That Push Helps: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring Students' Responses to Receiving an Early Alert

Eric Tammes
z1858393@students.niu.edu

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ABSTRACT

THAT PUSH HELPS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXPLORING STUDENTS’ RESPONSES TO RECEIVING AN EARLY ALERT

Eric Tammes, EdD
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2021
Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, Director

This dissertation examined the decision-making experience of students receiving an early alert notification at a community college and what influenced students’ responses to the alert. Early alert programs are identified as a high-impact persistence practice and may involve significant financial, technology, and personnel investments. Examining how students engage or disconnect from an early alert program may help maximize the institution’s investment and fulfill the program’s intent. Utilizing a qualitative case study, informed by Pascarella’s student-faculty informal contact model, this study sought to fill a gap within the persistence and early alert literature. The study also provided participant-driven guidance toward maximizing student engagement with the institution’s early alert program.

Seventeen participants were interviewed at a midwestern community college located outside a major metropolitan area. Four primary themes emerged from the interview data analysis: students’ self-efficacy influences response decisions; relationships influence students’ response decisions; clear, caring, and actionable messages foster positive student responses; and students desire personal conversations following an early alert. The study prompted a new conceptual model for early alert student decision making.
THAT PUSH HELPS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXPLORING STUDENTS’ RESPONSES TO RECEIVING AN EARLY ALERT

BY

ERIC TAMMES
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DEDICATION

Warmly dedicated in memory of my parents, Earl Tammes and Dorothy Mauer Tammes,

who were proud graduates of two-year colleges
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PREFACE

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE

The dissertation of practice is a scholarly endeavor that explores a complex problem of practice embedded in the work of a professional practitioner (Perry, 2015). The purpose of the dissertation of practice is to prepare students to become scholar practitioners who use practical research and applied theories to improve their practice while contributing to the knowledge base in the field of higher education and student affairs.

This dissertation of practice consists of three artifacts: (a) The dissertation of practice research proposal (Chapter 1). The purpose of this chapter is to showcase the proposal that guided my research focused on community college students’ responses and decision making after an early alert notification. I presented this qualitative case study proposal to my dissertation committee prior to beginning the research project. (b) A manuscript for a scholarly publication (Chapter 2). Based on my dissertation research, I developed a manuscript that could be published in a scholarly journal. This chapter features four key areas that participants highlighted as contributing to their responsiveness after an early alert and a new conceptual model to inform early alert response. I selected a potential scholarly journal for community college professionals and focused my manuscript toward that publication. While not required, I intend to submit this manuscript to the journal for publication after successfully defending the dissertation. (c) A scholarly reflection (Chapter 3). In the final chapter, I reflect on the overall dissertation process,
discuss applications of the project to my professional work, and share my newly gained skills for professional practice and future research.
CHAPTER I
DISSENTATION OF PRACTICE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Introduction

Community colleges educate 5.6 million undergraduate students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). However, only 62% of new students enrolling at two-year colleges for Fall 2018 persisted in higher education just one year later (National Student Clearinghouse [NSC] Research Center, 2019). Community colleges deploy strategies and services that address student persistence and retention, including early alert programs (Bailey et al., 2015; Barefoot, 2004; Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], 2015; Tinto, 2017a). An early alert program links student performance concerns with an intentional outreach process, prompting an intervention that focuses on improved academic outcomes and reduced institutional departure (Hanover Research, 2014; Hansen et al., 2002; Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013). Early alert programs have emerged as a high-impact educational practice to support student success, persistence, and retention (Barefoot, 2004; CCCSE, 2014).

Hanover Research (2014) found that 93% of colleges and universities incorporated an early alert program into their institutional retention initiatives. Four out of five community colleges surveyed by RNL (2019) utilize an early alert program. However, extensive utilization of early alert programs might not equate to perceived effectiveness. RNL (2019) reported that only 13% of academic affairs, student affairs, and retention officers responding to the survey
believed that early alert programs are very effective in supporting student persistence and success. Institutions measure early alert program effectiveness and impact through increases in course grades and completion rates (Brothen et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2002; Simpson, 2014), persistence and retention (Escobido, 2007), communication with faculty (Belcher, 1991; Buyarski et al., 2017), tutoring center appointments (Cai et al., 2015), and “studying harder” (Belcher, 1991; Eimers, 2000). These measurements show mixed results of early alert programs.

Student engagement in early alert programs varies as much as program effectiveness. Student response rates to faculty and staff outreach after receiving an alert typically range from 10%-50% (Buyarski et al., 2017; Cai et al., 2015; Hanover Research, 2014). Students’ experiences with early alert programs and what impacts their decision making following an early alert notification are minimally addressed in higher education literature. The lack of research results in a gap of knowledge about what influences a student’s decision to engage in early alert programs, what actions students take after receiving an alert, how institutional interventions and faculty interaction influence decision making, and whether and how students seek support (Lester et al., 2017).

Purpose Statement

This qualitative case study aims to gain insights into students’ experiences with early alert programs and how students choose to respond after receiving an early alert notification. More specifically, this study will examine students’ decision-making process at Midwest Community College (a pseudonym) after they are referred through an early alert program. Midwest Community College’s early alert program serves as one component of a comprehensive
package of student success initiatives within the institution’s student success framework. The framework serves as a purposeful institutional strategy to help students successfully progress from applying to the college through credential completion. The early alert program seeks to improve course success rates, increase utilization levels of academic support resources (e.g., tutoring and library), and strengthen student connections with faculty. To achieve these goals, a deeper understanding of students’ thoughts, actions, and decisions following an early alert notification will strengthen the program’s effectiveness and maximize impact on student success.

This study will answer the following research question: What influences student decision making following an early alert notification at Midwest Community College (MCC)? Specifically,

1. How does a student’s self-efficacy shape student decision making after an early alert notification?
2. What decisions and actions do an early alert notification prompt students to take?
3. How do institutional interventions influence student decisions and actions following an early alert notification? Institutional interventions include new student transition and onboarding programs, faculty interaction, and case manager interaction.

These research subquestions provide clarity and context to better understand the MCC early alert program’s significant components and add to early alert scholarly research. The institution is currently investing resources to enhance the onboarding, case management, and faculty engagement experience for students. Learning whether these resources factor into students’ decision making will guide the development of the early alert program.
Key Terms

- **case manager**: a staff member assigned to receive early alert notifications and communicate with a student following an early alert notification. This person is most often an academic advisor (Hanover Research, 2014).

- **decision making**: formal and informal actions undertaken by a student. More significant decisions might be addressed a few times during college (e.g., selecting a program of study or transfer institution), a few times per term (e.g., choosing classes), or daily (e.g., completing assignments and utilizing campus resources; Cuba, 2016).

- **early alert notification**: faculty concerns expressed through an early alert system that results in student outreach by a case manager. Concerns include inconsistent attendance, poor performance on class assignments, or diminished academic skills (e.g., note-taking or study strategies; Barefoot, 2004; Hanover Research, 2014).

- **early alert programs**: structured, institutional interventions using a referral network of faculty and staff that provide holistic support for students needing assistance (Barefoot, 2004; Hanover Research, 2014). These interventions interrupt a student’s concern that could negatively impact course completion, academic performance, or continued enrollment.

- **early alert systems**: a reporting process or tool to collect, manage, and maintain records of early alerts. Institutions typically create or purchase a software system to submit early alerts and track case management activities. Systems might link to a learning management system and auto-generate early alerts based on grades and attendance (Hanover Research, 2014; Tampke, 2013).
• **outreach**: communication by a case manager who contacts the student after receipt of an early alert. Communication from the case manager may be in the form of a phone call, email message, text message, or in-person conversation (Hanover Research, 2014).

• **student populations**: groups of students sharing a common background, experience, or identity. Examples include student-athletes, students in developmental courses, international students, and students of color (Hanover Research, 2014).

• **self-efficacy**: the belief in an individual’s ability to plan, execute, and finish a certain goal or task, sometimes in the midst of challenge or self-doubt (Bandura, 1997).

Literature Review

An examination of enrollment management and early alert program literature reveals the widespread implementation of early alert systems to improve student success, persistence, retention, and graduation. Institutions design programs to address student needs targeting specific populations or at full scale. Outcomes are as diverse as the students served by early alert programs and tend to be assessed by a handful of measures. Early alert systems may require active faculty adoption to maximize the tool’s functionality, and participation levels vary across institutions. However, the extant literature seems to lack a deeper understanding of how students respond to early alert notifications and students’ decision-making processes as a result of an early alert notification.
Retention and Persistence in Community Colleges

Community colleges provide access to post-secondary education for a defined local district or area. In the early 1900s, two-year colleges focused on homemaking skills and labor training. Institutional expansion in the 1950s and 1960s focused on community improvement, workforce development, and general education courses that transfer to four-year colleges and universities (Grubbs, 2019). Contemporary community colleges provide access to affordable higher education, often to students from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and typically operate in an open admissions framework (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Grubbs, 2019). This open admissions design creates access and opportunity for students but requires a purposeful institutional focus on persistence, retention, and student success to ensure goal, credential, and transfer completion (Grubbs, 2019; Miller et al., 2009).

Human development theories offer a broad foundation for understanding student persistence and retention. Tinto’s (1975) student integration model and Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory provide contrasting, yet complementary perspectives focused on the college experience. Tinto focused on student departure from college as a process and compendium of institutional, internal, and external factors that influence students’ decisions to remain enrolled. By understanding why students leave, an institution can adjust programming and services to meet student needs (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Tinto 1975). Astin (1984) asserted that involving and engaging students in their educational experience, both inside and outside the classroom, yield a richer depth of learning and personal development. Astin cautioned that strictly deploying or acquiring resources, services, and programs does not ensure increased student participation or engagement. Colleges must embed intentional experiences into the institutional culture and
weave curricular and co-curricular programming into a purposeful student experience (Astin, 1984). Tinto’s and Astin’s frameworks have been used to understand retention and involvement in the community college context (Fike & Fike, 2008; Heverly, 1999; Nakajima et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). These studies led to changes in how students are engaged and supported at community colleges, but persistence and retention continue to be an issue.

Persistence and retention data reveal that community college access does not translate into student success and college completion, particularly for students of color and student enrollment status. The NSC Research Center (2019) reported that first-year student retention rates of students returning to the same institution range from 60% for full-time students to 45% for part-time students. Persistence rates at any post-secondary institution are modestly higher at 70% for full-time and 53% for part-time students. Most alarming are equity gaps by race and ethnicity. Latinx students continue in higher education at a rate of 5% less than White students and African American students at 12% less (NSC Research Center, 2019). Community colleges face a clarion call to improve persistence, retention, and graduation rates, particularly for students of color and part-time students, to effectively balance educational access and success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bragg & Durham, 2012).

The Structure, Development, and Prevalence of Early Alert Programs

The CCCSE (2014) identified early alert programs as one of 13 high-impact practices that positively contribute to persistence and graduation through improved grades and greater engagement in the classroom. The design of early alert programs addresses student attrition issues by intervening as soon as an academic or success concern is observed (Barefoot, 2004;
Typically, faculty report one or more concerns that adversely affect a student’s performance and potential success (e.g., nonattendance or low grades) through the institution’s early alert system, triggering student outreach by the case manager. The case manager typically conducts the outreach to the student as quickly as possible, discusses potential solutions, refers the student to services (e.g., tutoring or academic advising), and communicates the results of the interaction to the faculty member submitting the alert (Bourdon & Carducci, 2002; Cartnal & Hagen, 1999; Escobido, 2007; Hanover Research, 2014; Hansen et al., 2002; Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013; Tinto, 2017b).

Institutions might leverage technology and institutional data to enhance the early alert system’s functionality. Specially designed early alert software systems facilitate the submission of early alerts and storing case management notes (Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013). Nuanced systems deploy automated student communications without a faculty referral based on performance indicators (e.g., absences or missed assignments) recorded in the institution’s learning management system (Bailey et al., 2015; Buyarski et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2017; Reddick et al., 2014). Although these early alert systems are structured to encourage a forward-acting response, students may find the process and information confusing without context or connection to a familiar faculty or staff member (Lester et al., 2017).

Institutions may fully scale an early alert program so faculty can refer students at any time or during key academic mileposts such as the institution’s enrollment census or midterm. An alternate strategy involves targeting early alert programs toward specific student populations such as student-athletes, low-income students, veterans, students of color, or students on academic probation (Bourdon & Carducci, 2002; Hanover Research, 2014; Tampke, 2013).
Early alert programs at community colleges frequently focus on at-risk populations, often students in developmental courses, due to higher course withdrawal and failure rates (Dwyer et al., 2019). However, Barefoot (2004) questioned limiting early alert programs to specific populations as college adjustment and transition needs transcend student backgrounds and identities.

Student communication is a critical component of an early alert program and might influence student responsiveness. Interventions include meetings, phone calls, email messages, and text messages from a case manager or faculty member. Alert interventions frequently occur via email or phone due to efficiency and ease of access (Hanover Research, 2014; Reddick et al., 2014). Timeliness in responding to alerts is critical to swiftly address student needs and abate negative influences. To that end, institutions deploy a defined process to monitor alerts regularly, maintain records of student interactions, share information across departments, and measure program effectiveness (Buyarski et al., 2017; Jayaprakash et al., 2014, Reddick et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013).

Regardless of the design, format, or structure, an early alert program does not assure improved persistence and retention. A network of wrap-around services, including an early alert program, must be embedded into a culture of student success and support (Kuh et al., 2008). Institutions should not view an individual student success program or initiative as the solution for improved participation, retention, or graduation rates (Astin, 1984; Barefoot, 2004).
Early Alert Program Utilization, Impact, and Student Outcomes

Early alert programs yield contradicting outcomes related to effectiveness and student success measures. While four out of five community colleges utilize an early alert program, institutions report modest effectiveness levels (Hanover Research, 2014; RNL, 2019). A survey by RNL (2019) found that 13% of responding community colleges considered an early alert program as very effective and 26% as minimally effective. Studies found differing opinions regarding the effectiveness of an early alert program for online students. Hanover Research (2014) found that academic and student affairs administrators viewed alert programs as slightly more effective for online learners than students in campus-based courses. The RNL (2019) survey, on the other hand, indicated when focusing strictly on online learners at two-year colleges, 62% of administrators responding described an early alert program as minimally effective.

For alerted students, outcomes improve based on a combination of faculty-generated referrals and purposeful interaction by the case manager. Higher levels of term-to-term persistence, year-to-year retention, and final grades resulted when faculty referrals prompted a face-to-face meeting, phone call, or email dialogue with a student to address the concern (Bourdon & Carducci, 2002; Dwyer et al., 2019; Escobido, 2007; Reddick et al., 2014; Richie & Hargrove, 2005; Tampke, 2013). These findings support Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) assertion that success can be enhanced when students interact with a faculty or staff member. However, faculty utilization of an early alert system is a critical link in the process. If faculty do not submit early alert notifications or “buy in” to the program, students needing support services may not connect
with institutional resources or address impediments to improved academic success (Capps, 2012; Lester et al., 2017; Norin, 2010).

