the term with a satisfactory grade. By helping more than half of those students by placing them on early alert, which identified the student
who was struggling, and intervened with support and services, MVCC is significantly lowering the number of students who are on warning, which leads to increased retention.

**Policy**

In reviewing the themes from the findings, timing of when the report is collected does not appear to be an important factor in deciding the early alert policy for a higher education institution. However, there are several other themes that may influence a college’s policy, such as the multiple reasons for a referral, utilizing a system most similar to the comprehensive early alert system. These themes are analyzed in depth in the recommendations section (Chapter 5), and may be used to make policy decisions.

**Delimitation**

While a case study can provide insight into how one college has implemented the early alert process, delimitations should also be mentioned. The boundaries that need to be considered in this qualitative study are the geographic boundaries and time boundaries inhibiting researchers from being able to study every community college. Instead of quantitative studies where a larger sample size means more validity of results, this is a qualitative study present more about the reasons why, and highlighting a method that can be recommended for many community colleges.

This dissertation research is not to be used to make generalizations. However, this example provides a basis for understanding one way that early alert can be implemented. In spite of this delimitation, it is the belief of the researcher that this study informs higher education institutions, faculty and administrators to the value of the early alert system and the different options available.
Recommendations for future research

Based on the results of the research found in the literature section of this study, the themes found in the interviews from the case study college, and the results shared from MVCC of their early alert statistics, recommendations are made. The topic of early alert has been shown in the literature to be of importance to higher education and to the goal of retention. Colleges need to devote resources and staff to this topic of early alert. MVCC had one person designated in the role to follow up with students, however, it is not necessary to have one specific staff, but identifying staff who are designated gives this issue more priority. Using triangulation in this study, the following recommendations are given for the themes addressed in this dissertation.

**Deadlines**

Reaching out to students early and in a timely manner is a theme found from the interviews with the MVCC faculty. Simons (2011) points out that more often early alert reports are tending to move to a point earlier in the semester to provide feedback in order to have adequate time to allow students time to recover. Previous research on community colleges indicated how communicating grades often and early aids in retention (Reynolds, 2017). While the research shows that catching those students at-risk earlier is most important to impacting their retention, MVCC does not have a specific time in which faculty are asked to complete the early alert report. However, those faculty who are successfully and consistently using the report have personally set a time early in the semester, or no later than the midpoint, to identify their at-risk students. This is also true in the technical program with Megan who does not use the early alert report, but has her own system of contacting all students one to two weeks before midterm. One faculty member suggested that the
institution should not set the timing of the early alert report, but instead the decision of timing be left to the individual faculty member. One reason for MVCC’s success in using no specific deadline is that the faculty choose the deadline or parameters that best fit their courses. Brenda, Danielle, Megan and Matt each have their own personal policy that works well for their classes. By having a system that allows reporting at any time gives faculty the freedom to choose timing that works best for that faculty member’s coursework. This researcher recommends that each community college consider having a system that has no deadline, if that can work for their campus. This decision may be based on technology, access to information, reporting requirements, or a variety of other issues. The message to faculty then needs to be that the choice of when to refer students to the early alert system is one that each instructor chooses. By encouraging the autonomy of timing for that faculty member, increased numbers of referrals may be made by each faculty member, resulting in better numbers of referrals and lower numbers of students placed on probation or suspension, such as the results seen by MVCC.

**Attendance**

In this case study, attendance is the most common issue for struggling students, and will continue to be a large part of the early alert report for many community colleges. Survey results indicated that some colleges are only reporting on grades, but grades are affected by attendance. One could argue that attendance is still being reported in the early alert report, however, using an early alert report that also tracks attendance as a reason for the referrals only enhances the strength of the early alert program. All of the instructors at MVCC indicated that attendance was either the most common reason, or one of the top reasons that students are referred. In addition, the early alert statistics reports provided by MVCC
indicate attendance (absences) as the largest of the many reasons that students are being referred. Having multiple reasons for the early alert report helps identify for the student their actions that are having negative repercussions on their academic success. Administrators of the early alert report are urged to choose an early alert system that includes attendance as a category for reporting, and not use systems that only indicate grades.

