



WHITE PAPER

Missed Connections

Recommendations to Improve the Success of Early Alerts Through Equity-Based Communications



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Overview

Advising technologies are an integral part of the student success strategy at most colleges and universities. These technologies, including EAB's Navigate and Starfish systems, provide early-alert features that allow faculty and staff to flag students who need extra help with basic needs, academic concerns, finances, and mental health.

COVID-19 has illuminated how important flagging these concerns is for the health of our students and our institutions. During the first year of the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the flags raised over the previous year, reflecting the struggles students felt then and continue to feel now.

We have evidence that early alerts can be a powerful tool for reaching institutional goals on student equity. Students of color receive a disproportionate share of alerts, so a high-functioning early-alert system can be an essential tool for determining how to allocate staff time and campus resources to better support students and groups who have historically been underserved.

Yet, despite this potential, early-alert systems aren't being used to their fullest extent possible. When we examined data from our systems, we found that the majority of alerts did not ultimately result in an advising conversation. While some of this can be explained by limitations on advisor time, much of the issue seems to be a lack of student response to intervention outreach. These "**mised connections**" inhibit our ability to support more students and get more value from our early-alert efforts.

Much of this engagement challenge stems from how we are communicating around alerts. Students are more likely to respond to personal emails with growth-mindset language. Students are also more likely to engage with an advisor with whom they have built prior rapport, and whom they know has their best interests in mind.

Offering positive, trusting support is especially important when working with students of color and other marginalized student populations. This requires advisors to better understand students' identities and life experiences in order to better craft outreach and support tailored to individual student needs. If that identity support is absent, we miss an opportunity to build the trust that makes students comfortable seeking help and encourages a sense of belonging at our institutions.

Fortunately, these are skills that advisors can easily learn and incorporate into their work. This paper explores the basics of what you need to know and offers suggestions on how to elevate your practice.



Early Alerts Are on the Rise

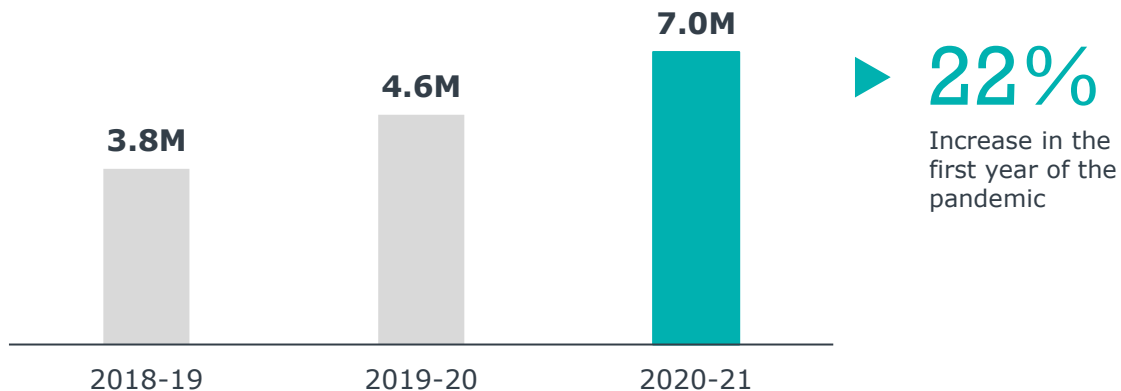
Colleges and universities have steadily increased their use of early-alert systems over the last several years. This suggests that early alerts are becoming a familiar and useful part of the student success strategies at many colleges and universities.

Faculty adoption has historically been the biggest challenge for early-alert programs and has therefore received the most attention from student success leaders. The steady increase in flags suggests that faculty are becoming progressively more comfortable using early-alert systems to direct support to students. This support is needed more than ever before.

Unsurprisingly, students are expressing increased emotional, social, and academic needs due to the continuing toll of COVID-19. We see this trend reflected in the 22% increase in flags raised by faculty and staff to advisors using early-alert systems between fall 2019 and fall 2020. With faculty participation on the rise, we now need to look for opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the downstream intervention processes that follow an alert.

Alert Activity on the Rise, Even Before the Pandemic

Number of Flags Raised



Common Early-Alert Reasons



Low grade



Tutoring



Well-being



Attendance



Basic needs



Disengagement (inattentive)



Opportunity to Improve Early-Alert Processes

The journey from alert to resolution is a multiphase process. Opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness exist in each of these phases.