Research focused on the type and amount of communication with students following receipt of an alert is limited, as is an understanding of how it may or may not impact student decision making. Findings from these limited studies are mixed. Both Hansen et al. (2002) and Brothen et al. (2003) concluded that students’ course success rates were no different based on the type of message or the volume of messages. Studying an alert program targeting community college students enrolled in developmental education classes, Simpson (2014) concluded that the use of early alerts did not result in a statistically significant impact on student outcomes. A more in-depth analysis revealed issues with faculty and students fully understanding the program’s purpose and the absence of a structured, formal process for faculty to submit alerts. However, Richie and Hargrove (2005) discovered that an early alert program using telephone outreach to students who missed English classes resulted in improved attendance, higher final grades, and increased persistence rates for the following term compared to a control group receiving no outreach. The researchers suggested that a personal outreach to express concern encouraged students to modify their decision making about class attendance. Though demonstrating care for students aligns with retention best practices, a limitation of the study is that it was completed in fall 2000 and spring 2001, before the widespread use of smartphones and electronic communications.

Early alert programs focused on specific student populations yielded findings as diverse as the students within the populations. Student alert outcomes were influenced by outreach strategies, types of courses, and frequency of contact. For example, Dwyer et al. (2019)
discovered statistically significant increases in term-to-term persistence among alerted community college students enrolled in developmental mathematics and English classes. The most considerable improvement in persistence rates was for students in mathematics classes reported to be at risk for failing (Dwyer et al., 2019). Similarly, a study of Latinx students at a community college found that students who were referred through and participated in the early alert program persisted to the next term at a higher rate than the overall student population (Escobido, 2007). The referrals in this study prompted intrusive, frequent follow-up by assigned student success advisors; thus, the success of the program may be due to the intrusiveness of the referrals (Escobido, 2007). Because these studies focus on specific student populations, it is uncertain if the same outcomes would apply to fully scaled alert programs. A student population’s impact of shared experiences, dedicated resources, and community programming might positively influence student performance more than full-scale institutional retention programs, including early alert systems. Therefore, the emphasis on early alert programs for student populations at community colleges might occlude retention and research.

Studies focused on early alert programs typically conclude with either positive or neutral student outcomes from implementing a program. However, instances of adverse outcomes exist, including increased withdrawal rates and decreased student self-efficacy. For example, Buyarski et al. (2017) found that students earned lower grades in course sections where alerts were submitted compared to sections where faculty did not use early alerts. Potential causes may relate to students feeling a sense of not meeting expectations and “giving up” rather than persisting, seeking assistance, or using the alert as a motivator to improve (Buyarski et al., 2017). Students may also be more likely to withdraw from one or more courses due to interventions
about academic performance rather than remaining in the class only to earn a failing grade (Cartnal & Hagen, 1999). However, the case manager intervention may assist students with properly following the institution’s official withdrawal process and avoiding consequences for an incorrect withdrawal (Hudson, 2005).

**Student Decision Making, Responsiveness, and Subsequent Action**

A significant research gap relates to understanding students’ decision-making process, responsiveness, and action undertaken in response to an early alert notification. Cuba (2016) found that college students view decision making as an opportunity for self-enrichment or an obstacle course to avoid uncomfortable experiences or potential pitfalls. Early alert program research primarily focuses on the self-development actions taken by students and subsequent impact. However, the measures of self-development action and overall alert responsiveness are as diverse as study findings.

Research indicates that students often fail to respond or take action based on the early alert. For example, Hanover Research (2014) discovered average student response rates below 50% in an examination of early alert data from 400 institutions. Buyarski et al. (2017) found that, of students referred through an early alert system with a recommendation to talk with the course instructor, only 1 in 10 students communicated with faculty. Similarly, Cai et al. (2015) discovered that 15% of students alerted for low performance in a developmental mathematics class followed through with recommendations to meet with a tutor. Students’ lack of responsiveness may be due to not reading or opening email messages regarding the alerts (Buyarski et al., 2017) or students may already be aware of academic performance issues, thus
the early alert notification merely reinforces their reality (Brothen et al., 2003). Students may also hesitate to respond to an early alert message if sent via an automated early alert software system as the email lacks personalization and appears generic (Brothen et al., 2003). A more effective way to reach students may be a personal email, phone, or text contact by a faculty member or case manager (Hanover, 2014; Reddick et al., 2014), especially if that person possesses sufficient information about the concern to recommend the best course of action (Buyarski et al., 2017).

Examples of increased decision making and responsiveness dot the early alert program literature. Follow-up surveys sent to alerted students indicated that students take corrective actions after the alert (Eimers, 2000, Faulconer et al., 2014). For example, based on a follow-up survey emailed to over 800 alerted students at the University of Missouri, Eimers (2000) found that 90% of responding students recalled the early alert communication. Over three-quarters reported that they studied more, and half worked on organization skills and talked with a parent or friend to improve performance (Eimers, 2000). More than half considered the alert as a “wake-up call” to improve course performance (Eimers, 2000). Similarly, a promising 85% of alerted students stated that they took corrective action after receiving an early alert in a survey conducted by Faulconer et al. (2014). Limitations of these studies are low response rates (for example, Eimers’ study had a response rate of 30%; Faulconer et al. (2014) did not reveal the survey response rate) and response bias based on student responsiveness; students opting to complete a survey might be the same students who are apt to respond to early alert communication.
Regardless of the outcome measurements, a student’s self-efficacy, decision-making process, relationship with the faculty and the institution, and actions taken after an early alert notification might ultimately determine an early alert program’s impact. Students not performing well in coursework may know the recommended steps to succeed but may not be following through and seeking assistance (Dembo & Seli, 2004). Assessing only academic performance would thus not reveal the root cause of low grades, mainly how to best support students’ “skill and will” to succeed (Dembo & Seli, 2004, p. 10). The method of addressing skill and will also matters. Addressing academic areas for skill improvement is best shared by a faculty member or case manager due to existing relationships and trust (Achilles et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2017).

Students perceived notifications sent by an automated early alert system or unfamiliar person as less trustworthy (Lester et al., 2017) or as strangers “peering over students’ shoulders” (Eimers, 2000). The impact of students’ will to take action is visible in a study of survey completion and student success. Students who responded to a new-student survey in the first semester achieved higher first-semester grade point averages (GPAs) and were more likely to be retained into the sophomore year (Woosley, 2005).

The will to take action may also be based on the timeframe and academic self-efficacy. Belcher (1991) found that students in academic difficulty and alerted for the first time were more likely to take some kind of action, such as studying more or seeking faculty assistance. In subsequent semesters, students reported that the information was less beneficial. Belcher (1991) noted that “even if new information is gained, students may not take the necessary steps to either improve their performance or withdraw from their classes” (p. 8). Lack of response might be connected to lower levels of self-efficacy, goal orientation, and connection to the institution (Cai...
et al., 2015; Chemers et al., 2001; Hanover Research, 2014; Stephenson et al., 2020; Woosley, 2005). Higher levels of academic self-efficacy offer a greater prediction of academic performance than measures such as a high school GPA (Chemers et al. 2001).

Summary

Community colleges seek higher levels of student persistence, retention, and credential completion. Investments in programs and services aim to engage students and provide timely support. Institutions have adopted early alert programs as a commonly accepted student success best practice. Studies focused most frequently on program design, the use of technology, and student outcomes. Overall outcomes and student participation levels have been reported, in the aggregate, as modest. Research directed toward students’ decision making following an early alert notification is minimally addressed in the literature. Given these factors, a deeper understanding of students’ thoughts, decisions, and actions and the influence of institutional interventions and faculty interaction could enhance the investment, impact, structure, and viability of the early alert program at Midwest Community College.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks will guide this study: Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence and Pascarella’s (1980) student-faculty informal contact model. Tinto (2017b) suggested that students do not seek to be retained by an institution, but rather persist in higher education. Tinto (2017b) argues that motivation is an underpinning of persistence, such that “students have to want to persist and expend the effort to do so even when faced with the
challenges they sometimes encounter” (p. 255). Tinto proposed a model whereby a student’s combination of self-efficacy, a sense of belonging within the institution, and perceptions of the institution’s curriculum inform motivation and subsequent persistence (Figure 1). In particular, self-efficacy informs how a student makes decisions, accomplishes tasks and goals, and manages roadblocks in the educational process (Tinto, 2017b).

Figure 1. Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence (Tinto, 2017b).

Tinto’s (2017b) model looks inward by exploring how students’ thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions shape their motivation and thus their persistence. To maximize the model’s success, Tinto (2017b) argues that institutions must integrate first-year experience programs, early alert systems, purposeful advising and counseling, and engaged learning through pedagogy and faculty student support. Pascarella’s (1980) conceptual framework provides additional insights into the ways in which institutions can influence student persistence through such interventions.
Pascarella’s (1980) conceptual framework considers how institutional factors, informal contact with faculty, and overall college experiences, in addition to student background characteristics, affect academic outcomes and student persistence or withdrawal from college (Figure 2). The model emphasizes the importance of relationships with faculty, an important aspect to consider when exploring an early alert program because faculty typically assume a critical role in these programs by initiating an alert notification (Hanover Research, 2014; Norin, 2010). The model further suggests that prior educational experiences, institutional structures, and overall college experiences (e.g., extracurricular activities or peer contact) might influence a student’s engagement level in an early alert program (Pascarella, 1980).

Figure 2. Pascarella’s conceptual model for research on student-faculty informal contact (Pascarella, 1980).
Utilizing both Tinto’s (2017b) model and Pascarella’s (1980) conceptual framework as the lens for this study of students’ decision making following an early alert notification highlights the need to look at (a) students’ self-efficacy and how this self-efficacy shapes students’ motivation to respond to an early alert, (b) faculty interactions with students and how faculty may influence students’ decision making after an early alert, and (c) a variety of other interrelated factors from student background experiences to institutional factors and other college experiences. Combining these two models thus provides an opportunity to look at student decision making in-depth and consider a variety of aspects that may shape these decisions.

Research Design

This study will deploy a qualitative case study design to learn about students’ decision-making process following an early alert notification at a community college. Qualitative research centers on participants’ perspectives and meaning making about a topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a higher education setting, qualitative research strengthens the understanding of student learning and encourages the inclusion of potentially overlooked or marginalized participants in qualitative studies (Jones et al., 2014). Further, a qualitative study provides a robust understanding of the research problem and how it intersects with the participant experience (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A qualitative approach will offer a holistic and inclusive exploration of the decision-making experience, including shared institutional and learning experiences as well as individual student considerations in navigating the early alert decision-making process.
I will approach this study from a constructivist epistemology, a process of constructing rather than creating meaning through experiences and social context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jones et al., 2014). A constructivist approach helps make meaning and interprets people’s experiences to ultimately identify themes or behaviors that could lead to improved outcomes among populations and communities (Jones et al., 2014). Constructivism also focuses on interactions among people and draws from an individual’s historical and cultural life experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The constructivist worldview aligns with this study’s goal to gain a richer understanding of students’ decision-making processes. I am seeking to learn about human interaction and institutional contexts that inform students’ actions and provide participants with an opportunity to make meaning of the early alert experience.

This study will use a case study design to maximize the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the topic within a specific, clearly defined context. Case study research focuses on a phenomenon bounded by a particular place and time and draws from richly descriptive data from various sources (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this study, the phenomenon is the early alert program and subsequent decision-making processes by alerted students. The case is bounded by time and place: early alerts submitted within one or two academic terms at Midwest Community College (MCC). The design includes opportunities for rich descriptions through participant narratives, providing information sources to address the real-world nature of the research topic (Yin, 2014). Interviews will be conducted with students who responded to outreach as well as those who did not to gain different perspectives. Participants will be interviewed one time to gain both breadth and depth of the early alert experience. In addition, descriptive statistics related to early alert faculty utilization rates, leading reasons for early alert
notifications, and student response rates will be included in the study. An analysis of these data will help triangulate the findings and ensure internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My purposeful use of a descriptive research framework will emphasize my desire to learn about the early alert decision-making phenomenon within the context of the early alert program (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

**Research Site**

The case for this study is MCC, a community college outside a major metropolitan city, enrolling 13,000 students within 40 transfer programs and nearly 200 career degrees and certificates. MCC enrolls a diverse student community measured by enrollment status (27% full-time students, 73% part-time students), student age (61% are 24 years old or younger, 39% are over 24 years old), and race (35% Latinx, 7% African American, 46% Caucasian, and 12% other races or international students). MCC is an Achieving the Dream (ATD) member institution, an organization supporting community colleges seeking to improve student access, equity, and college completion (ATD, 2020). Through the college’s intentional involvement with ATD, MCC has defined student success as an institutional environment where every student receives personalized and culturally-relevant experiences from start to finish with a study-ready focus. MCC is actively creating an institutional culture focused on improved student success and implementing programs like early alert to eliminate equity gaps in performance, persistence, and graduation.

The case will be bounded by time, focusing on early alerts submitted during MCC’s 16-week Spring 2021 semester. Approximately 500 early alerts are submitted each fall or spring
semester by approximately 125 MCC faculty. The MCC early alert system began as a pilot student success project in Spring 2013 to support students in select developmental mathematics and English courses. The system was scaled in tandem with a new academic coaching program to support all students in developmental education courses beginning in 2014. Since that time, additional student populations have been added into the early alert system, including new students, student-athletes, and international students. Since Summer 2020, faculty may submit an early alert for any student currently enrolled in a college-level course. Faculty submit an early alert notification for students through the course roster in the MCC’s student information system. Faculty participation is optional, and the alert system is not connected to the learning management system (LMS).

I selected this single case because it provides a holistic account of an early alert program. While the program started with a focus on special populations, it is no longer limited to just a small subpopulation of students. In addition, I will have easy access to the participants as a MCC employee and the early alert program director. Thus, this study will not only add to the literature but also provide valuable insights to the institution and may lead to changes in program implementation. Specifically, the study is intended to provide recommendations for enhancing the institution’s early alert program, maximizing student engagement in the early alert experience, and identifying best practices for faculty and staff to deepen student engagement in the early alert program. The findings from the study will be shared with the college’s senior leadership team and academic deans.
Participants

The pool of eligible participants for this study will be college-level, for-credit students who received one or more early alert notifications using the defined MCC early alert program protocol. The protocol currently involves a faculty member completing an online early alert referral form in the MCC student information system, an automatic assignment of the early alert to a staff case manager, and communication by the case manager to the student via phone, email, or text message within 48 hours. Eligible student participants will represent a diverse pool based on age, race, academic program, enrollment level, and credential completion goal. Students alerted in the Fall 2020, Spring 2021 and Summer 2021 terms at MCC will be eligible. I will prioritize students enrolled in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 for the study and invite Summer 2021 students to participate only if there are insufficient responses from eligible Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 students.

Participants will be recruited from the pool of alerted students using an emailed invitation and student interest form sent by the MCC registrar, the student’s academic success advisor, or the academic success dean. The invitation will explain the purpose of the study and the expected time commitment. The invitation will also highlight that participants who complete the interview will receive a $25 gift card. The interest form will ask critical information for sampling purposes (e.g., name, contact information, academic program of study, enrollment status, race, and age), and participants will be complete the form online using Qualtrics. Participants will be selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy. Maximum variation sampling will help gain a breadth of student experiences related to the early alert phenomenon and include diverse voices in the data collection process (Jones et al., 2014). Participants will be selected based on
maximum variation related to credential pursued (i.e., certificate, an associate career program, or associate transfer program), enrollment status (i.e., full time or part time), outreach responsiveness (i.e., did or did not reply to the case manager following the alert notification), age, and race when possible. Based on these criteria, a minimum sample of 20 participants is anticipated to reasonably address the phenomenon. Interviews will be conducted until experiences and themes repeat and reach a saturation point, thereby maximizing data collection and the sample size (Jones et al., 2014). Saturation is achieved when new data no longer provides different themes or experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additional interviews will be conducted if new data continues to reveal fresh perspectives.