**Feedback**

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, and Kinzie (2008) pointed out that communication among the institutional departments and services is key to providing services and resources necessary to help students who are in need of assistance. Based on the feedback from some faculty at MVCC who indicated that they would like to know when follow-up has been completed with the students placed on the early alert report, a change to the early alert report would be recommended. Beth and Rosa both indicated that hearing the information about what has been done to help the student would be useful. Rosa shared her concern in wondering why one student was able to turn it around, but another did not. She felt that some sharing with faculty afterward, such as information that the student was sent for tutoring or other services, would help her in her role. I recommend that when the early alert report is next reviewed and revised, colleges should include a date box on the early alert form that indicates when follow up was completed with the student. For colleges that have multiple staff who complete student follow-up communications, a signature box would also be recommended. Afterward, the faculty member could contact the staff member whose name is in the signature box if more detail is needed by the faculty member, or if additional follow-up may be needed for that student warranting a conversation between the staff member and faculty.


**User-friendly system**

Ease of use by faculty is pertinent to ensuring faculty will complete additional forms, such as an early alert report. As indicated by many faculty at MVCC, the ease of use of their current system is cited as the best feature about the report. Beth indicated that the form “automatically fills in” which she explains is due to how the set up populates the names of the students from her class, as well as her information when she logs in to complete the form. Danielle, Brenda, Rosa and Beth commented that they like that the form is an online, easy-to-use form. Pam, Matt, David and Alvin remember how cumbersome the paper form was prior to MVCC putting the form online. In addition to MVCC, most all of the community colleges surveyed were satisfied with their early alert system, which is very important if colleges want their faculty to use the report. If this system has not been put online, the college’s first step should be to move to an electronic system. MVCC’s online system (see appendix E) is a great example for colleges to use as a guide, since the system is populated automatically with the faculty member’s classes and the students’ names. It even fills in the faculty member’s contact information all formatted as checkboxes for ease of use. Lynch-Holmes, Tory, and Ramos (2012) warn that early alert systems are relatively new, and few clear best practices have been developed and implemented. However, the research in this study gives one example of a successful system that has worked well, and is recommended for community colleges to adopt for their early alert systems. (See chapter 2 early alert section for the current list of products available on the market for colleges to purchase for early alert.)

**Time is short**

In a survey of community colleges, chief academic officers were asked about additional training offered on systems such as for reporting grades, early alert reports, as well
as LMS training (Reynolds, 2017). 66% of the colleges surveyed offer training on their grade reporting system and early alert referrals (Reynolds, 2017). 85% offer training to new faculty on the LMS (Reynolds, 2017). The community colleges who completed the survey offer training and incentives to encourage and equip the faculty (Reynolds, 2017).

Many contemporary instructors use a multitude of teaching strategies to merge the student into the college environment and help the student experience and develop into academia, the campus and the college experience (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). However, incorporating a variety of teaching techniques that will stimulate the college student’s mind take additional time and resources. Feeling extremely busy and having multiple priorities was a consistent theme from the MVCC faculty interviews. Mark and David both shared that instructors are busy, and Mark added that some faculty are lazy. Danielle shared that she gets caught up in her own deadlines. Faculty have many priorities that are going on simultaneously, such as preparing for the next class, grading the last assignment or test, meetings, retention in their classroom, on top of student needs. All of the foregoing is happening for each class, while full-time instructors juggle many classes. Juggling all of this can be difficult, so faculty need to feel supported, just as students need to feel supported. Therefore, support for faculty is important if faculty are to feel that they have time to complete reports such as the early alert report. Community colleges must continue to offer training, support and resources to encourage the faculty to complete the early alert report.

**Informal/Other ways to connect**

Adding to the pressure created by busy schedules, faculty/student interaction is crucial. Communicating with students is an important step toward improving retention
Students who interact with faculty increase their learning, and rate their overall college experience higher (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). When students who are struggling perceive that someone at the college cares about them, they tend to persist, earn higher grades, and graduate in higher percentages than those who do not (Kuh, 2002). Early alert systems are a way to first identify who those students are, and then to connect them with resources and college services (Kuh, 2002).

The theme of faculty reaching out to students in ways other than using the formal early alert report is the most difficult to analyze. On one hand, the faculty may be using resources that are effective at helping the student; such as setting up tutoring, or referring the student to a counselor. The relationship that the faculty member has with the student strengthens the connection with the college, and may increase the chance of the student using the resources and services recommended. The goal of the early alert report is to identify the students who are struggling, and to get them the help that they need. On the other hand, there is no record of this assistance provided to the students, no matter how effective, because that system is not an informal one in which results are tracked. For tracking purposes, MVCC college is missing out on opportunities to monitor both the effectiveness of the early alert report, and the patterns of students who struggle.