The first phase is triage. While some advisors excel at reaching students, we found that on average only about half (51%) of alerts result in outreach. Many advising offices do not have the capacity to follow up on every alert and thus need to make informed choices about where to deepen their efforts. Usually this involves prioritizing students based on preestablished criteria, such as the number of alerts they received, their GPA or academic status, or a predictive model that helps inform which students are most in need of help.

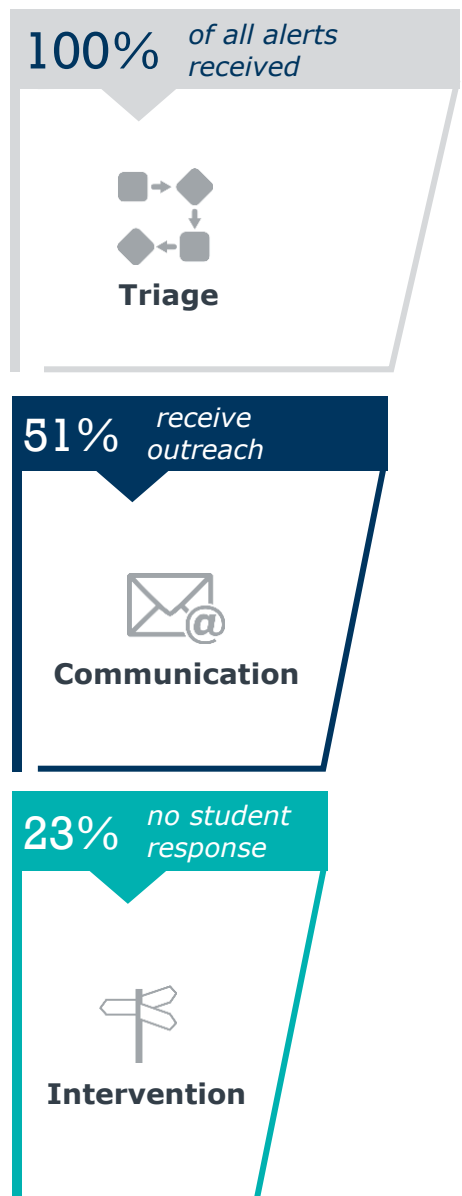
The second phase is communication. Roughly three-fifths of outreach to students receives a response, representing just 28% of the original pool of alerts. While some of this outreach may not request or need a response, the overall low conversion rate suggests there may be opportunities to improve how we are inviting students to seek help, especially when students who already feel marginalized.

The third phase is intervention, in which the advisor and student meet to discuss the issue and seek a resolution. These meetings are hugely meaningful for student success. Our data suggests that students who are flagged with alerts and meet with advisors are retained at a rate more than eight percentage points higher than students who are flagged and do not receive outreach, and twelve percentage points higher than those who get outreach and do not respond.

Taken as a whole, we see two clear opportunities for increasing the number of alerts that ultimately result in productive advising appointments. First, we need to add staff capacity to follow up on more alerts. Advisors often “pay for themselves” in terms of the tuition revenue preserved through retention efforts. That said, adding staff can be daunting when faced with tight budgets and a challenging labor market.

Second, advisors can explore better ways to communicate with students to improve their engagement with the process. This can be acted on in the short-term with existing staff and produce immediate results. We believe that equity-minded communication strategies, such as those described in the following pages, are key to achieving this second objective.

Early-Alert Funnel



Source: EAB interviews and analysis.