Before recruiting participants for the study, I will obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of both MCC and Northern Illinois University. Confidentiality will be addressed with an informed consent form that each participant will receive and complete as part of the online student interest form. I will review the consent form details with the participants at the start of the interview to ensure all participant questions are addressed and confirm participant consent through a verbal response. Participants will be asked to sign the consent form before the interview begins. Participants will be notified of the option to stop participating in the research project at any point in the process, and pseudonyms will be utilized in the record-keeping, data analysis, and reporting processes.

Data Collection

An in-depth understanding of the case will be gained through individual interviews with participants. Using interviews for data collection will yield rich and individualized information
that directly relates to the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Semi-structured interviews allow me to gather broad findings from participants while allowing opportunities for clarification and personalization (Jones et al., 2014). I designed questions to seek breadth of decisions and the impact of interactions rather than depth of targeted experiences (see Appendix A). Each student participant will be interviewed one time for approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted either in person at a neutral and nondistracting location or using virtual meeting technology. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis so the conversation’s full context and nuances can be understood. Participants will have the option to end the interview at any time.

The interview will begin with discussing the informed consent document, the study purpose, and the timeline for the interview and necessary follow-up activities. I will seek to establish rapport and learn about the participant’s goals before beginning the prepared questions. A series of open-ended questions will focus on participants’ experiences at MCC, reflections on self-efficacy, interaction with the early alert program, decision making in response to receiving the alert, the alert’s impact, and how institutional interventions might have influenced participants’ decisions. Open-ended questions will encourage active conversation by the participant and reduce the risk of asking leading or loaded questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I will seek to minimize unnecessary or extra comments so the interview time can be devoted to participant dialogue (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Participants will be invited to ask clarifying questions or choose not to answer a particular question. At the conclusion, participants will be invited to provide any additional information that might relate to the study, and I will clarify the next steps in the research process.
Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis will follow a simultaneous procedure of reviewing data while interviews are occurring (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because each interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, a thorough analysis of the interview will be conducted to understand participants’ experiences, contexts, and nuances. The individual transcripts will be read carefully to ensure familiarity with the interview content. Data analysis of the interviews will be completed through a two-step transcript coding process. Transcripts will initially be coded using an open coding process to summarize interview responses into broad groupings and then moving to an axial coding process to find interconnections and themes. The axial coding process will reduce a more extensive set of open codes into a smaller selection of themes, and the open codes will be utilized to describe what occurred with each of the themes (Jones et al., 2014). This two-step process will facilitate the grouping of interconnected and related codes (Jones et al., 2014). As Hancock and Algozzine (2017) recommended, a keen focus on the research question will be maintained throughout the coding and summarizing process. Exemplary statements will be identified in the transcripts to illuminate themes and provide examples of participants’ experiences, decisions, and interactions. These statements will be incorporated as appropriate into the final study document.

Trustworthiness and Positionality Statement

Confirming this study’s findings will be accomplished through intentional strategies including member checking, a memoing strategy, use of rich and thick descriptions, a positionality statement, and triangulation between descriptive statistics of the MCC early alert
program and the interview data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Each interviewee will complete a two-step member-checking process: 1) a copy of the individual interview transcript will be provided via email to each participant to confirm the accuracy and provide clarification, and 2) a preliminary list of themes and findings will be provided via email to participants to review and provide feedback. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) recommend this member-checking process as “perhaps the most powerful strategy to confirm a report’s findings” (p. 71). Accuracy of the transcript and list of themes will be confirmed via email or a follow-up call based on the student’s preference or availability. I will revise themes and findings based on participants’ feedback.

Next, I will utilize a memoing strategy during individual interviews to allow reflection about the intersection of my personal experiences and interpretation of results. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested this strategy to address reflexivity and continually consider how personal opinions might shape the study results. Third, I will include rich and thick descriptions of the findings to enhance the study’s validity and provide a more realistic understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thick descriptions require reporting a decision or action intertwined with an interpretation of the participant’s intentions, contexts, circumstances, and cultural underpinnings (Jones et al., 2014).

The final strategy is incorporating a positionality statement to reflect my personal understanding and experiences regarding the study topic and abatement of possible effects. Merriam (1998) recommended acknowledging individual experiences from the beginning of a study and taking steps to limit any influence on the study. My approach to this study is through the lens of my 28-year career in higher education that has primarily focused on student transition,
success, and completion. I am responsible for the early alert program in my current role at MCC and managed an early alert program at a prior institution. I have supervised staff responsible for contacting students after an early alert referral from faculty. I have also managed a technology system to receive, track, and report on early alert program outcomes.

I maintain an assumption that an early alert program intends to effect positive change from the current state in a student’s academic journey to a different state. I believe that the desired change is most often to improve academic performance, attendance, and overall engagement in the learning environment. A secondary change is encouraging a student to decide to withdraw from the course rather than receiving a lower final grade. A guiding principle that I maintain in every aspect of my professional experience is that students do not enroll in higher education planning to fail or not complete courses. My professional experience and knowledge of early alert programs require me to minimize any potential bias in the research process. I will maintain a neutral and external perspective during the research process, including my verbal and nonverbal communication during interviews. I will also include a positionality statement in any reports or publications related to this study.

Potential Limitations of the Research

Limitations of this research study exist. First, gaining a rich understanding of student decision making is a paradox: students who decided not to engage in the early alert program might be equally unlikely to respond to the study participation invitation. This phenomenon was addressed by Woosley (2005) and Stephenson et al. (2020), whereas students struggling academically or feeling less connected to the institution might be less likely to respond to a
survey. A strategy to address this limitation is providing a gift card to encourage a broad representation of student decision making. However, students actively engaged in the alert process could still dominate the interview process. Second, this study focuses exclusively on the student experience in an early alert program. Engaging faculty and staff in the research process could be included in a future study to gain a holistic perspective of the early alert decision-making process.

Significance

The findings of this study will contribute to a growing body of research about community college student persistence. Students, parents, and taxpaying community college district residents expect improved accountability and a renewed focus on successful student completion (Bailey et al., 2015). To that end, institutions adopted early alert programs to improve student persistence and embraced these programs as a retention best practice (Barefoot, 2004). Past studies focused on program design, the use of technology, and outcomes for targeted cohorts of students (Buyarski et al., 2017; Cai et al., 2015; Escobido, 2007; Hansen et al., 2002; Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013). The literature reveals that student response and participation levels vary among institution types, sizes, and student populations (Hanover Research, 2014; Hudson, 2005). Research focused specifically on student decision making and responsiveness to early alert programs is minimally addressed, particularly at community colleges. Better understanding students’ decision making after an early alert is received could help institutions improve the effectiveness of these programs.
This study also has practical significance for Midwest Community College and for me as the researcher. The study will help MCC and myself understand how students make decisions in response to receiving early alert notifications from the college. This knowledge will guide the ongoing development of MCC’s early alert program, including student outreach, technology solutions, institutional programming (e.g., new student orientation and student success courses), faculty development, and strengthening a college culture oriented toward student readiness and student success. This study’s findings are also intended to contribute toward reducing equity gaps in student success for students of color and Pell-eligible students. Improved awareness of student decision making during the early alert process will enhance the college’s alert program’s impact and viability and, ultimately, students’ persistence and graduation from MCC.
CHAPTER 2

THAT PUSH HELPS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXPLORING STUDENTS’ RESPONSES TO RECEIVING AN EARLY ALERT

Abstract

This qualitative case study, informed by Pascarella’s (1980) student-faculty informal contact model, examined the decision-making experience of students receiving an early alert notification at a community college and what influenced students’ responses to the alert. Seventeen participants were interviewed. Four primary themes emerged from the research: students’ self-efficacy influences response decisions; relationships influence students’ response decisions; clear, caring, and actionable messages foster positive student responses; and students desire personal conversations following an early alert. The study prompted a new conceptual model for early alert student decision making.

Keywords: Early alert, decision making, responsiveness, faculty relationships, case manager, academic support, community college, self-efficacy, motivation, retention, persistence
Introduction

Community colleges annually educate 5.6 million undergraduate students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, only 62% of new students enrolling at two-year colleges for Fall 2018 persisted in higher education just one year later (National Student Clearinghouse [NSC] Research Center, 2021). Most alarming are equity gaps by race and ethnicity. Latinx students persist in higher education at a rate of 5% less than White students and African American students at 12% less (NSC Research Center, 2021). Community colleges face a clarion call to improve persistence, retention, and graduation rates to effectively balance educational access and success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bragg & Durham, 2012). Community colleges frequently deploy early alert programs as a student success strategy to improve persistence and retention (Bailey et al., 2015; Barefoot, 2004; Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], 2015; Tinto, 2017a). An early alert program links student performance concerns with an intentional outreach process, prompting an intervention that focuses on improved academic outcomes and reduced institutional departure (Hanover Research, 2014; Hansen et al., 2002; Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013).

Early alert programs have emerged as a popular high impact educational practice to support student success, persistence, and retention (Barefoot, 2004; CCCSE, 2014; Finchum, 2016). Hanover Research (2014) found that 93% of all colleges and universities incorporated an early alert program into their institutional retention initiatives. Though four out of five community colleges utilize an early alert program, institutions report modest effectiveness levels (Hanover Research, 2014; RNL, 2019). A survey by RNL (2019) revealed that 13% of
responding community colleges considered an early alert program as very effective and 26% as 
minimally effective in supporting student persistence and success. Institutions measure early 
alert program effectiveness and impact through increases in course grades and completion rates 
(Brothen et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2002; Simpson, 2014), persistence and retention (Escobido, 
2007), communication with faculty (Belcher, 1991; Buyarski et al., 2017), tutoring center 
appointments (Cai et al., 2015), and “studying harder” (Belcher, 1991; Eimers, 2000). These 
measurements show mixed results of early alert programs. 

Student engagement in early alert programs varies as much as program effectiveness. 
Research indicates that students often fail to respond following the early alert, may take action 
leading to unintended outcomes such as course withdrawal (Lester et al., 2017), or struggle with 
self-reflection and sense making (Verbert et al., 2013). Student response rates to faculty and staff 
outreach after receiving an alert typically range from 10%-50% (Buyarski et al., 2017; Cai et al., 
2015; Hanover Research, 2014). Students’ experiences with early alert programs and what 
impacts their responses and actions following an early alert notification are minimally addressed 
in higher education literature. Thus, this qualitative case study explored students’ experiences 
with an early alert program at a community college. The study specifically focused on why 
students chose to respond and take actions, or not, after receiving an early alert notification.
Literature Review

An examination of enrollment management and early alert program literature reveals the widespread implementation of early alert systems to improve student success, persistence, retention, and graduation. Structures and outcomes are as diverse as the students served by early alert programs and tend to be assessed by a handful of measures. The extant literature seems to lack a deeper understanding of how students respond to early alert notifications and students’ decision-making processes as a result of an early alert notification.

The Structure, Development, and Processes of Early Alert Programs

The design of early alert programs addresses student attrition issues by intervening as soon as an academic or success concern is observed (Barefoot, 2004; Finchum, 2016; Hansen et al., 2002; Tampke, 2013). Typically, faculty report one or more concerns that adversely affect a student’s performance and potential success (e.g., nonattendance or low grades) through the institution’s early alert system, triggering student outreach by the case manager. The case manager typically communicates with the student, discusses potential solutions, refers the student to services (e.g., tutoring or academic advising), and shares the outcomes with the faculty member submitting the alert (Bourdon & Carducci, 2002; Cartnal & Hagen, 1999; Escobido, 2007; Hanover Research, 2014; Hansen et al., 2002; Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013; Tinto, 2017b).

Institutions might leverage technology and institutional data to enhance the early alert system’s functionality. Early alert software systems facilitate the submission of early alerts and storing case management notes (Jayaprakash et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013), including automated
student communications without a faculty referral based on performance indicators (e.g., absences or missed assignments) recorded in the institution’s learning management system (Bailey et al., 2015; Buyarski et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2017; Reddick et al., 2014). Although these early alert systems are structured to encourage a forward-acting response, students may find the process and information confusing without context or connection to a familiar faculty or staff member (Lester et al., 2017; Verbert et al., 2013).

Student communication is a critical component of an early alert program and might influence student responsiveness. Interventions include meetings, phone calls, email messages, or text messages from a case manager or faculty member. Alert interventions frequently occur via email or phone due to efficiency and ease of access (Hanover Research, 2014; Reddick et al., 2014). Institutions deploy a defined process to monitor alerts regularly, maintain records of student interactions, share information across departments, and measure program effectiveness (Buyarski et al., 2017; Jayaprakash et al., 2014, Reddick et al., 2014; Tampke, 2013).

**Early Alert Program Effectiveness, Impact, and Student Outcomes**

Early alert programs yield contradicting outcomes related to effectiveness and student success measures. Hanover Research (2014) discovered average student response rates below 50% in an examination of early alert data from 400 institutions. Buyarski et al. (2017) found that, of students referred through an early alert system with a recommendation to talk with the course instructor, only 1 in 10 students communicated with faculty. Similarly, Cai et al. (2015) discovered that 15% of students alerted for low performance in a developmental mathematics class followed through with recommendations to meet with a tutor. Students’ lack of
responsiveness may be due to not reading or opening email messages regarding the alerts (Buyarski et al., 2017) or students may already be aware of academic performance issues, thus the early alert notification merely reinforces their reality (Brothen et al., 2003). Students may also hesitate to respond to an early alert message if sent via an automated early alert software system because the email lacks personalization and appears generic (Brothen et al., 2003). A more effective way to reach students may be a personal email, phone, or text contact by a faculty member or case manager (Hanover Research, 2014; Reddick et al., 2014), especially if that person possesses sufficient information about the concern to recommend the best course of action (Buyarski et al., 2017).

Among alerted students, outcomes improve based on a combination of faculty-generated referrals and purposeful interaction by the case manager. Higher levels of term-to-term persistence, year-to-year retention, and final grades resulted when faculty referrals prompted a face-to-face meeting, phone call, or email dialogue with a student to address the concern (Bourdon & Carducci, 2002; Escobido, 2007; Reddick et al., 2014; Richie & Hargrove, 2005; Tampke, 2013). These findings support Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) assertion that success can be enhanced when students interact with a faculty or staff member.

Research focused on the type and amount of communication with students following receipt of an alert is limited and findings mixed, as is an understanding of how it may or may not impact student responsiveness and decision making. Both Hansen et al. (2002) and Brothen et al. (2003) concluded that students’ course success rates were no different based on the type of message or the volume of messages. Studying an alert program targeting community college students enrolled in developmental education classes, Simpson (2014) concluded that the use of
early alerts did not result in a statistically significant impact on student outcomes. A more in-depth analysis revealed issues with faculty and students fully understanding the program’s purpose and the absence of a structured, formal process for faculty to submit alerts. However, Richie and Hargrove (2005) discovered that an early alert program using telephone outreach to students who missed English classes resulted in improved attendance, higher final grades, and increased persistence rates for the following term compared to a control group receiving no outreach. Though demonstrating care for students aligns with retention best practices, a limitation of the study is that it was completed in Fall 2000 and Spring 2001, before the widespread use of smartphones and electronic communications.