The MVCC early alert statistics report (see Appendix D) shows the number of students who received an early alert, and still ended up on probation or suspension. However, it also shows the students who ended up on probation who did not receive an early alert referral. This number may also include students who were contacted through some of these informal methods. One possible option is if the early alert referral has an added date box and signature box, the faculty member could still refer the student to the early alert
system for tracking purposes only, and immediately check the box that follow-up was completed. Pam at MVCC shared that she would like to see the report go to the Dean of Students or someone who would oversee records of all students. This researcher recommends that one individual on the campus be responsible for reviewing the overall report, which could be beneficial to the college to detect patterns in students, and to better allocate resources anticipating future student needs.

While some colleges have the best, easy to use system and provide great support for faculty, there are some faculty who still are not using such resources as the early alert report. The attitude of these faculty, as shared in interviews at MVCC, inhibits the use of the report for reasons such as that a college student is an adult and does not need babysitting. While it is true that the instructor should focus on the students who are showing up to class, that does not release them from reaching out to the student who is struggling. Perhaps Brenda at MVCC was correct in her assessment that those faculty who do not use the report do not have a background in education. That means they have not heard some of the research shared in the literature review of this dissertation, such as the value of making connections in college, and how engagement and involvement solidify the students’ commitment, therefore increasing their chance at retention. One important fact that should be shared with those faculty is that providing feedback to students creates an enhanced college atmosphere while teaching students academic competence (Tagg, 2003).

Comprehensive system

The multiple methods of contact with students has many benefits. While the comprehensive system is gaining in popularity across campuses, some colleges are still using only grades, or faculty, or just an email to reach those struggling students. This single
method has not had the results and successes that the comprehensive early alert system boasts. These systems use multiple departments and multiple methods of contacting the student. Students may be referred for a variety of attendance, academics or social reasons (The Hanover Research Council, 2007). A comprehensive type of early alert uses a variety of people for follow-up on campus from faculty, staff, administrators and classmates and use a variety of ways to reach the student, such as email, phone calls and texts (Wasley, 2007; Tampke & Shirley, 2009). Studies have shown that these multiple methods of contact, particularly the phone call had the largest impact on making the student feel supported (Ritchie & Hargrove, 2005). Brenda shared in her interview that she liked that Jennifer, the faculty and TRiO all work together, which is why she would not recommend making any changes to the current comprehensive system that MVCC uses. Mark feels that one of the best aspects of the early alert system at MVCC is that it “brings another voice in to the conversation”, which Mark means that it adds another person, which adds more weight to the issue. This comprehensive system brings those different voices together focused on one goal, improving the academic success for that student in that class. Colleges still using one method are urged to consider a trial or pilot group using multiple factors, people and media to reach the students to test whether this comprehensive system is better for their college and that it does improve student retention.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Funding is a constant and growing concern for post-secondary education institutions, so to make a recommendation that may involve more funds being allocated can be difficult. Some of these recommendations presented above include additional funds and resources. One recommendation that may include an additional cost is the review and upgrade of their
current early alert system to be online so that it is easy to use and access. The second recommendation is to have a designated person or people on campus who follow up with and devote time toward intervening with those students who are at-risk. The recommendation to allow faculty time to devote to referring students to early alert may require additional funds for others on campus to take some of the burden off faculty could increase the costs at the campus to have others cover those duties. All of these recommendations may be cost prohibitive in the short run for some community colleges, however, the long-term benefits to the college may outweigh the cost.

Change is also hard in any organization. The recommendations to have no deadlines, to provide feedback afterward to faculty, and to change from using some of the informal methods that are not part of the early alert system to using the internal early alert report in order to track all students may mean huge changes. These changes, while being worthwhile in the long run, may cause confusion, apprehension, and unease among the faculty, especially if not implemented well. The implications of these changes could not only decrease the use of the system from faculty who were previously referring students, but it could also create negative attitudes toward the system overall if not introduced in a positive way. One additional recommendation to aid in the implication of this policy is for the institution to introduce the idea, asking for input from faculty as to what changes they would like to see made to the report. Then when presenting the new system explaining the benefits which match those that faculty requested, training should be provided in a thorough and clear manner so that faculty will feel confident about using the new system.
Recommendations for Future Research

One suggested topic that could be pursued is to find out when colleges started using their early alert report, and how often they update their system. Knowledge of the need for a change in the near future could help colleges to start applying the research from this dissertation about early alert reports, and therefore, reduce the amount of time they will need to spend researching this topic.