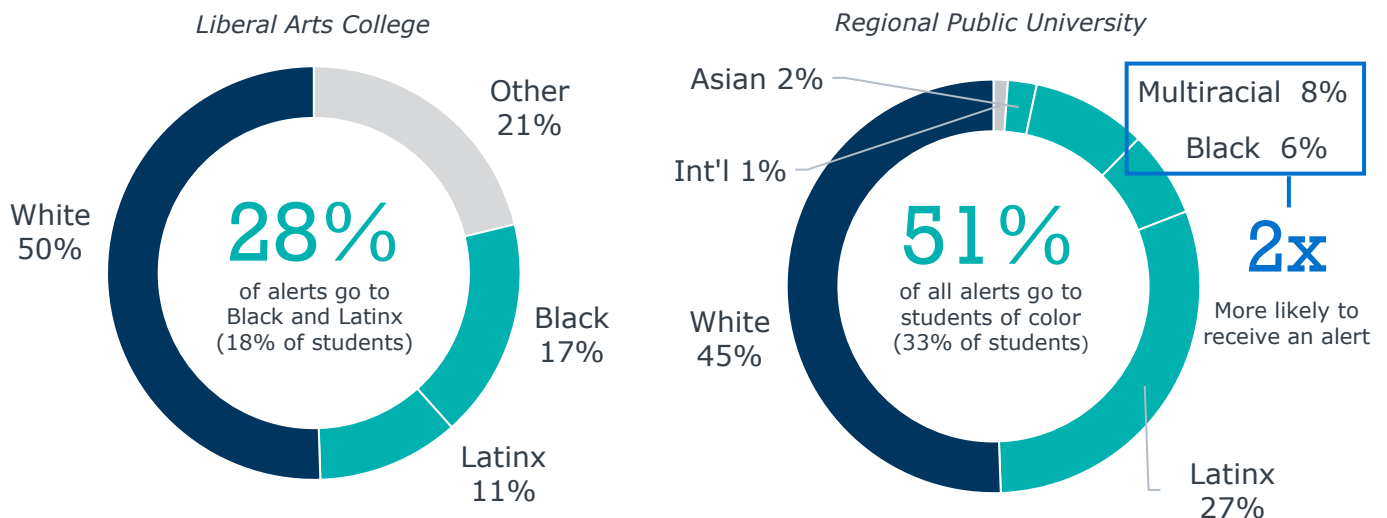
Early Alerts as a Tool for Equity

Students of color receive a disproportionate share of alerts at many institutions. For example, data provided by a private liberal arts college and a regional public institution, both in the Midwest, show how students of color receive up to twice as many alerts as their white peers. While some of these disparities may be explained by biases from instructors, much of it reflects the true struggles and needs of students. Thus, we believe early alerts can be a powerful tool for helping schools direct advising resources in a way that supports equitable outcomes.

That said, this will work only if we intentionally approach early-alert interventions with an eye and ear toward different student identities and experiences. Students of color are more likely than white students to be discouraged by negative feedback on academic performance. Faced with an often-unwelcoming campus environment, an early alert can feel like just another microaggression telling the student that they cannot succeed and do not belong in college.

We can mitigate these concerns by helping advisors communicate early-alert interventions in an empathetic way that builds trust. Many advisors who are working with struggling students have never been on the receiving end of an academic intervention. They also may not have the lived experience necessary to immediately understand how their words and actions might be interpreted differently by students from backgrounds unlike their own. Fortunately, advisors can bridge these gaps through intentional communication and rapport-building. In the next section, we offer three recommendations that you may consider adding to your professional practice.

Black and Latinx Students Often Have the Highest Share of Alerts



Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Take Action: Increase Connections Through Communication and Trust

Recommendation #1:

Improve Response by Building Rapport

Recommendation #2:

Pre-explain Alerts in Course Materials

Recommendation #3:

Adopt Asset-Based Language in Emails



Recommendation #1: Improve Response by Building Rapport

Students are more comfortable opening up about sensitive issues with people they trust, even if the person is from a different background. Unfortunately, we have substantial trust gaps along racial lines. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that Black students are substantially less trustful of campus leadership (presidents, provosts, and deans) than their white peers. Black students have lower rates of out-of-group trust as well and are less likely to engage with someone who is unknown to them or outside of their race.

Fortunately, students see their advisors as among the most trusted people on campus, providing a foundation for productive relationships. Dr. Paul Hernandez, a nationally recognized expert on equity and pedagogy, offers three lessons for building stronger trust with students:

- 1 Recognize and acknowledge that your reality and experiences may differ from those of your students of color, perhaps drastically so.
- 2 Show who you are beyond your role as an authority figure and dismantle any negative stereotypes students may have due to past experiences with others.
- 3 Focus on universal themes such as frustration, commitment, hopelessness, and fear to create a connection and encourage productive conversation.