Studies focused on early alert programs typically conclude with either positive or neutral student outcomes. However, instances of adverse outcomes exist, including increased withdrawal rates as well as decreased student self-efficacy and persistence rates. For example, Buyarski et al. (2017) found that students earned lower grades in course sections where alerts were submitted compared to sections where faculty did not use early alerts. Potential causes may relate to students feeling a sense of not meeting expectations and “giving up” rather than persisting, seeking assistance, or using the alert as a motivator to improve (Buyarski et al., 2017). Dwyer et al. (2019) discovered that the early alert reason (e.g., attendance, danger of failing) and the type of course impacted persistence of community college students. Academic performance alerts in developmental mathematics classes yielded higher persistence rates, but attendance alerts in college-level courses negatively impacted persistence (Dwyer et al., 2019). Students may also be more likely to withdraw from one or more courses due to interventions about academic
performance rather than remaining in the class only to earn a failing grade (Cartnal & Hagen, 1999; Lester et al., 2017).

**Student Decision Making, Self-Efficacy, and Response**

Students’ decision-making processes are a complicated mixture of self-efficacy, goal setting, and motivation (Lester et al., 2017). College students may view decision making as an opportunity for self-enrichment or an obstacle course to avoid uncomfortable experiences or potential pitfalls (Cuba, 2016). Researchers have attempted to understand students’ decision making after receiving an early alert with follow-up surveys. These surveys primarily focus on the self-development actions taken by students and subsequent impact. However, the measures of self-development action and overall alert responsiveness are as diverse as study findings.

Examples of increased decision making and responsiveness dot the early alert program literature. Follow-up survey sent to alerted students indicated that students take corrective actions after the alert (Eimers, 2000, Faulconer et al., 2014). For example, based on a follow-up survey emailed to over 800 alerted students at the University of Missouri, Eimers (2000) found that 90% of responding students recalled the early alert communication. Over three-quarters reported that they studied more, and half worked on organization skills and talked with a parent or friend to improve performance (Eimers, 2000). More than half considered the alert as a “wake-up call” to improve course performance (Eimers, 2000). Similarly, a promising 85% of alerted students stated in a survey conducted by Faulconer et al. (2014) that they took corrective action after receiving an early alert. Limitations of these studies are low response rates and response bias based on student responsiveness. Eimers’ study had a survey response rate of 30%
and Faulconer et al. (2014) did not reveal the rate. Further, students opting to complete a survey might be the same students who are apt to respond to early alert communication.

Regardless of the outcome measurements, a student’s self-efficacy, decision-making process, relationship with the faculty and the institution, and actions taken after an early alert notification might ultimately determine an early alert program’s impact. Students not performing well in coursework may know the recommended steps to succeed but may not be following through or seeking assistance (Dembo & Seli, 2004). Assessing only academic performance would thus not reveal the root cause of low grades, mainly how to best support students’ “skill and will” to succeed (Dembo & Seli, 2004, p. 10). The method of addressing skill and will also matters. Addressing academic areas for skill improvement is best shared by a faculty member or case manager due to existing relationships and trust (Achilles et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2017). Students perceived notifications sent by an automated early alert system or unfamiliar person as less trustworthy and lacking context (Lester et al., 2017) or as strangers “peering over students’ shoulders” (Eimers, 2000). The impact of students’ will to take action is visible in a study of survey completion and student success. Students who responded to a new-student survey in the first semester achieved higher first-semester grade point averages (GPAs) and were more likely to be retained into the sophomore year (Woosley, 2005).

The will to take action may also be based on the timeframe and academic self-efficacy. Belcher (1991) found that students in academic difficulty and alerted for the first time were more likely to take some kind of action, such as studying more or seeking faculty assistance. In subsequent semesters, students reported that the information was less beneficial. Belcher (1991) noted that “even if new information is gained, students may not take the necessary steps to either
improve their performance or withdraw from their classes” (p. 8). Lack of response might be connected to lower levels of self-efficacy, goal orientation, and connection to the institution (Cai et al., 2015; Chemers et al., 2001; Hanover Research, 2014; Stephenson et al., 2020; Woosley, 2005). Higher levels of academic self-efficacy offer a greater prediction of academic performance than measures such as a high school GPA (Chemers et al., 2001). More information is needed to understand why students respond in a certain way after receiving an early alert.

Theoretical Framework

Pascarella’s (1980) student-faculty informal contact model serves as a conceptual framework to guide this study. The model considers how student characteristics, institutional factors, informal contact with faculty, and overall college experiences affect academic outcomes and student persistence or withdrawal from college (Figure 2). Pascarella (1980) suggests interconnection and reciprocal impact among these variables rather than a linear progression. The model emphasizes the importance of contact and communication with faculty, a meaningful aspect to consider when exploring an early alert program, as faculty typically assume a critical role by initiating an alert notification (Finchum, 2016; Hanover Research, 2014; Norin, 2010). Pascarella (1980) asserts that a student’s informal contact with faculty is not a single transaction but a multidimensional experience. These elements include context (i.e., who initiated the contact), exposure (i.e., frequency of faculty interaction), focus (i.e., the intent and objectives of the contact), and impact (i.e., student’s satisfaction with the experience). The model further suggests that prior educational experiences, institutional structures (e.g., programs and
resources), and overall college experiences (e.g., extracurricular activities or peer contact) might also influence a student’s engagement level in an early alert program (Pascarella, 1980).

Figure 2: Pascarella’s conceptual model for research on student-faculty informal contact.

Applying Pascarella’s framework to an early alert context, the model posits that students’ prior educational experiences, reason for attending college, and faculty relationships influence response and actions after an early alert, specifically whether a student is able to successfully complete the course. This, in turn, influences students’ persistence or withdrawal decisions, not just for the specific course, but at the institution as a whole. The emphasis on informal contact with faculty in the model seems particularly appropriate as faculty steer the learning and community engagement experience within the classroom, assess student performance, and initiate the early alert process.
Pascarella’s model provided a foundation for me to create a guiding framework for this study and shaped my interview protocol and data analysis. The model sensitized me to consider not only students’ experiences with the early alert program and process but also students’ background characteristics (e.g., aspirations, attitudes, self-efficacy, goals), their experiences with institutional services and programs, their relationships with faculty, and other college experiences.

One aspect that seemed to be missing from Pascarella’s model was informal contact with staff members. Students in early alert programs often interact with a case manager or are referred to other resources (Hanover Research, 2014); thus, their relationship with case managers and other staff likely influence their response to an early alert. Broadening the scope of the informal contact with faculty aspect of the framework to include interactions with staff allowed me to consider all institutional actors that may come in contact with students during the early alert process.

Research Design

I deployed a qualitative case study design to learn about students’ decisions and actions following an early alert notification at a community college. Case study research focuses on a phenomenon bounded by a particular place and time and draws from richly descriptive data from various sources (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2014). The set-up and structure of early alert programs vary greatly (Hanover Research, 2014; Tampke, 2013). By utilizing a single case study design (Yin, 2014), I was able to keep the institutional context, and in particular the early alert
approach, constant, thus allowing me to consider in-depth how the process and set-up of the early alert program may influence students’ decisions and actions.

The case for this study was Midwest Community College (a pseudonym), a Hispanic-serving institution in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area, enrolling 13,000 students within 40 transfer programs and nearly 200 career degrees and certificates. Midwest Community College (MCC) enrolls a diverse student community measured by enrollment status (27% full-time students, 73% part-time students), student age (61% are 24 years old or younger, 39% are over 24 years old), and race (35% Latinx or Hispanic, 7% Black or African American, 46% White or Caucasian, and 12% other races or international students).

The MCC early alert program started in 2014 with a focus on students in developmental education classes and expanded in 2018 to include cohort populations such as student-athletes, veteran students, and students participating in multicultural outreach programs. The alert program further expanded in Spring 2020 to serve all college-level students. During the first three years of the program, 85% of developmental course faculty submitted at least one early alert in response to a student academic or success concern. After expanding to an all-campus model, faculty participation dropped to 20%. Homework concerns (e.g., low grades or missing assignments) generated the most early alerts, followed by attendance concerns (e.g., tardiness or missing class), performance on exams and quizzes, and resource needs (e.g., textbooks, financial assistance, student support services). Forty-three percent of alerted students responded to the early alert notification, aligning with response rates calculated by Hanover Research (2014).
Participants and Data Collection

I selected a maximum variation participant sampling strategy to gain a breadth of student experiences related to the early alert phenomenon and include diverse voices in the data collection process (Jones et al., 2014). The pool of eligible participants were college-level, for-credit students who received one or more early alert notifications in the Spring 2020 through Summer 2021 terms at MCC. One thousand three hundred unique students received invitations to participate via email, 32 students submitted an interest form, and 17 followed up by completing an interview. The main data source were interviews with students to yield rich and individualized information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In addition, I incorporated descriptive statistics of the MCC early alert program in the case description to provide additional context for the findings.

Semi-structured interviews produced broad findings from participants while allowing opportunities for clarification and personalization (Jones et al., 2014). I interviewed each participant one time for 30-45 minutes within a four-month period. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis so the conversation’s full context and nuances could be understood. I assigned a pseudonym to each student to protect students’ identities.

Participants represented the diversity of MCC students: 47% identified as Latinx or Hispanic, 29% as White or Caucasian, 18% as Black or African American, and 6% multiracial. Participants’ reported their biological sex or gender identity as 52% female, 41% male, and 6% nonbinary/third gender. Sixty-five percent of participants identified their age as 18-24 years old and 35% as 25 or older. Eighty-eight percent of participants reported responding to the early alert notification by communicating with the course instructor and/or case manager. Nonresponders
did not recall the early alert or withdrew from the class immediately prior to the alert. Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I completed the data analysis through a two-step transcript coding process. I initially coded transcripts using an open coding process to summarize interview responses into broad groupings and then moved to an axial coding process to find interconnections and themes (Jones et al., 2014). The open codes were utilized to describe what occurred with each of the themes, and the axial coding process created a smaller selection of themes (Jones et al., 2014). I maintained a keen focus on the research purpose throughout the coding and summarizing process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Exemplary statements were identified to illuminate themes and provide examples of participants’ experiences, decisions, and interactions. I also conducted a final round of coding to compare the themes to Pascarella’s framework to clarify the multiple inputs that influence students’ decision making.

Trustworthiness and Positionality Statement

I confirmed the study’s findings through intentional strategies including member checking, a memoing strategy, use of rich and thick descriptions, and a positionality statement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Each interviewee completed a two-step member-checking process. First, I provided a copy of the individual interview transcript via email to each participant to confirm the accuracy and provide clarification. All participants
Table 1
Summary of Participant Demographics

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
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<th>Enrolled</th>
<th>Recalled Alert</th>
<th>Responded to Alert</th>
<th>Responded to</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Student reports not responding to email communications but did after receiving phone call.

** Student reports not responding to phone call initially because phone number was unknown.
reviewed the transcript and responded that the interview was transcribed accurately. Second, I emailed a preliminary list of themes and findings to participants to review and provide feedback. Responding participants all reported that the themes accurately summarized their experience with the early alert program and did not offer any changes or adjustments to the list. I incorporated a memoing strategy during individual interviews to allow reflection about the intersection of my personal experiences and interpretation of results. The study findings included rich and thick descriptions using student quotes to enhance the study’s validity, providing a more realistic understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The final strategy was incorporating a positionality statement to reflect my personal understanding and experiences regarding the study topic and abatement of possible effects (Merriam, 1998). My approach to this study was through the lens of my 28-year career in higher education focusing on student transition, success, and completion. I maintain an assumption that an early alert program intends to affect positive change from the current state in a student’s academic journey to a different state. A guiding principle that I maintain in every aspect of my professional experience is that students do not enroll in higher education planning to fail or not complete courses.

Findings

Four key themes emerged from the data analysis. First, students’ self-efficacy influences response decisions. Second, relationships influence students’ response decisions. Third, clear, caring, and actionable messages foster positive student responses. Finally, students desire personal conversations following an early alert. I discuss each of these themes next.
“I Can Do This, I Can Do This”: Students’ Self-Efficacy Influences Response Decisions

Participants shared how their self-efficacy influenced their decisions and actions after receiving the early alert notification. Participants who were able to maintain a positive attitude and belief in their ability to succeed in college were more likely to seek help while those who already questioned their ability saw the early alert as an indicator that they would not be able to be successful in the class. Case managers, however, were able to influence participants’ perceptions of self-efficacy.

Christian shared, “It was, how do you say that word, it convicted me. It made me realize what am I doing paying for all these classes and I’m not even showing up to class.” After receiving the early alert, Christian reminded himself that he was capable of improving his attendance and making an investment in himself. Rather than viewing the alert as a sign that he should give up, the alert reminded him to prioritize his time and focus on classwork. Similarly, Lorrie said, “As long as you are just a positive mindframe and to be on top of everything…when there are issues that you run into, and you address them right away, you know, there shouldn’t be any issues.” Lorrie’s positive mindset activated her to take immediate action after receiving the early alert; she contacted the course instructor for assistance and sought support from MCC’s advising department. Similarly, after receiving an alert notification with information about how to drop a class, Fernanda viewed the early alert as a challenge to improve:

I never dropped a class late in my whole life…so if someone were to tell me you should just drop it, I would probably feel like why are you telling me that? You shouldn’t be able to make me feel I couldn’t, you know, pass the class.

Fernanda talked with her case manager about staying in the class and was pleased with the support and encouragement she received. Fernanda communicated regularly with her professor
and intensified her focus on coursework, resulting in an improved grade. Participants described how their help-seeking behaviors influenced their response after receiving an early alert. Renee described how she has changed her help-seeking behavior:

I didn’t use to ask for help because I felt like I should get it. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t get it, my brain is functioning. And so I had to understand that everyone needs help. I’m not the only person that doesn’t understand stuff.

As a result of her early alert experience, Renee discovered that seeking support from MCC’s tutoring center helped her achieve the grade she desired.

Conversely, participants expressing a negative or deficit attitude regarding their ability to succeed tended to resist seeking assistance or opted for a course withdrawal. Julie decidedly stated, “I’m just not that person. I don’t know how to write research papers… I dropped one of the two classes.” Rather than motivating her to seek assistance, the early alert reinforced Julie’s self-doubts about her research and writing skills. She interpreted the alert as a recommendation to withdraw from the course. Other participants with deficit perspectives initially avoided seeking assistance but expressed how a case manager influenced their self-efficacy. Miggy self-assessed his quantitative skills by saying, “I had trouble because math isn’t my strong suit.” After receiving an early alert notification, he did not take immediate action but noted that the case manager’s outreach and encouragement “made it somewhat easier that I have that person emailing me” about his progress in the class. As time progressed, Miggy appreciated that someone was occasionally checking in and offering support even if he did not necessarily follow up with the case manager.
Participants highlighted the importance of engaged and caring relationships with faculty members and case managers in encouraging early alert responsiveness. Establishing trusted relationships with faculty and case managers seemed to influence participants’ responsiveness to an early alert. From knowing students’ names to offering encouraging comments and advice, participants offered multiple examples of faculty and staff who demonstrated care and how that shaped their learning experience. These expressions of concern and compassion appear to pave the way for early alert responsiveness.

Melissa’s faculty member sent a personal message of support and encouragement immediately after submitting an early alert. Melissa shared, “When my English teacher saw I needed help she had sent me an email…that helped me a lot.” Melissa described how the instructor’s expression of care encouraged her to seek assistance when the case manager called to discuss the early alert. Charles echoed these themes and said that “when teachers have reached out to me, it was fairly personal, and I’ve always sort of been more open to communicating with them because I knew them.” Charles expressed skepticism of the early alert notification from an unknown case manager but recalled his faculty member mentioning that someone might contact students needing extra support. He reflected that his eventual decision to meet with a tutor might have occurred sooner if his instructor recommended tutoring first.