Another future research topic could involve more detail on the length of time that courses are being offered, and compare those with the due dates or deadlines for the early alert report. Even though the case study college in this dissertation did not have an imposed due date or deadline, many community colleges still use a system in which all grades are due on a certain date. For example, for colleges that have courses shorter than 16-weeks, are early alert reports being collected? And if so, what percentage of students are getting referred in those shorter length courses compared to the typical 16-week term? What is the impact of the early alert report on retention and successful completion of the course? By comparing those results even further, a college may be able to make a better choice about the timing of the early alert report, or like the case study college, having no one set due date or timing. Additional research could investigate if the use of the early alert report results in improved student retention and completion.

One final research topic that interests this researcher is the impact of faculty training and professional development on this report. While all of the community colleges in a previous survey indicated that training was offered to all new full-time faculty on their systems (Reynolds, 2017), such as early alert, more in-depth research would be interesting. Finding out if faculty feel that they were properly trained on not just how to use the early
alert system, but also the reason why it could have such a large impact on students, as well as the amount of time devoted to training on this topic could be an interesting future research topic.
REFERENCES

ACT (2010), What Works in Student Retention, Fourth National Survey, Private Four-Year Colleges and Universities Report, The survey was mailed to the Chief Academic Affairs Officers at 1,318 private four-year colleges and universities. Iowa City, IA.


APPENDIX A. NIH CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION AND
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

NIH “Protecting Human Research Participants” Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Karen Reynolds successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 06/08/2015
Certification Number: 1778903
The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:
- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application. Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)
Modification Form for Exempt Research

Title of Project: Survey of the community colleges policies, practices and expectations of using an early alert reporting system and a quantitative analysis of the community college data.

Principal Investigator (PI): Karen Reynolds Degrees: PhD
University ID: 998154177 | Phone: 3199889144 | Email Address: karenrn@iastate.edu
Department: Education Leadership Doctorate

FOR STUDENT PROJECTS (required when the principal investigator is a student)
Name of Major Professor/Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jan Friedel
University ID: | Phone: 515-294-4799 | Email Address: jfriedel@iastate.edu
Alternate Contact Person: Keith Reynolds Email Address: kfbikes@gmail.com
Correspondence Address: 449 Primrose Drive, Hudson, Iowa Phone: 3199397296

Please notify the IRB Office if your contact information has changed since the last review.

ASSURANCE

- I certify that the information provided in this application is complete and accurate and consistent with any proposal(s) submitted to external funding agencies. Misrepresentation of the research described in this or any other IRB application may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct.
- I agree to provide proper surveillance of this project to ensure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects are protected. I will report any problems to the IRB. See Reporting Adverse Events and Unanticipated Problems for details.
- I agree that modifications to the approved project will not take place without prior review and approval by the IRB.
- I agree that the research will not take place without the receipt of permission from any cooperating institutions when applicable.
- I agree to obtain approval from other appropriate committees as needed for this project, such as the IACUC (if the research includes animals), the IBC (if the research involves biohazards), the Radiation Safety Committee (if the research involves x-rays or other radiation producing devices or procedures), etc., and to obtain background checks for staff when necessary.
- I understand that IRB approval of this project does not grant access to any facilities, materials, or data on which this research may depend. Such access must be granted by the unit with the relevant custodial authority.
- I agree that all activities will be performed in accordance with all applicable federal, state, local, and Iowa State University policies.

Date: 9/16/16

For IRB Use Only

IRB Reviewer's Signature

Checklist:
- Minimal Risk
- Exempt Per 45 CFR 46.101(b)
- No Human Participants
- Not Research Per Federal Regulations
- Review Date: 9/12/2016

(Requested when the principal investigator is a student)
APPENDIX B. LITERATURE REFERENCE GUIDE
APPENDIX C. EARLY ALERT SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Early Alert Programs

This survey is currently LOCKED to prevent invalidation of collected responses! Please unlock your survey to make changes.