Summarized from *The Pedagogy of Real Talk: Engaging, Teaching, and Connecting with Students At-Promise*

Academic coaches at the **Catholic University of America** (CUA) are keenly aware of the benefits of having authentic conversations like these with students. Coaches pre-identify students who are more likely to struggle academically and reach out early in their college careers to begin building rapport. In doing so, coaches often share their own stories and thus create a space for students to open up about their challenges and frustrations.

The efforts of CUA's coaches to build rapport, gain trust, and create connections are paying off. Student response rate to emails is 80%, higher than we see from typical early-alert outreach. Furthermore, students average a 0.73 increase in GPA after working with their coach. Many of these relationships are so strong that students maintain them after they graduate.

"I share that I had it rough and grew up in a toxic environment, struggled in college, and had a series of setbacks. They hear that, and it gives them hope."

CUA Coach

Source: National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), *The trust gap among college students*, NSSE Interactive Reports. Retrieved from nsse.indiana.edu, Hernandez, Paul, *The Pedagogy of Real Talk Engaging, Teaching, and Connecting with Students At-Promise*, and EAB interviews and analysis.



Recommendation #2: Pre-explain Alerts in Course Materials

Students are more likely to respond to alert outreach—and less likely to feel stigmatized—if they understand what an alert means and how it is intended to help them succeed. To this end, schools like **Cal Poly Pomona** and **University of Wisconsin Milwaukee** ask instructors to include prewritten explanatory blurbs in their course syllabi and learning management system pages. These additions have led to an increase in class conversations about grades, normalizing of self-advocacy and help-seeking behaviors, and increased trust between faculty members and students.



Create Your Own Syllabi Blurb

Three Steps to Ensure Students Are Aware of Alerts and Support Services

- 1 Explain why your institution is using student support and success technology** (*introduce the name and purpose of the technology, explain that alerts are beneficial and meant to help support your success*)
- 2 Communicate when and how alerts may be raised and how they will be communicated to students** (*outline the timing, next steps, who may reach out, and where alerts will be sent, such as campus email, personal email, or text message*)
- 3 Share available resources and support to bolster their success** (*include office hours and times to connect with faculty versus advisors for additional and specialized support, note availability of mental health resources*)

Sample Blurbs



“At different points during the semester, **I will send a progress report to the Office of Student Success (OSS) for all students in this class. The progress reports are not punitive.** They are an opportunity to connect you with an OSS staff member who can offer additional support and suggest resources if you need assistance.”



“UWM uses Navigate, a powerful tool dedicated to student success. Navigate allows instructors to send Progress Reports to students throughout the term... **certain reports may encourage academic advisors or other support staff to provide outreach to you as well.**”



Recommendation #3: Adopt Asset-Based Language in Emails

The words we use matter. Often the emails we send about early alerts use deficit language, contain microaggressions, or reflect harmful power dynamics. By intentionally focusing on the language we use, we can help students of color feel more welcomed, supported, and celebrated.

For this reason, schools like **Campbell University** have begun using asset-based language in their outreach. Asset-based language focuses on strength and potential by emphasizing the student and avoiding harmful characteristics and code words such as “underprepared” or “unmotivated.” Campbell found that making small but significant changes in their wording generated a 32% improvement in email response rate.

Anatomy of an Asset-Based Email

The screenshot shows an email composition window titled "We missed you in...". The "To" field contains "mjwarner@woodley.edu" and the "Subject" field contains "We missed you in Math 101". The email body is annotated with several key features:

- Personal:** "Dear Malcolm,"
- Concise:** "We've missed seeing you in Math 101! We know balancing life and class can be a challenge. **Students who regularly attend their courses are more likely to succeed, and you can be successful.** [Add additional notes from flag notes] **If there is a reason you cannot attend this class as scheduled, please [schedule time with me.](#)**"
- From a trusted sender:** "Hope to see you soon, **Kate**, Student Success Advisor"
- Positive:** "We missed you in Math 101"
- Realistic:** "We know balancing life and class can be a challenge."
- Normalizes challenges:** "Students who regularly attend their courses are more likely to succeed, and you can be successful."
- Directly links to next step:** "[schedule time with me.](#)"

Source: Source: Heretohere.org; New America. 2022. How You Say It Matters, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/how-you-say-it-matters> [Accessed 24 February 2022], and EAB interviews and analysis.