Participants were more likely to respond to an early alert from proactive faculty who established a caring environment where students could seek help and assistance. Engaged faculty were not only able to talk with participants about academic concerns but also provide recommendations related to personal needs. Mental health emerged as an area where faculty
influenced students to seek assistance. After receiving an early alert from a trusted faculty member, Lorrie recounted:

I was going through a really hard time last year, you know I was struggling with my own self-esteem and my own mental health. So showing up to school was very difficult. She was very understanding, and she gave me a lot of good advice…She really motivated me and made me feel welcomed all the time, so she did have a really big impact on me.

Lorrie leveraged her relationship with the faculty member to create an alternate class completion plan, resulting in Lorrie’s successful course completion. Julie, while experiencing challenges managing work, family, and class commitments during the pandemic, expressed how her professor “picked up on all this and sent me all this information to talk to somebody…He goes, nobody should be going through this much stress. Yeah, he just, he saw that it was a matter of why I was a mess.” Julie described how the faculty member’s care and proactive approach helped her connect with MCC’s psychological services as part of the early alert follow-up.

Participants also indicated that case managers play an equally impactful role in their experiences with the early alert process at MCC. Participants appreciated case managers’ interest in their overall well-being and success. Academic advisors, student development counselors, and academic coaches serve as case managers at MCC. Some students have an assigned case manager with a well-established relationship while other students are assigned to a case manager once the early alert is submitted. Erik described the value of his assigned case manager relationship, sharing that “no one knows me better than she does. What I mean is no one knows the problems that I’ve faced so far, the trouble I had starting out…Now, me and her go through that together.” Erik’s comfort, trust, and familiarity with his long-term case manager provided a pathway to discuss the early alert notification and seek supportive resources. Renee shared a similar perspective but did not have an assigned case manager prior to the early alert:
Every academic counselor was the bomb. I mean they broke down all the information for me. They helped me understand things that I did not understand that I don’t think that I would have gotten on my own. If it wasn’t for the academic advisors, I don’t think that I would have ever started college.

Renee described MCC case managers overall as supportive and encouraging and felt connected to anyone in an advising role rather than solely relying on one person. She responded to the alert notification based on her trust in the case managers’ wide scope of knowledge. Similarly, Fernanda highlighted the importance of the relationship with her assigned case manager:

He was assigned to me…he will check in with me and ask how are your classes, how you doing, is there any help we can give you. I can honestly say at this point that he’s like my second dad…I feel like he’s more like an educational father.

Fernanda preferred to learn about the early alert from her case manager rather than a “stranger.” She viewed the case manager as a mentor and quasi-family member, and their shared connection encouraged Fernanda to take action.

Another participant, Erik, explained the overall importance of relationships on his and other students’ learning, motivation, and decision making as follows:

It can feel like a lot when you’re trying to get a student to stay motivated, to not fail, to know that he can get help, to show them how you can help them…you know, that’s a gift, man. All teachers don’t have it. I’m thinking it won’t be a long career if you can’t connect with the students because you won’t have any students…If they’re not learning then they’re not going to stay.

Building connections among students, faculty, and case managers seems to create trust and a culture of support. When such relationships were established, participants seemed more likely to respond to an early alert because they perceived a sense of care, compassion, and interest in their success.
“That’s a Game Changer”: Clear, Caring, and Actionable Messages Foster Positive Responses

Participants shared that the message influenced their decisions and responses to the early alert. The tone, information, and recommendations included in early alert notifications, regardless of communication channel, shaped students’ actions and their perceptions of ability to succeed. Participants valued receiving a realistic assessment of their academic performance but noted that the early alert inspires action when woven with messages of support, hope, and belief in ability. Case managers’ persistence in communicating with students also influenced participants’ decisions to respond and seek assistance.

Positive, personalized and encouraging messages created a favorable imprint on participants’ minds after receiving an early alert notification. Katherine explained:

They don’t say like you know you’re failing this class or you’re not doing well. But they do kind of motivate you. So they’re not saying like, oh, you’re dumb, you know, or this class is not for you. But no, instead they say that MCC offers help and we can work around you.

Katherine appreciated that the written and verbal early alert messages acknowledged a concern about her academic performance but focused more toward resources, strategies for success, and solutions. Beatrice concurred:

Just to know that through the email they’re actually thinking about me and worrying about me, that kind of mattered most to me…the emotions attached to the email like actually make it seem more sincere and genuine, like hey I do care about you instead of like, hey, you’re ruining my statistical average or something like that.

Beatrice’s comments highlighted the importance of expressing concern and care in an early alert notification. She also appreciated that the communications felt personalized and “from a real person, it wasn’t like an automated response.”
In addition to personalized and supportive messages, participants appreciated specific action steps and recommended resources within an early alert notification. Nearly all participants reflected on the importance of using MCC student resources (e.g., tutoring center, counseling and psychological services, and reference librarians) and appreciated when the early alert notification included specific referrals to these services. John was not familiar with MCC’s academic support resources prior to the early alert. He explained:

That was something that I never really thought in my mind that existed in college, and that was pretty awesome. And you know, they even have math tutoring for courses and everything is there to help you succeed. And that’s a game changer, you know.

The early alert introduced John to people and services interested in supporting his success. Similarly, Beatrice stated that the early alert notification directed her to talk with the course instructor. She suggested providing additional information, such as “Here are some other steps or like resources, resources especially that’d be nice. Then like attach a ‘hey if you’re dealing with any like mental health things then this is a resource’…especially like what to do next.” Beatrice viewed the early alert like a diagnosis and prescription, an explanation of what is happening, who can best provide support, and personalized guidance for how to access the recommended resources.

Participants described the positive impact of case managers’ persistence after an early alert. Charles shared:

I like to do things on my own, even though I know I might need help…The person kept messaging me not at regular intervals, but just sort of like a check-in every now and then. I didn't think it was super helpful at first…but after only a little bit more, where my grades started to tank, I was conversing with them just a little bit more. Eventually I had worked myself up to talking to the professor and emailing them to figure out what to do.
The ongoing communication from the case manager softened Charles’s initial resistance to seek help, prompting him to work toward a solution with the faculty member. There appears to be value in case managers providing encouragement and offering support long after the original alert notification, regardless of the student’s responsiveness.

Overall, participants expressed appreciation for a hopeful yet honest appraisal of their academic performance and recommended action steps as part of the early alert experience. Fernanda shared that the early alert was “kind of a wake-up call, just like you can’t keep letting your grades go down when you’re doing so good in your other classes.” As a result of the wake-up call, Fernanda decided she could and should perform better, utilized MCC resources, and successfully completed the class.

“The Best Thing Is Always an In-person Interaction”: Desire for Personal Conversations

Participants recalled that most early alert notifications were communicated via email and phone and occasionally through text messaging. However, the most desired method of communication was an in-person conversation to discuss the early alert and create a plan to achieve academic success. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning, conversations via Zoom videoconferencing technology sometimes fulfilled participant desires for in-person communication, but not in all instances.

The value of one-on-one conversations with faculty and case managers resonated among most participants. When discussing how she preferred to address the early alert notification, Julie stated, “I talked to the teacher. I was able to talk to him face-to-face. I was able to get a hold of them easier.” Julie explained that her face-to-face early alert discussion resulted in a productive
and efficient conversation, rather than a series of email exchanges that might take days for a response. Charles, on the other hand, was initially hesitant about seeking help after the early alert notification, but the case manager continued to check in over email and recommended a faculty meeting. Charles eventually warmed to the idea of an individual meeting after his grades continued to decline. Charles explained:

I don’t like to ask for help. At least not in class. A lot of times I’ll be talking with like a teacher, maybe over email or after class and possibly set up a one on one, because that’s where I would end up working best.

Charles’s comments highlight the importance of connecting with students one-on-one. Charles was uncomfortable asking for help in front of his peers in class. Instead, he preferred communication via e-mail or, as needed, a one-on-one meeting with a faculty member. Like Julie, he felt that a one-on-one meeting, whether in person or virtually, would be the most effective way to address his questions.

Victoria withdrew from class immediately before receiving the early alert. Despite not having engaged in the early alert process, Victoria highlighted the benefits of an in-person meeting: “I think the best thing is always an in-person interaction because a lot can be lost in tone and body language when you try and do an email or even a phone call.” Participants like Victoria preferred individual early alert conversations and highlighted the importance of body language and tone when communicating early alert information.

Participants appreciated having flexibility with setting up an in-person meeting that worked best for the participant’s schedule. Katherine noted that her case manager said “We can work around, you know, after a class. Go ahead and schedule a meeting and find out how we can help.” The case manager’s scheduling flexibility encouraged Katherine to arrange an early alert
conference. Fernanda appreciated the convenience of Zoom meetings and the case manager’s focus on Fernanda’s availability: “She just told me that she could have a Zoom with me and anytime would work best.” The case manager placed the emphasis on what would be best for Fernanda, prompting an early alert conference. A nimble and open approach to scheduling meetings appears to have encouraged follow-up with faculty and case managers.

The transition to remote learning shifted in-person conversations to the Zoom platform. Participants shared mixed opinions about communicating using Zoom regarding an early alert notification or academic concern. Val noted, “I like that you can just like pop in during their office hours and ask them like any questions you have about any work that you’re doing in class.” Val found that Zoom offered a convenient and efficient method to connect with her professor. However, informal conversations before or after class differ in a virtual environment. Jesse offered a cautionary view on using Zoom for dialogue related to early alert notifications or academic concerns:

I’ve seen the professors say during class, you know, can you stay on Zoom because I want to talk to you. I mean, to me that’s always would have been one of those things where like I learned that the military is like, you know, praise in public, other things in private…If you’re doing a classroom that’s different, you know, they’re like ‘hey can you stay back,’ that could be good or bad, you don’t know…but then in the Zoom class is a lot more noticeable because everyone’s paying attention.

Jesse, who did not recall receiving the early alert, believed that faculty and case managers should exercise caution when discussing student concerns in group settings. A well-intended attempt to talk with a student might create an embarrassing situation and negatively influence students’ receptiveness to the offer for assistance.
Discussion

The findings of this study revealed connections between students’ responsiveness and actions after an early alert notification and students’ self-efficacy; relationships with faculty and staff; ways support and care were communicated; and personal, in-person outreach and interactions. Students interviewed for the study, most of whom responded to and took actions following the early alert, provided examples of faculty and case managers who exhibited interest in their success, communicated areas of concern balanced with hopefulness, and honored each student’s needs and goals. These actions seem to have influenced the students’ subsequent decision making. Students’ perceptions of their own abilities also shaped how students responded to the early alert.

Before further discussing the findings, it is important to acknowledge a limitation of this study. Most of the study participants responded to the early alert compared to less than half of all MCC students receiving an early alert notification. The findings reflect the experiences of students who were engaged in the early alert process but lack substantive feedback from non-responding students. Woosley (2005) and Stephenson et al. (2020) cautioned that students experiencing academic difficulty or lacking connection to a college may opt out of participating in a survey or research. Students who chose to participate in this study may possess stronger relationships with MCC or possess greater levels of self-efficacy and motivation. What influences these participants’ decisions and actions after an early alert may differ in important ways from participants who chose not to respond to the study invitation. Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into what may make the early alert process effective for certain students and addresses the human experience gap in the existing literature.
The interviews revealed that students recognized their need for academic and personal support as a result of the early alert notification, consistent with findings by Dembo and Seli (2004). However, decisions to seek assistance may impinge on students’ relationship with faculty and case managers and a sense of hopefulness that academic improvement is possible. Thus, “skill and will,” as Dembo and Seli (2004, p. 10) noted, seemed less important to participants in this study than “bond and belief” through a focus on students’ relationship with faculty and case managers and their belief in themselves, similar to findings by Achilles et al. (2011) and Lester et al. (2017).

Student interviews reinforced the importance of personalizing early alert communications based on the academic concerns, available institutional resources, and the case manager’s knowledge of the student. Similar to previous research, these findings highlight the value of trusted relationships and communication from faculty and case managers and, ultimately, how these connections positively influence students’ early alert decisions (Brothen et al., 2003; Buyarski et al., 2017; Hanover Research, 2014; Reddick et al., 2014). Further, students viewed early alert communications as a wake-up call to take action and make decisions affecting their academic success in the class (Eimers, 2000).

The findings from this study affirmed several concepts described in Pascarella’s (1980) theoretical framework. Examples of how educator relationships impacted on decision making reverberated throughout the interviews. Participants embraced and valued faculty behaviors demonstrating care and concern for students, which often led to participants making decisions to seek support and take some kind of action toward academic and personal improvement. These behaviors mirrored participants’ experiences with case managers: an ethic of care and concern
combined with personalized communications impacted decision making. Institutional factors, especially MCC’s extensive student success resources and services, influenced decision making when paired with a referral or recommendation from a faculty member or case manager. Providing specific action steps (e.g., meet with a tutor and review a specific concept or set of homework problems rather than “do more homework problems”) emerged as a powerful influence on participants’ decisions. Self-efficacy surfaced as a key background characteristic that impacted participants’ decision making. Participants’ aspirations, attitudes, and goals, when grounded in a positive mindset, seemed to lead toward communication with faculty and case managers and following through with seeking academic support. Other classroom experiences, such as extracurricular activities and peer culture, were not identified as influencers.

The Pascarella (1980) framework offers some insights into what may affect students’ early alert decisions through a broad lens of persistence and withdrawal. However, the framework was not intended to inform the early alert experience and student responsiveness. Pascarella’s framework includes components that were not identified by study participants and may be too complicated to provide actionable suggestions to practitioners implementing or revising an early alert process. Further, participants cited important areas that were missing in Pascarella’s model. The findings from this study and the need for a framework focused specifically on early alert create a rich opportunity to suggest a new model that explains students’ responses after an early alert.
The study’s findings informed the creation of a new conceptual model for student early alert response (Figure 3).

This conceptual model emphasizes the interrelationships and interconnections among four key areas that student participants of this study highlighted as contributing to their responsiveness and actions after an early alert. For example, faculty and staff relationships alone do not necessarily contribute to course success. Instead the interplay of relationships with personal conversations, clear and caring messages, and self-efficacy creates a supportive milieu that encourages responsiveness. Further, the model suggests that the early alert response experience is not linear and progressive. There is not a particular order of operation that assures
course success or persistence decisions. The model serves as a framework for faculty and case managers to consider when engaging in an early alert program. Each of the model’s four dimensions offers insight into what matters for alerted students and how institutions can enhance an early alert program.