Q2  Our college’s faculty/staff collect and report all of the following information for the Early Alert System:
(Please check all that apply)
   - Attendance
   - Student’s grades who are at-risk: receiving C-, D or F only
   - All students grades are reported regardless if satisfactory or not
   - Classroom Behavioral issues/Social concerns
   - Other (please specify) 

Q1  Our college’s Early Alert Report is submitted by faculty for the following timeframe:
   - at the midpoint (halfway through) the term
   - at 4 weeks into the term
   - at 6 weeks into the term
   - N/A- our college does not report at-risk students
   - Other timeframe (please explain) 

Display This Question:
If  Our college’s faculty/staff collect and report all of the following information for the Early Alert System:
   Attendance is Selected
Or  Our college’s faculty/staff collect and report all of the following information for the Early Alert System:
   Student’s grades who are at-risk: receiving C-, D or F only is Selected
Or  Our college’s faculty/staff collect and report all of the following information for the Early Alert System:
   Other (please specify) is Selected

Q3  Is Financial Aid contacted or attached to this early alert report?
   - Yes
   - No
   - It depends. (please explain) 

Q5. What happens after a student’s name has been indicated as at-risk by faculty? (Check all that apply):

- An email is sent to the student letting them know they are at-risk in their college course, encouraging them to seek help.
- A letter is sent to their home address encouraging them to meet with their instructor or advisor.
- The student’s advisor is informed that their student has been identified as struggling in a class.
- Later, a 2nd attempt to reach the student is made after the first contact to indicate to the student they are not receiving satisfactory results in a course.
- Other (please specify) [ ]

Q6. The 2nd attempt to reach out to the student after the initial message, is made by the... (check all that apply):

- Student’s academic advisor
- The instructor of the course who identified them as struggling
- A staff person or committee who coordinates the early grade report follow up
- Other, please specify or explain [ ]

Q7. The follow-up contact made after the initial report to the student, is made via (check all that apply):

- Telephone call to the student
- Postcard / letter sent to the student
- Additional Email
- Text message is sent to the student
Our college uses an early alert system that we...

- made at the college—a system we created just for our purposes here at the community college.
- purchased from the company that provides our learning management system.
- purchased from a vendor advertised to aid with retention. (please indicate which one):
- Using existing systems: Our learning management system and our current grade reporting system are used. (Faculty enter the information in to our grade reporting system from their gradebook/LMS)
- Other, please explain

How often is the data reviewed of the students who receive the report and their progress?

- Every semester
- Yearly
- Every couple years
- Not often enough, we would be interested in a researcher reviewing our data. (Please indicate a contact person here):
- Never
- Other

Faculty are communicated that completing the early alert report is...

- required/an expectation from the college
- strongly encouraged by the college
- encouraged as it is a benefit to their students/ may increase retention in their classroom
- other (please explain)
Q11  Faculty who do not complete the early alert report... (Check all that apply):
- Are sent one additional reminder
- Are contacted and possibly talked to by their supervisor at their review
- Are followed up with until the report has been completed
- N/A, we do not track which faculty have/have not completed the report
- Other (please explain)

Q12  Incentives that are given to faculty for completing the Early Alert Report are...
- Indicated in their Quality Faculty Plan/annual review
- Certificate / email recognizing accomplishment
- Personal satisfaction and increased retention in their classes
- No incentive is given (or needed)
- N/A- no report is done / no tracking is done of faculty who reported
- Other (Please indicate)

Q13  Please rate your current Early Alert System:
- Very Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Neither Satisfied, nor unsatisfied
- Somewhat unsatisfied
- Very unsatisfied

Q14  Since this research is for the purpose of writing a dissertation (the community college names are omitted), our college would be... (check all that apply)
- Interested in receiving the results of this survey. (Indicate your email address here)
- Willing to let a researcher give us advice on how/where we might improve our retention results (include email address here)
- Willing to share our success results to be used in your dissertation (indicate contact person's email)
- Able to contact our college with any follow up questions/clarification. (contact person's email):
- Not interested.
APPENDIX D. MVCC: EARLY ALERT SYSTEM REPORTS

Early Alert Statistics Fall 2012

There were 113 referrals for 75 different students in the fall 2012 semester. Twenty-one instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

Reasons for Referral

- Absences: 75%
- Inadequate Preparation: 18%
- Test/Quiz scores: 4%
- Other: 3%

Probation/Suspension

- Students who received an early alert referral but ended up on academic probation/suspension: 21%
- Students ending up on probation/suspension who did not receive an early alert referral: 79%

44% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics Spring 2013

There were 94 referrals for 65 different students in the spring 2013 semester. Seventeen instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

55% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics
2012-2013 Academic Year

Number of Early Alerts

Number of total referrals | Number of students referred
---|---
Fall 2012: 113 | Fall 2013: 94
Spring 2013: 75 | Spring 2013: 65