Tool: Asset-Based Checklist

We built this checklist as a tool for you to assess your current email strategy. Use it to ensure your message matches the intention of your efforts.

Quick Check Items		Ask Yourself	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<i>Creating inclusive and asset-based emails</i>			
1	Send a personalized message	Did I use the student’s first name?	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Did I use the student’s preferred pronouns, if known?	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Did I introduce myself, if I haven’t met the student yet?	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Did I state the reason for my outreach?	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Send emails from someone known to the student	Did I make sure the sender of the email is someone the student trusts or at least knows?	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Normalize challenges	Did I provide quantitative or anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that other students face the obstacle I’m reaching out about?	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Use asset-based language	Did I acknowledge the student’s potential to succeed?	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Did I focus on the student’s strengths and/or encourage their aspirations?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Email communication best practices</i>			
5	Keep your message clear and concise	Did I keep my email approximately at the seventh-grade reading level?	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Did I avoid jargon?	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Provide a direct follow-up link	Did I provide a direct path to appointment scheduling, a campus chatbot, or a direct-dial phone number?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Use notes from the raised alert in your student success management system.

Advisors and faculty are the most trusted and ideal senders. Other potential senders are campus partners who work directly with specific student groups.

Use the Gunning Fog Index or another readability test to assess the reading level required for your email.

TIP: Get student feedback on what works—and what doesn’t

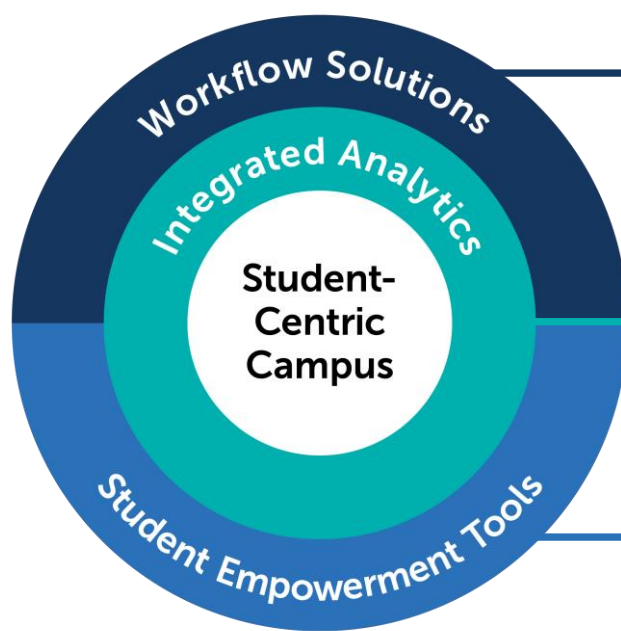
Your student email communication strategy should be an iterative process, especially as the impact of the message will be felt differently across student groups. To ensure you consider students’ perspectives as you plan your strategy, invite student leaders or student focus groups to participate in the planning process (and compensate them for their time).

Interested in Upgrading Your Early-Alert Technology?

Navigate Provides Early Alerts and Dozens of Other Student Success Tools

Navigate is EAB's Student Success Management System, the first enterprise-level technology for student success in higher education. Navigate brings together students, administrators, advisors, faculty, and other staff in a collaborative network to holistically support students across the college journey. Navigate is informed by EAB's work with more than 850 schools on student success. Our partners see graduation rate increases of 3 to 15% and a typical ROI of 5:1. Navigate will help you create a more personal and outcomes-focused experience for your students.

Inside Navigate, EAB's Student Success Management System



Workflow Solutions

Focus and scale interventions, manage early alerts and communications, support advisors and other staff in their day-to-day work, and create a truly coordinated network for student success

Integrated Analytics

Understand which interventions are working and how to best **adjust your strategy** to support your school's needs

Student Empowerment Tools

Build **belonging** and a deeper sense of purpose at school with Navigate's mobile app and other digital tools

Improving Key Equity Measures with Navigate

90%

Retention rate of Black male students participating in a Navigate-powered support program, compared to 68% national average

NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

13.8%

Increase in graduation rate for Alaska Native students across five years after implementing Navigate for student support

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE

7 percentage points

Reduction in graduation rate gap between URM and non-URM students across five years due in part to success initiatives leveraging Navigate

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY FULLERTON

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