The importance of faculty and staff relationships and contact with students cannot be underestimated. Actions that demonstrate care and concern, such as intentional conversations focused on students’ needs inside and outside the classroom or personalized emails that direct students to institutional resources, signal to students that faculty are interested in their learning and believe in their ability to succeed. Building a foundation of trust paves the way for students to make decisions and take action if an early alert is submitted. Relationships also matter for case managers assigned to follow up on early alert notifications. Students appreciate hearing from a familiar person following an early alert notification. This familiarity prompts a greater sense of trust and appreciation and subsequent decision making that results in proactive actions to address academic concerns. Institutions should assign the most appropriate person as the case manager (e.g., advisor or tutor who recently assisted the student, academic administrator from the student’s program of study) rather than a random assignment. Faculty and case managers should always communicate two or three specific recommendations for students (e.g., focus on a specific set of problems, speak to a certain tutor, revise and resubmit part of a writing assignment) rather than obtuse recommendations (e.g., study harder, spend more time reading, work less). One of the recommendations should include a personal conversation about the early alert.
While email and texting might offer efficiencies of communication, a one-on-one or in-person conversation matters for students after an early alert. Students appreciate an opportunity to gain feedback, seek clarification, ask for advice, and leverage relationships with faculty and case managers. Conversations do not need to be lengthy but should be purposeful and integrate concepts from the early alert responsiveness model (e.g., care, support, asset-based approach). Offering flexibility in meeting times and modalities encourages a meeting, rather than relegating conversations to office or drop-in hours. A discussion before or after class is a possibility, but ensure that privacy is afforded to the student whenever possible. Stepping into the hallway or moving into a Zoom breakout room demonstrates sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

Students’ self-efficacy and positive thinking appears to have an encouraging impact on decision making and responsiveness. Faculty and staff should observe students’ positive or negative attitudes toward coursework and college and consider how self-efficacy might inform their early alert outreach. A deficit mindset about mathematics skills might prompt a conversation regarding past math experiences and how to shift the student’s narrative. Incorporating conversations about Bandura’s (1997) research on self-efficacy or Dweck’s (2008) research about growth mindset into case manager training and first-year experience courses may enhance students’ decision-making process.

Finally, clear and caring communication is a critical component of the early alert experience for students: both the communication channel and the message. Institutions should continually promote their early alert program as a positive campus service. Creating a socially normative culture around “this is how we encourage student success” demystifies the process and clarifies that faculty and case managers regularly collaborate in supporting students. Early
alert messages should always greet students by name, express care and belief in the student’s ability to succeed, and offer some kind of action step. Automated alert messages should be reviewed for authenticity, avoiding generic and vague commentary. Case managers should continue checking in with alerted students regardless of whether students respond or the alert was resolved. Students might accept an offer of support long after the initial alert message.

Implications for Future Research

This study focused on a gap within retention and persistence research related to student experiences and actions taken as a result of an early alert notification. Future research might follow a student’s early alert experience from beginning to end: observing faculty and student engagement in class, interviewing faculty and case managers as the alert is submitted and communicated, seeking reflective feedback from students at multiple points during the experience, and reviewing course outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of the early alert experience could identify pivotal moments that impact decision making (e.g., comments by a faculty member or content of an email), or whether there are halo effects that impact student responsiveness (e.g., care demonstrated by a faculty member in one class that boosts a student’s sense of care and self-efficacy across all courses).

A second area for future research could focus on nonresponsive students to an early alert notification. A clearer understanding of why students do not respond could inspire changes within a program and increase student participation rates. Finally, future research might explore early alert responsiveness based on race/ethnicity and other social identities. The impact of imposter syndrome within our BIPOC student communities (Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet et al.,
2015), for example, could influence when, why, and how students engage in the early alert experience.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide qualitative data regarding the early alert program experience of college students and shine light on what influences the decisions and actions taken by students. By looking beyond isolated measures of student achievement such as course grades, faculty, case managers, and early alert program administrators gain a more nuanced understanding of the multiple inputs that impact student responses following an early alert notification. A holistic understanding of the early alert experience maximizes this high-impact retention program’s true influence on student success.
CHAPTER 3
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Introduction

In this chapter, I will begin with a reflection on the dissertation process emphasizing my motivation for this study, my original goals, and the eventual result. I will also discuss what worked well, the challenges that I faced, and what I might reconsider if conducting the study again. Next, I will share how the study impacted my professional practice as a higher education professional and how the study could influence the early alert program at my home institution. Finally, I will share my experiences with conducting scholarly research, writing a journal article, opportunities for the future, and my doctoral journey.

Reflection on the Dissertation Process

I have been connected to early alert programs for approximately 20 years through my career in higher education. Seven years ago, I assumed responsibility for a new academic coaching program at Midwest Community College (MCC), and an early alert program and case management technology system were core components of the program. After the first year of administering the coaching program, I noticed a substantial number of students who never responded to outreach by the student’s academic coach following an early alert notification. We began examining responsiveness as a function of the academic coaching program, specifically exploring whether contact with the case manager (and if so, the frequency) showed any
differences in students’ academic success in the course. An initial review of the data hinted that some kind of action by the student (e.g., meeting with the case manager, engaging in an email conversation) might be linked to students persisting into the next semester but not necessarily a higher final grade or completion of the course. Analyzing a collection of disparate data points failed to address the greatest gap of understanding: what was the impact of the alert from the student’s perspective and what action did the students take? We needed to hear students’ stories to better understand what contributed to a final grade or decision to interact with a case manager.

Early in my doctoral coursework, I reflected on my desire to learn about the student early alert experience beyond course outcomes. I began to research scholarly literature related to early alert program structures, student outcomes, and program impact through a course assignment in the first year of class. I was initially hyper-focused on responsiveness, specifically, why someone responded and why someone did not. While this appeared to be a gap in knowledge, this myopic approach to responsiveness did not address the decision making and self-awareness of students that led to toward responding to an early alert. Responsiveness seemed to be a by-product of a series of student decisions, perceptions, and considerations. Through conversations with our program faculty and eventually my dissertation chair, I discovered that decision making and self-efficacy would provide a better lens for examination of student responsiveness and action. I also needed to accept that this study could not accomplish everything I wanted to know about the early alert experience. Focus and editing became a key theme in the initial stages.

From a practical lens, we deduced that it might be difficult to recruit nonresponsive students to participate in an early alert program interview. If a student was disengaged from the early alert process, there was no evidence indicating that a research study (even with an
incentive) would generate a significant pool of study participants. Further, it risked labeling the student as failing to seek assistance or blaming the student for not participating and receiving an unsuccessful course grade. Therefore, all students who received an early alert during four prior academic terms were invited to participate in the study. All but two of the participants reported responding to the early alert outreach. This early alert response rate was higher than typical MCC early alert program rates. Our original hunch that nonresponsive students may self-select out of participation was likely correct and this self-selection bias might have influenced the findings. This could be a core problem with this type of research. In future studies, researchers could consider alternate data collection methods. The commitment of an interview might be a limitation for students. An online survey might seem less invasive and require less time for participants. Leveraging relationships within the institution might also encourage participation, such as engaging advisors and faculty in the recruitment process.

After determining the direction for the study, the process for preparing a literature review and interview questions became more focused. I enjoyed moving beyond a strict focus on early alert literature and exploring studies related to self-efficacy and student participation in activities such as surveys. Writing the interview questions was a reflective process as I drew from professional experience and the literature review. I also possessed a genuine interest in the topic since it was clearly connected to my work. Interviewing students was the highlight of the process: hearing students’ stories, successes, frustrations, and reflections was humbling, sometimes surprising, and often inspiring. Some students recalled significant life situations that impacted their learning and engagement in classwork, such as homelessness, domestic violence, and mental health. I often considered what I might or might not do if I experienced similar
challenges. I am not confident that I would have possessed the optimism and resilience that the students demonstrated as well as their innerdrive and determination. I find myself thinking about the students’ experiences in my day-to-day work at the college, and I consider how they might benefit from a project on my task list. Students’ openness to sharing their academic journey was the most humbling dimension of the dissertation experience.

Recruiting students for interviews emerged as the greatest challenge of the process. I decided to include an incentive from the outset to encourage participation. Even with at $25 gift card, students completed the interest form in very modest numbers. Over 1,300 students were invited to participate. Multiple emails were sent to students using MCC and personal email addresses, subject lines were adjusted, and time expectations were updated to reflect the actual experience (originally stating it was a 60-minute interview but realistically was a 30- to 40-minute conversation). All of these efforts yielded 32 students showing interest over a four-month span by completing the application and consent form. Moving students toward scheduling an interview and participating became the second challenge. Through more follow-up via email and case managers, the final pool of study participants was interviewed. I tried balancing my need to nudge and remind students about scheduling appointments against my appearing pesky or bothersome.

A second challenge was identifying a theoretical framework for the study. Vincent Tinto’s frameworks on persistence and retention of college students were obvious options, yet they did not quite provide the guidance I needed for the study. Pascarella’s framework offered a focus on student-faculty engagement, a concept that resonated in persistence and early alert research. I originally attempted to use two frameworks, a recent model from Tinto focused on
persistence and motivation along with Pascarella’s, but struggled with the integration. I wished for a cafeteria approach: taking elements of each to create a workable model. Ultimately, I landed on just Pascarella’s framework due to the focus on relationships and multiple potential elements that impact the student experience. The process of identifying a framework helped me realize that there was not a single perfect framework, particularly related to early alert experiences. The overall dissertation experience, along with encouragement from my dissertation chair, inspired me to present a new early alert decision-making and response model that might support practitioners and future research. Given the lack of research about the student experience in early alert programs, I hope this will be a useful contribution to the academy.

Another challenge was distilling the student interviews into themes focused only on the early alert experience. Reviewing the transcripts yielded rich, authentic comments about students’ personal stories that involved inspiration and frustration. I found myself pulled toward insightful anecdotes related to student success and engagement, but all were not necessarily through the lens of early alert. I was tempted to include much more than could or should fit within the study. I repeatedly needed to decide what really fit within the study and what was simply interesting and insightful. Again, focus and editing emerged as core needs during the research experience.

If I had the opportunity to engage in this experience again, I would make some adjustments to the study. There are certain interview questions I would amend to gain deeper discovery of students’ experiences and greater understanding of how a certain decision resulted in a particular outcome. I would also strategically recruit students to participate, leveraging student connections with faculty and staff colleagues (e.g., athletic coaches, student club
advisors, faculty advisors). This could help increase the size of the participant pool and the diversity of students’ early alert engagement. I was initially concerned about interviewing students across so many academic terms in the past, fearing that students might have forgotten the alert experience. The decision ended up being an asset: students from prior terms offered reflections about pre-pandemic and post-pandemic experiences. Students recalled alerts from several prior terms, prompting me to wonder about the lasting imprints from an early alert experience.

The dissertation experience also generated more questions than the study was designed to answer. During the data collection and coding process, I wondered how race and ethnicity might influence students’ alert responses as well as how students’ social identities might impact their decisions. I also questioned how students’ lack of awareness about the early alert program might influence responsiveness. Each finding seemed to create a new question. As a result, the early alert topic continues to pique my professional interest. I now have greater clarity that early alert programs might have greater impact than solely course outcomes-based data might indicate.

Applications to Professional Practice

This study will be shared with faculty and staff leaders at MCC to inform both our early alert program design and institutional focus on student access, success, and credential completion. MCC is making a significant investment in personnel and infrastructure. The college has implemented a new early alert technology system and process for faculty to refer students needing support, resources, and encouragement and improve the flow of communication. The system is part of a larger redesign of our new student onboarding and first-year experience. The
redesign features an assigned case manager for every student from the first day of classes until graduation. Further, the college is currently redesigning how students are resourced for success with financial, personal, health, advocacy, and academic supports. The key findings from the study reinforce core elements of the redesign: personalized communication, building relationships with a case manager, and connecting students with institutional resources. With the systems and human capital in place, we can implement the relationship and growth mindset-based experiences that students found beneficial. The findings of the study will help us implement practices that leverage our new student success designs, encourage student participation in the early alert experience, and best support MCC students. I also plan to submit Chapter 2 to a peer-reviewed journal, submit session proposals to several regional and national conferences, and present locally during MCC’s professional development weeks.

The research process has strengthened my confidence in conducting formal and informal research. In the past, I might have deferred to Google as an appropriate and convenient repository for researching a higher education topic or best practice. Becoming more familiar with scholarly research databases and peer-reviewed journals strengthened my skills in digging deeper and finding higher quality literature. As I began the doctoral program, I joked that the last time I wrote a research paper it involved a card catalog and microfiche machine. It really was the truth, so engaging in contemporary research processes and resources opened doors and provided a foundation to complete this study.
Applications to Research

A reader’s viewpoint of a journal article definitely shifts when you become the author. Self-reflection about scope of the study, breadth and depth of the literature review, appropriateness of the research design, and presentation of the findings are a few topics that I considered multiple times over the last three years. I learned through this process that I needed to deftly move among 10,000-foot, 5,000-foot, and 100-foot views of the research and writing experience. Some moments required careful attention to details and word selection, such as writing interview questions, and other tasks called for a holistic vision of the study such as identifying themes emerging from interviews. It became helpful to pause, consider which view was required for a particular task, and then take action or seek counsel to make an informed decision. Much of the time I found myself stuck at the 100-foot view and needed a “see the forest rather than the trees” reality check. These were moments when I benefited from seeking counsel from faculty and peers.

I discovered that there are several motivating factors related to conducting and publishing research. As a doctoral student, original research is intentionally included within the dissertation experience to share knowledge and learning. For faculty, it is an ongoing function of their professional work, tenure process, and desire to contribute to scholarship and improvement of higher education. Others simply enjoy the process of research and writing, probably for their professional development, personal curiosity, and enjoyment of sharing findings with colleagues. The common denominator among these points of view seems to be that research requires an element of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. If not for the dissertation, I believe it is highly unlikely that I would have completed this study. My lack of experience in conducting research
coupled with the 25-year span since my last formal educational experience created real and perceived barriers. It simply would have been too daunting to complete on my own, and I would have hesitated even if I worked with a group of colleagues. However, the training, support, and course engagement provided through the doctoral program provided the necessary educational supports for this study. My journey represents the experiences of many MCC students: if you feel isolated, question your self-efficacy, or lack knowledge of supports and services, the likelihood of accepting a challenge or completing a goal begins to diminish. I feel that I relate to the findings from this study because having faculty and classmates who are interested in my success and referrals to support services (e.g., technology, financial support, research assistance) resulted in me making affirmative decisions in my education.

The entire doctoral coursework and dissertation journey proved to be an ongoing learning experience. French mathematician Blaise Pascal intimated that as your circle of knowledge increases so does your circle of ignorance. Pascal’s observation accurately describes my experience with conducting and publishing research. With each step, recommendation, or question, I found there was something new to learn, consider, and decide how it would or would not influence the research process. While I possessed informal hunches about early alert programs and student experiences, designing a research study to formally examine student decision making challenged me to shift away from instincts and anecdotes to a more thoughtful and purposeful examination. I needed to frequently self-check my subjectivity and listen to the data.

As a result, I now look at research through a lens of consumer and provider. Prior to the dissertation experience, I strictly used others’ research but have now become a contributor to
higher education literature. This is a rather rewarding feeling, particularly if it helps colleagues at MCC and other community colleges to continually improve their early alert programs and strategies to help students complete a credential. Students do not begin a college education with a plan to stop or fail in the process. A host of experiences, policies, practices, and structures impact the journey to graduation, particularly for students of color, Pell-eligible students, and undocumented students, among others. I hope this study clears a small part of that roadway to completion.