Number of Early Alert Referrals on Academic Warning/Suspension

Fall 2012: 203
Spring 2013: 145

Fall 2012: 42
Spring 2013: 29

- Total number of students on academic warning/suspension
- Students referred to early alert on academic warning/suspension
2012-2013 Academic Year

- 207 referrals for 140 students.
- 348 students were placed on academic warning/suspension over the fall/spring semesters.
- 49% of students who were referred for an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning/suspension.
- 72% of referrals were for absenteeism.
- 80% of students on probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Fall and Spring Semester Comparison

### Fall 2012

- 113 referrals (75 different students)
- 21 instructors participated
- 75% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 44% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 79% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

### Spring 2013

- 94 referrals (55 different students)
- 17 instructors participated
- 79% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 55% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 80% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.
Early Alert Statistics Fall 2013

There were 90 referrals for 58 different students in the fall 2013 semester. Eighteen instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

![Reason for Referral](chart)

- Absences: 84%
- Inadequate Preparation: 6%
- Test/quiz scores: 5%
- Other: 2%
- Tutoring: 3%

![Academic Warning/Suspension](chart)

- Students who received an early alert referral but ended up on academic warning/suspension: 18%
- Students ending up on warning/suspension who did not receive an early alert referral: 82%

48% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics Spring 2014

There were 64 referrals for 55 different students in the spring 2014 semester. Eighteen instructors made early alert referrals in the spring semester.

![Reason for Referral Pie Chart]

- Absences: 61%
- Test/quiz scores: 6%
- Other: 2%
- Troubled Student: 31%

![Academic Warning/Suspension Pie Chart]

- Students who received an early alert referral but ended up on academic warning/suspension: 18%
- Students ending up on warning/suspension who did not receive an early alert referral: 82%

54% of students who received an early alert referral in the spring semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics
2013-2014 Academic Year

Number of Early Alerts

Number of total referrals
Number of students referred

Fall 2013
Spring 2014

Number of Early Alert Referrals on Academic Warning/Suspension

Fall 2013
Spring 2014

Total number of students on academic warning/suspension
Students referred to early alert on academic warning/suspension
2013-2014 Academic Year

- 154 referrals for 113 students.
- 307 students were placed on academic warning/suspension over the fall/spring semesters.
- 51% of students who were referred for an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning/suspension.
- 74% of referrals were for absenteeism.
- 82% of students on probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Fall and Spring Semester Comparison

**Fall 2013**

- 90 referrals (58 different students)
- 18 instructors participated
- 84% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 48% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 82% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

**Spring 2014**

- 64 referrals (55 different students)
- 18 instructors participated
- 61% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 54% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 82% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.
Early Alert Statistics Fall 2014

There were 108 referrals for 90 different students in the fall 2013 semester. Twenty-three instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

49% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics Spring 2015

There were 49 referrals for 43 different students in the spring 2015 semester. Fourteen instructors made early alert referrals in the spring semester.

**Reason for Referral**
- Absences: 78%
- Test/quiz scores: 14%
- Other: 8%

**Academic Warning/Suspension**
- Students who received an early alert referral but ended up on academic warning/suspension: 15%
- Students ending up on warning/suspension who did not receive an early alert referral: 87%

48% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics
2014-2015 Academic Year

Number of Early Alerts

Number of Early Alert Referrals on Academic Warning/Suspension

Total number of students on academic warning/suspension

Students referred to early alert on academic warning/suspension
2014-2015 Academic Year

- 198 referrals for 92 students.
- 340 students were placed on academic warning/suspension over the fall/spring semesters.
- 48% of students who were referred for an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning/suspension.
- 68% of referrals were for absenteeism.
- 80% of students on probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Fall and Spring Semester Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall 2014</th>
<th>Spring 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>108 referrals (90 different students)</td>
<td>49 referrals (42 different students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 instructors participated</td>
<td>14 instructors participated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74% of referrals were due to absenteeism.</td>
<td>78% of referrals were due to absenteeism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.</td>
<td>48% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.</td>
<td>87% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early Alert Statistics Fall 2015

There were 120 referrals for 71 different students in the fall 2015 semester. Thirteen instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

65% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics Spring 2015

There were 49 referrals for 43 different students in the spring 2015 semester. Fourteen instructors made early alert referrals in the spring semester.