Going forward, I anticipate that this research journey will help shift my informal hunches toward more concrete, data-driven decisions. However, I still desire to hear individual voices and experiences to gain a richer understanding of the student experience. Melinda Karp (2014) offered a perspective on early alert programs that resonates with me: “Sending up a red light isn’t likely to influence retention. But if that red light leads to advisers or tutors reaching out to students and providing targeted support, we might see bigger impacts on student outcomes” (p. 1). This thoughtful intersection of data with personalized intervention seems to be a healthy space for early alert programs to fulfill their intended purpose and truly become high-impact experiences.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Introduction:

Welcome, and thank you for talking with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about you and your experiences with the early alert program at the College of Lake County. I will ask you a series of questions, and please know that there are no right or wrong answers. It is perfectly fine if you did not do something or take a specific action. I anticipate that our conversation will last about 60 minutes, but there is no time limit for you to answer the questions.

You recently completed a biographical survey, and I appreciate your feedback. Your answers to the survey questions will help us have a productive conversation. You might also remember signing a consent form that authorizes your participation in this interview. I have a copy of your consent form for us to review before beginning. Highlight key points of form. Do you have any questions about the consent form or the interview process? All of the information you share is considered confidential, and I will not share your name or other personally identifiable information without your permission. We also discussed before today that our conversation will be recorded to assist me with summarizing the interview and helping me with the research study. Are you still comfortable with me recording our interview?

What questions do you have before we begin? I will turn on the recorder and ask the first question. You can feel free to stop me at any time if needed.

General Background and College Experience

1. Please tell me more about you, your goals while studying at CLC, and your plans after graduating from CLC.
2. How would you describe your educational experiences before attending CLC?

3. What influenced your decision to attend CLC? *Follow up if needed:* Who has influenced or inspired you to attend college?

**Experiences with Institutional Interventions**

4. How was your transition into CLC as a new student? *Follow up if needed:* What do you remember about your new student onboarding and orientation process?

5. Please tell me a story or example of your interaction with a professor in class. *Follow up if needed:* Which part of the experience was most meaningful or helpful?

6. Please tell me more about your experiences with your field of interest academic advisor. *Follow up if needed:* How frequently do you communicate with your advisor, and how do you communicate?

7. What have you enjoyed the most about CLC? What has been challenging?

**Experience with Self-Efficacy**

8. How do you approach a challenging class at CLC? *Follow up if needed:* What would we see you do and say?

9. What do you do when you encounter difficulties with a class or an assignment? *Follow up if needed:* Who do you contact?

10. What are the qualities of a successful college student? *Follow up:* Based on those qualities, how would you describe your ability to be a successful student at CLC?

**Experience with Early Alert Program**

11. Do you remember receiving an early alert notification through email, a phone call, or a text message?
a. *If yes:* What do you remember about receiving an early alert notification? *Follow up if needed:* How were you contacted about the alert and by whom?

b. *If no, describe a typical notification process.* Does that sound familiar? *If yes,* return to question 8a. *If no, continue to question 10.*

12. Describe your reaction to receiving the early alert notification.

13. What did you know about the early alert program before receiving an alert? *Follow up if needed:* How did you learn this information?

**Early Alert Decision Making and Outcomes**

14. What was your reaction after being contacted about the alert? *Follow up if needed:* What communication did you have with the person who contacted you?

15. What decisions did you make as a result of receiving an early alert notification? *Follow up if needed:* What actions did you take?

16. How did your experiences with new student onboarding and orientation, your field of interest advisor, and your faculty impact your decisions?

17. What impact did the early alert process have on your academic experience during the rest of the semester? *Follow up if needed:* How did the early alert impact your final grade?

18. What is your opinion of the early alert program? *Follow up if needed:* What would you change about the early alert program?

**Summary Thoughts and Participant Engagement**

19. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your day-to-day experience as a student? *Follow up if needed:* How has the pandemic influenced your approach to making decisions?
20. What are your plans for next semester? *If returning:* What impacted your decision to continue at CLC? *If not returning (withdrawing):* What has impacted your decision to withdraw from CLC?

21. What else do you think is important for me to learn about your early alert program experience?

22. What questions do you have for me?

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and feedback. I will communicate with you two more times after today. I will email you a transcript of our conversation today to verify it for accuracy and add any clarifying statements. When I finalize the study, I will again email you and provide a draft of the research findings. Reviewing the findings is another opportunity for you to check for accuracy and see how your participation contributed to the study. You can respond to me through email or phone after you review each of the documents.

What questions do you have right now? Can I follow up with you if I have any additional questions? Thank you again for your participation.
APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS
Application for Institutional Review of Research
INvolving Human Subjects

Note: Please complete this form thoroughly keeping in mind that the primary concern is the potential risk (economic, ethical, legal, physical, political, psychological/emotional, social, breach of confidentiality, or other) to the participants. Include attachments of all materials to be used in the investigation (PDF preferred). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) must have enough information about the transactions with the participants to evaluate the risks of participation.

Names and employee IDs for all investigators (Z-IDs for students)

Eric Tammes, [redacted]

Status (select all that apply): ☐ Faculty ☒ Graduate Student ☐ Undergraduate Student

Department (main PI):

Counseling and Higher Education

Phone (main PI):

[redacted]

E-mail address (for all investigators):

All communications will occur via NIU email accounts (for all NIU affiliates).

[redacted]@students.niu.edu

Project Title:

Student Decision Making in an Early Alert Program

Note: All projects involving human subjects research must receive formal written clearance from the IRB prior to the start of data collection.

Type of Project (Check one)

☐ Departmental Research (faculty/student projects not externally funded and not indicated below)
☐ Graduate Thesis/Dissertation (IRB application should be submitted AFTER proposal defense)

Advisor/Committee Chair (& e-mail): Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, gnyunt@niu.edu

☐ DNP Project (Doctor of Nursing Practice)
☐ Undergraduate Project (Senior thesis/capstone, research rookies, independent study)

Advisor/Committee Chair (& e-mail): [redacted]

☐ Externally Sponsored Research

A complete copy of the grant proposal or contract must accompany this application form for IRB review to take place.

Source of Funding:

Title of grant proposal (if different from IRB protocol):

• Name of principal investigator on grant proposal:

• Sponsored Programs Administration file number (or grant number if awarded):

SPA#

☐ Other

Specify:
Part I. Purpose and Procedures:

1) Describe the purpose of your study and the reason(s) this study is needed. Include any necessary background information and a description of your hypothesis or your research question.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain insights into students’ experiences with early alert programs and how students choose to respond after receiving an early alert notification. More specifically, this study will examine the decision-making process of students who are referred through an early alert program. The early alert program serves as one component of a comprehensive package of student success initiatives within the college’s Lancer Success Framework. The framework serves as a purposeful institutional strategy to help students successfully progress from applying to the college through credential completion. The early alert program seeks to improve course success rates, increase utilization levels of academic support resources (e.g., tutoring and library), and strengthen student connections with faculty. To achieve these goals, a deeper understanding of students’ thoughts, actions, and decisions following an early alert notification will strengthen the program’s effectiveness and maximize impact on student success.

Research question: What influences student decision making following an early alert notification at the College of Lake County? Specifically,

- How does a student’s self-efficacy shape student decision making after an early alert notification?
- What decisions and actions does an early alert notification prompt students to take?
- How do institutional interventions influence student decisions and actions following an early alert notification? Institutional interventions include new student transition and onboarding programs, faculty interaction, and case manager interaction.

2) The following items will help the IRB reviewers understand the step-by-step procedures of your study:

2A) Explain the participant eligibility and exclusion criteria that will be used.

The eligible participants for this study will be college-level, for-credit students who received one or more early alert notifications using the defined CLC early alert program protocol. The protocol currently involves a faculty member completing an online early alert referral form in the student information system, an automatic assignment of the early alert to a staff case manager, and communication by the case manager to the student via phone, email, or text message within 48 hours. Eligible student participants will represent a diverse pool based on age, race, academic program, enrollment level, and credential completion goal.

2B) Explain the recruitment procedures (how will participants learn about the study?). If using the snowball technique, please explain who contacts potential participants (other participants or the researcher). Please attach recruitment scripts, flyers, or postings.

Participants will be recruited from the pool of alerted students using an emailed invitation and link to a Qualtrics student interest form sent by the college’s registrar, academic success advisors, and/or dean of academic success. The invitation will explain the purpose of the study and the expected time commitment. The interest form will ask critical information for sampling purposes (e.g., name, contact information, academic program of study, enrollment status, race, and age). Participants will be selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy. Participants will be voluntary and selected based on maximum variation related to credential pursued (i.e., certificate, an associate’s career program, or associate’s transfer program), enrollment status (i.e., full-time or part-time), outreach responsiveness (i.e., did or did not reply to the case manager following the alert notification), age, and race when possible.

2C) Explain the consent process (verbal and/or written procedures for informing participants of the nature of the study and what they will do).

[Please attach all documents (assent, consent, parent permission) that are appropriate for each group of subjects participating in the study. Consent forms should be prepared for adult participants (age 18 or over). Assent forms should be prepared for minor subjects appropriate to their ages, and permission form(s) for parents or legally authorized representatives should also be]
prepared. For children too young to comprehend a simple explanation of participation, parental permission is sufficient only if the research will provide direct benefit to the subject, a member of the subject's family, or other children with the same condition as the subject.

Each participant will review an informed consent form as part of completing the student interest form before participating in the study and indicate their agreement to participate. I will review the consent form details with the participants at the start of the interview to ensure all participant questions are addressed. Participants will be asked to provide a verbal agreement to the consent form before the interview begins. Participants will be notified of the option to stop participating in the research project at any point in the process, and pseudonyms will be utilized in the record-keeping, data analysis, and reporting processes.

2D) Describe the data collection procedures including what data will be collected, how it will be collected (include a description of any interventions to be used), the duration of participation in the study session(s), and how the session(s) will end.

Data will be collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Each student participant will be interviewed one time for approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted either in-person at a neutral and non-distracting location, or using virtual meeting technology. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, so the full context and nuances of the conversation can be understood. Participants will have the option to end the interview at any time. The interview will begin with a discussion of the informed consent document, the study purpose, and the timeline for the interview and necessary follow-up activities. A series of open-ended questions will focus on participants’ experiences at CLC, reflection on self-efficacy, interaction with the early alert program, decision making in response to receiving the alert, the impact of the alert, and how institutional interventions might have influenced participants’ decisions. Participants will be invited to ask clarifying questions or request not to answer a particular question. At the conclusion, participants will be invited to provide any additional information that might relate to the study, and I will clarify the next steps in the research process.

2E) If applicable, explain the procedures for providing compensation.

Participants will be compensated with a $25 gift card at the completion of the interview and the member checking process.

2F) If applicable, explain the procedures for debriefing participants. Please attach a debriefing script or sheet.

Each interviewee will complete a two-step member checking process at a separate time after the interview: 1) a copy of the individual interview transcript will be provided via email to each participant to confirm the accuracy and provide clarification; and 2) a preliminary list of themes and findings will be provided via email to participants to review and provide feedback. Accuracy of the transcript and list of themes will be confirmed via email or a follow-up call based on the student’s preference or availability. I will revise themes and findings based on participants’ feedback.

Reminder: Include copies of all questionnaires, surveys, interview questions, listing of all information/data to be collected, etc. with this application. It is the responsibility of the researcher to obtain any relevant permission for copyrighted materials. If the research involves an oral interview or focus group discussion that could evolve as it progresses, include a list of discussion topics and any “starter” questions for each topic that can reasonably be expected to be covered. If a draft of a written questionnaire or survey is attached, it should be clearly labeled as such and a final version must be submitted before data collection begins.

Part II: Research Participants

3) Participant demographics:

- Gender: All ☒ M ☐ F ☐ Trans M ☐ Trans F ☐ Nonconforming ☐
- Estimated age(s):
  - 18-50
- Are any subjects under age 18? Yes ☐ No ☒
Potentially vulnerable populations (please indicate if any of the following groups are the target population of the study)

- Pregnant women & fetuses
- Prisoners
- Decisionally impaired/mentally disabled
- Specific racial or ethnic group(s) (list in box):

If any potentially “vulnerable populations” will be the target of the study, be sure to include a response to 2A above explaining eligibility criteria.

Target number of participants in the entire study (including controls) from start to finish (keep in mind that this is just an estimate of the total):

20

4) Please explain any outside institutional (e.g., schools, hospitals) approval you will need to obtain and how approval will be sought. Provide scripts, letters, or emails providing any information that will be used to obtain needed approvals/permission. It is the responsibility of the researcher to follow all applicable policies of any outside institution(s).

None

Part III: Risk/Benefit assessment

5) What knowledge/benefit(s) to the field will be gained from the study?

The findings of this study will contribute to a body of research about community college student persistence and best practices. Students, parents, and taxing community college district residents expect improved accountability and a renewed focus on successful student completion. Research focused specifically on student decision making and responsiveness to early alert programs is minimally addressed, particularly at community colleges.

6) What direct benefit(s) are there to the participant(s) (if any) from the proposed research? [For example, learning a new skill, psychological insight, teaching experience] [Please note that compensation is NOT considered a direct benefit.]

Student participants may gain the opportunity to reflect on their learning experience at CLC, resources available for support, and self-efficacy skills. Participants will help in developing and strengthening the early alert program at CLC.

7) Describe any potential risks (breach of confidentiality, economic, ethical, legal, physical, political, psychological/emotional, social, etc.) to the subjects posed by the proposed research. (Note: Some studies may have “no reasonably foreseeable risks.”) Investigators are required to report all unexpected and/or adverse events to the IRB. Therefore, it is important that you list all reasonably anticipated risks because unanticipated adverse events may need to be reported by NIU to OHRP.

This study does not have any reasonably foreseeable risks. Discussing academic and college success experiences may elicit varying feelings or emotions based on the participant’s prior experiences. Institutional support and resources will be provided to the participant where needed.

8) Federal regulations require that researchers use procedures that minimize any risks to participants. What procedures will be used to minimize each risk and/or deal with the challenge(s) stated in “7” above?

Notes, transcripts, and audio recordings will be kept confidential and maintained in a password-protected file. Pseudonyms will be utilized in the record-keeping, data analysis, and reporting processes.
9) If support services are required to minimize risk of harm, explain what will be provided (list of services available).

**DeKalb area resource list:**

If using this, please include with your application.

| Not applicable |

10) How do the potential benefits of the study justify the potential risks to the participants?

| Not applicable |

**Part IV: Consent Document Variations**

11) Will audio, video, or film recording be used? Yes ☒ No ☐

If yes, specify the recording format to be used.

Interviews will be conducted using Zoom video conferencing and recorded or using the telephone with audio recording. Both formats will be transcribed.

Please keep in mind that specific consent must be sought in the informed consent document(s) by including a separate signature/date line giving consent for recording. This is in addition to the signature/date line giving consent to participate in the research project.

12) Will this project require the use of consent/assent documents written in a language other than English? Yes ☐ No ☒

**Reminder:** If non-English documents will be used, please have the document translator provide documentation (email or written) that the translation is equivalent to the English version. [This can be done after the protocol is approved in order to minimize the number of changes needed.]

13) Are you requesting a waiver of a signature on the informed consent document? Yes ☐ No ☒

Please indicate the justification for requesting this waiver:

☐ The only record linking the subject to the research would be the signed consent document and the principal risk of the research would be breach of confidentiality.

☐ The research involves minimal risk to the subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context (e.g., online surveys).

14) Are you requesting a waiver/alteration of some other aspect of the informed consent document? Yes ☐ No ☒

**[This section is particularly relevant for studies involving deception.]**

14a) Please explain which aspects of informed consent will be missing or altered along with a justification for the change.

14b) Please explain how the project meets all of the following criteria:

1) The research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to the participants.

2) The waiver/alteration will not adversely affect the rights or welfare of the participants.

3) The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration.
4) Whenever appropriate, the participants will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

15) Will any HIPAA protected health information be collected as part of the data? Yes ☐ No ☑

If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

[Please provide a copy of your HIPAA disclosure form to be given to participants.]

16) Will any protected school records be collected as part of the data? Yes ☐ No ☑

If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

Part V: Confidentiality and Anonymity

17) Will identifying information be connected to the data, or is there a way to re-identify the data through pseudonyms or a code that is kept separate from the data? Yes ☑ (confidential data) No ☐ (anonymous data)

QUALTRICS USERS: You may want to keep your survey anonymous by allowing student participants to access a second Qualtrics survey where they enter their name and student ID if needed. This would require clear instructions in the original survey along with a link to the second survey where they enter the identifiers for course credit or entry into a drawing.

18) If you answered yes to question #17, describe precautions to insure the privacy of the subjects, and the confidentiality of the data, both in your possession and in reports and publications.

All participants will be assigned a pseudonym to insure privacy. Any identifiable information will be removed from data collected and only the pseudonym will be used. All publications will use the pseudonym and only limited demographic information intended to support the study findings will be presented so the identity of the participant will not be known.

19) If you are collecting your data through an on-line survey tool, will the survey instrument collect email and/or IP addresses with the data? No ☐ The survey will be set so that email/IP addresses are NOT collected (in Qualtrics: within a survey select “survey options” then “anonymize responses” toward the bottom) Yes ☐ IP and/or email addresses WILL be collected with the data N/A ☑ I am not using an online survey tool.

Please Note: Some electronic survey items may not be accessible to people who use screen readers as a way of accommodating their visual impairments. We recommend that you follow the link below to check the accessibility of your Qualtrics survey items: https://www.qualtrics.com/support/survey-platform/survey-module/survey-tools/check-survey-accessibility/

20) How will the records (data, recordings, and consent forms) be stored? Also indicate how long records will be kept and how and when they will be disposed of.

[Note: Signed informed consent documents must be maintained for 3 years following completion of the study.]

Records for this study will be maintained on a personal computer and stored using a password-protected file. Records will be destroyed at the completion of the study, except where required to be maintained.
Part VI: Projects Involving Deception [complete only if your study includes deception]

21) Describe the deception being used. Be sure to clarify whether this is deception by omission (an important aspect of the study is withheld from the participants) or commission (the participant is misled about some aspect of the study) or both. [Complete item 14 if aspects of consent are missing.]

Not applicable

22) Why is deception a necessary and unavoidable component of the experimental design?

Not applicable

23) Debriefing of participants will be:

- Immediate (directly following the research session)
- Delayed
- Full (all aspects of deception will be revealed)
- Partial (some aspects of deception will remain unexplained)

a) If debriefing is delayed, why is the delay necessary, and when will it occur?

b) If debriefing is not full, why is partial debriefing necessary? Would the participant be harmed in any way by full debriefing?

c) If debriefing is partial, will full debriefing occur later?

d) Does the presence of deception increase risk of harm to the participants?

e) Is the respondent free to withdraw his/her data after being fully debriefed?

24) Who will provide the debriefing?

Reminder: Please include a copy of your debriefing script/sheet with this application.

Part VII: Credit and Compensation

25) If participants will receive course credit for participation, please describe it below.

Not applicable

26) If participants will receive some other form of compensation for participation, please describe it below.

Participants will receive a $25 gift card at the completion of participation in the study.

27) Describe any alternative tasks that will be available for participants to earn the credit or compensation.

Not applicable

Part VIII: Conflict of interest

28) Do any of the researchers conducting this study have any potential conflicts of interest?
Conflicts of interest may include financial or personal interest, or any condition in which the investigator’s judgment regarding a primary interest may be biased by a secondary interest.

Yes ☐  No ☒

29) If yes to the above question, please describe the nature of the conflict of interest.

Part IX: Researcher Qualifications

30) In addition to listing the investigators’ names, indicate their qualifications to carry out the research described in this application.

I am a doctoral student in the counseling and higher education department and have completed the required program coursework. This study will be conducted with guidance from my dissertation chair and committee.

31) State the date of completion of the CITI Human Subjects Protection training program(s) for the individuals listed in the question above. The required course is “Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher, Basic Course.” The required CITI training is accessible from the ORCIS website at https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/training/index.shtml

If you have comparable training elsewhere, please include the certification with this application.

[Note: NIU policy requires that research investigators must complete appropriate training before conducting human subjects research.]

October 29, 2018

To be completed by investigator and confirmed by advisor (if student project) and departmental reviewer.

Check the items that are accompanying this completed application form:

1. ☒ Subject recruitment/introductory materials
2. ☒ Informed consent documents (select at least one):
   - ☒ Consent form for adults (if participants are age 18 or over)
   - ☐ Assent form for minors (if participants are under age 18)
   - ☐ Parental permission form (if participants are under age 18)
3. ☒ All surveys, questionnaires, interview questions, or other instruments to be used
4. ☐ grant proposal SPA# included on front of application (for externally funded projects)

REQUIRED SIGNATURES: ALL PROJECTS

CERTIFICATION

I certify that I have read and understand the policies and procedures for research projects that involve human subjects and that I intend to comply with Northern Illinois University Policy. Any changes in the approved protocol will be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to those changes being put into practice unless it involves an immediate safety issue for a subject during a procedure. (In such instances, the researcher is required to promptly notify the IRB after the fact.) I also understand that all non-exempt projects require review at least annually.

__________________________________________________________________
* Investigator(s) Signature(s)  Date

__________________________________________________________________  
* Signature of Faculty Advisor  Date

(Student Projects Only)
* Signature of Authorized Departmental Reviewer  Printed name  Date

* PIs (both faculty and students), faculty advisors, and ADRs may choose to send an email statement (or email thread) indicating acknowledgement of the certification statement above in lieu of signatures.

Return this form, together with necessary documentation, to the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at researchcompliance@niu.edu (a single PDF is preferred, but we can work with multiple files and Word documents). For information or additional assistance with the approval process, please call our office at (815) 753-8588 (Lowden Hall, 301) or access the ORCIS web page at https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/index.shtml
Approval Notice
Initial Review

29-Jan-2021

TO: Eric Tamme (01858393)
   Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS21-0155 “Student Decision Making in an Early Alert Program”

In a preliminary review, the Initial Submission of the above named research protocol was determined to meet the definition of human subjects research according to the federal regulations. The submission was then reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board through the expedited review process under Member Review procedures on 29-Jan-2021.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

**Protocol Approval period:** 29-Jan-2021 - 28-Jan-2022

It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or others.

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

**Informed Consent:**

Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that
informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.

If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject's representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.

**You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.**

**Continuing Review:**

Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your protocol number (HS21-0155) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

**Closing the Study:**

Please note that a final report submission should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.

With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml
March 1, 2021

Eric Tammes
Academic Success

Re: Student Decision-Making in Early Alert Program (Doctoral Research)
IRB Protocol Number 20.009

Dear Mr. Tammes:

The [name redacted] Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has approved your research project, “Student Decision Making in Early Alert Program (Doctoral Research)”. This approval is valid for one year from today and may be renewed at that time.

This approval is based on a limited IRB review of your submitted IRB application, research protocol, and answers to questions posed by the IRB. Your project is considered exempt by the [name redacted] Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the following standard exemptions in the Common Rule:

- 45 CFR 46 §46.104(d)(2)(iii) for research that includes interactions involving interview procedures in which the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46 §46.111(a)(7).

The IRB is confident that your data management plan includes adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain confidentiality of data.

Please note that any adverse events or breaches of confidentiality must be reported to me within 24 hours of each occurrence. In addition, any substantial changes in the research protocol during the course of this project should be submitted as amendments for IRB review and approval.

Regards,

Megan M. Lombardi, PhD
Assistant Director; IRB Chair
Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT EMAIL
March 8, 2021

Dear CLC Student,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study about your experience with the early alert program at the College of Lake County. This study is being conducted for a doctoral student dissertation at Northern Illinois University (NIU). The purpose of the study is to gain insights into students’ decision-making processes, responses, and perceptions of the early alert experience.

If you are selected to participate, you would complete one interview using Zoom or a phone call for approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview would be recorded and transcribed. Within two weeks after the interview, you will receive a transcript and summary of the interview to confirm the information you shared. All findings from the study, including excerpts from the interview, will be published in the dissertation. Your identity will be kept confidential and your participation in the study is complete voluntary. Whether you choose to participate or not participate in the study will have no impact on your student status at CLC. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

By being selected for participation and completing the study, you would receive a $25 Visa gift card in appreciation for your time and feedback.

**If you would like to participate in this study and share your early alert experiences, please complete the brief application and consent form at**

[https://niu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6RMFcs0mUHxrTq6](https://niu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6RMFcs0mUHxrTq6) **by March 31, 2021.**

Thank you for your consideration. If you have questions or are interested in learning more about this NIU and CLC Institutional Review Board approved project, please contact:

Eric Tammes, Northern Illinois University
Z1858393@students.niu.edu

Sincerely,

Tanya Woltmann,
Dean, Academic Success
Participant Recruitment Questionnaire  
*Completed on Qualtrics*

Name: ____________________________________________

☐ email: __________________________________________

Phone: ____________________________________________

**Biological Sex or Gender Identity:**

☐ Female    ☐ Male    ☐ Nonbinary/third gender

☐ Prefer to describe_________________________    ☐ Prefer not to say

**Age range:**

☐ 18-24 years old    ☐ 25 years or older

**Race and/or ethnicity (check all that apply):**

☐ Latinx or Hispanic    ☐ Black or African American    ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian American    ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander    ☐ White

**How many semesters have you attended ☐:**

**Enrollment status:**

☐ full-time (12 credit hours or more)    ☐ part-time (up to 11 credit hours)

**Degree/goal:**

☐ complete certificate program

☐ complete associate’s degree and enter career/workforce

☐ complete associate’s degree and transfer to a four-year university

☐ transfer to a four-year university before completing associate’s degree
APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: Student Decision Making in an Early Alert Program

Investigators

Name: Eric Tammes
Dept: Counseling & Higher Ed
Phone: 773-710-4961

Key Information
- This is a voluntary research study on the decision making experience of students following an early alert notification at the College of Lake County.
- This one semester study involves participants engaging in a 60 minute interview.
- The benefits include providing insight to improve the early alert and student success experience for College of Lake County students. There are no foreseeable risks involved with this study.

Description of the Study
The purpose of the study is to gain insights into students’ experiences with early alert programs and how students choose to respond after receiving an early alert notification. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: complete a recruitment questionnaire, participate in a 60-minute interview during the spring or summer semester, review a transcript of your interview and summary the findings, and offer feedback or clarification about your responses.

Risks and Benefits
There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks.

The benefits of participation include the opportunity to reflect on your learning experience at College of Lake County, learn about resources available for support, and discuss your self-efficacy skills. Participants will help in developing and strengthening the early alert program at College of Lake County.

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. The researcher will be the only person with access to any audio recordings. Electronic data collected will be destroyed after completion of the study. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Compensation
You will receive the following compensation for your time: $25 Visa gift card upon completion of the interview and review of the interview transcript and interview summary. The gift card will be mailed to an address provided by the participant or picked up from the researcher at the College of Lake County.

Your Rights
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Eric Tammes, at etammes@students.niu.edu or 773-710-4961. You may also contact the researcher’s dissertation chair, Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, at gnyunt@niu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.
Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

__________________________________________  _____________________
Participant’s Signature  Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the interview related to this study.

__________________________________________  Date
Participant’s Signature
Student Interview Protocol: Early Alert Responsiveness

Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for talking with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about you and your experiences with the early alert program at the College of Lake County. I will ask you a series of questions, and please know that there are no right or wrong answers. It is perfectly fine if you did not do something or take a specific action. I anticipate that our conversation will last about 45 minutes, but there is no time limit for you to answer the questions.

When you applied to participate in this study, you completed a biographical survey and a consent form that authorizes your participation in this interview. I have a copy of your consent form for us to review before we start. Highlight key points of form. Do you have any questions about the consent form or the interview process? All of the information you share is considered confidential, and I will not share your name or other personally identifiable information without your permission. We also discussed before today that our conversation will be recorded to assist me with summarizing the interview and helping me with the research study. Are you still comfortable with me recording and transcribing our interview?

What questions do you have before we begin? I will turn on the recording and ask the first question. You can feel free to stop me at any time if needed. Begin recording.

General Background and College Experience

1. Please tell me more about you, your goals while studying at CLC, and your plans after graduating from CLC.

2. How would you describe your educational experiences before attending CLC?
3. What influenced your decision to attend [ ]? Follow up if needed: Who has influenced or inspired you to attend college?

**Experiences with Institutional Interventions**

4. Please tell me a story or example of your interaction with a professor in class. Follow up if needed: Which part of the experience was most meaningful or helpful?

5. Please tell me more about your experiences with your academic advisor or student development counselor. Follow up if needed: How frequently do you communicate with your advisor, and how do you communicate?

6. What have you enjoyed the most about [ ]? What has been challenging?

**Experience with Self-Efficacy**

7. How do you approach a challenging class at [ ]? Follow up if needed: What would we see you do and say?

8. What do you do when you encounter difficulties with a class or an assignment? Follow up if needed: Who do you contact?

9. How would you describe your ability to be a successful student at [ ]?

**Experience with Early Alert Program**

10. Do you remember receiving an early alert notification through email, a phone call, or a text message?

   a. If yes: What do you remember about receiving an early alert notification? Follow up if needed: How were you contacted about the alert and by whom?

   b. If no, describe a typical notification process. Does that sound familiar? If yes, return to question 8a. If no, continue to question 10.
11. Describe your reaction to receiving the early alert notification.

12. What did you know about the early alert program before receiving an alert? *Follow up if needed:* How did you learn this information?

**Early Alert Decision Making and Outcomes**

13. What was your response after being contacted about the alert? *Follow up if needed:* What communication did you have with the person who contacted you?

14. What decisions did you make as a result of receiving an early alert notification? *Follow up if needed:* What actions did you take? What influenced your decisions as a result of the alert?

15. Share more about what the alert said and who sent it. How did that impact your decisions?

16. What impact did the early alert process have on your academic experience during the rest of the semester? *Follow up if needed:* How did the early alert impact your final grade?

17. What recommendations do you have about how an early alert is communicated?

18. What is your opinion of the early alert program? *Follow up if needed:* What would you change about the early alert program?

**Summary Thoughts and Participant Engagement**

19. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your day-to-day experience as a student? *Follow up if needed:* How has the pandemic influenced your approach to making decisions?
20. What are your plans for next semester? *If returning:* What impacted your decision to continue at [BLANK]? *If not returning (withdrawing):* What has impacted your decision to withdraw from [BLANK]?

21. What else do you think is important for me to learn about your early alert program experience?

22. What questions do you have for me?

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and feedback. I will communicate with you two more times after today. I will email you a transcript of our conversation today to verify it for accuracy and add any clarifying statements. After you review the transcript and notify me of any changes or edits that are needed, I will send you the $25 Visa gift card as a thank you for participation.

When I finalize the study, I will email you and provide a draft of the research findings. Reviewing the findings is another opportunity for you to check for accuracy and see how your participation contributed to the study. You can respond to me through email or phone after you review each of the documents.

What questions do you have right now? Can I follow up with you if I have any additional questions? Thank you again for your participation.