![Reason for Referral](image)

Academic Warning/Suspension

![Academic Warning/Suspension](image)

48% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics
2014-2015 Academic Year

Number of Early Alerts

- Number of total referrals: 108 (Fall 2014), 49 (Spring 2015)
- Number of students referred: 90 (Fall 2014), 43 (Spring 2015)

Number of Early Alert Referrals on Academic Warning/Suspension

- Total number of students on academic warning/suspension: 177 (Fall 2014), 163 (Spring 2015)
- Students referred to early alert on academic warning/suspension: 46 (Fall 2014), 22 (Spring 2015)
2014-2015 Academic Year

- 198 referrals for 92 students.
- 340 students were placed on academic warning/suspension over the fall/spring semesters.
- 48% of students who were referred for an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning/suspension.
- 68% of referrals were for absenteeism.
- 80% of students on probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Fall and Spring Semester Comparison

**Fall 2014**
- 108 referrals (90 different students)
- 23 instructors participated
- 74% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 49% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 74% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

**Spring 2015**
- 49 referrals (42 different students)
- 14 instructors participated
- 78% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 48% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 87% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.
Early Alert Statistics Fall 2016

There were 164 referrals for 97 different students in the fall 2016 semester. Twenty-two instructors made early alert referrals in the fall semester.

51% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics Spring 2017

There were 74 referrals for 57 different students in the spring 2017 semester. Seventeen instructors made early alert referrals in the spring semester.

60% of students who received an early alert referral in the fall semester were not on academic warning/suspension at the end of the semester.
Early Alert Statistics
2016-2017 Academic Year

Number of Early Alerts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 2016</th>
<th>Spring 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of total referrals</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students referred</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Early Alert Referrals on Academic Warning/Suspension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 2016</th>
<th>Spring 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students on academic warning/supension</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students referred to early alert on academic warning/suspension</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2016-2017 Academic Year

- 238 referrals for 154 students.
- 306 students were placed on academic warning/suspension over the fall/spring semesters.
- 54% of students who were referred for an early alert referral did not end up on academic warning/suspension.
- 66% of referrals were for absenteeism.
- 78% of students on probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Fall and Spring Semester Comparison

Fall 2016

- 164 referrals (97 different students)
- 22 instructors participated
- 62% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 51% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 67% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.

Spring 2017

- 74 referrals (57 different students)
- 17 instructors participated
- 73% of referrals were due to absenteeism.
- 60% of students who received an early alert referral were not on academic probation/suspension at the end of the semester.
- 86% of students who were on academic probation/suspension did not receive an early alert referral.
Initiative I

Strengthen and expand opportunities for students to learn and succeed.

» Develop and implement strategies to reduce barriers for student learning.
» Improve the effectiveness of the student advising process.
» Sustain a success rate in the top 20 percent of Iowa community colleges.
» Increase the number of third party certifications available to students.
» Achieve an aggregated transfer GPA equal or above other Iowa community college graduates.
» Utilize a comprehensive education assessment process that verifies and improves student learning.

Initiative II

Increase student enrollment and retention.

» Increase credit hour and headcount enrollment by 1 percent annually.
» Increase non-credit contact hours by 1 percent annually.
» Improve the percentage of area high school graduates attending SWCC immediately after graduation.
» Grow the enrollment of under-represented populations annually.
» Maintain fall to spring student retention at or above 75 percent.
» Raise the institutional graduation rate by 10 percent.
» Develop and implement strategies to enhance student life.
**Initiative III**

Maximize resources to support program and student needs.

- Increase scholarship funds received by students by 5 percent.
- Maximize state, local, and federal funding opportunities.
- Increase contributions to the SWCC Education Foundation by 10 percent.
- Obtain additional grant funding to support program and student needs.
- Develop a comprehensive process for data collection and reporting.

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**Initiative IV**

Provide an innovative environment that supports learning.

- Promote participation in professional development and peer networking opportunities.
- Provide the necessary infrastructure to support learning, enhance productivity, and create a culture of sustainability.
- Maintain an up-to-date master facilities plan to include construction, renovation, and maintenance.
- Sustain and enhance physical learning environments that meet the needs of students, staff, and constituents.
Initiative V

Strengthen and expand regional relationships to provide effective workforce preparation.

» Identify the workforce needs of employers and communities.

» Expand offerings to assist businesses in advancing the skills of their workforce.

» Collaborate with regional partners to address the middle skills gap.