

## Implement early-alert system for students in crises

In the post-**Virginia Tech** era, the need for interdepartmental communication about students in crises is greater than ever. Information from multiple sources might lead to an intervention that could prevent tragedy and help retain high-risk students.

That's why you should advocate for a program similar to the **University of North Carolina at Greensboro's** Early Spartan Success Initiative. Faculty members and administrators submit online forms to the Student Academic Services office about students who are struggling academically, socially or emotionally. Then SAS staff tries to help the student or refer him to other campus resources for assistance.

The forms are also forwarded to the dean of students. If the dean is already aware that the student has problems, the online form adds to his knowledge, according to **Tammy Alt**, assistant director of student academic services at North Carolina Greensboro. She's also one of two assistant directors in charge of ESSI.

"We know we need to be putting the whole picture together about students and communicating with each other as much as we can," Alt said.

ESSI started in fall 2006, but only the 40 professors teaching first-year experience courses for freshmen or adult and transfer students could transmit the forms. Approximately 760 students enrolled in those courses last year.

FYE professors are trained to help students, but Alt encouraged them to send forms even if they were already supporting students. That way, there would be a record about the students' problems, Alt said. She asked instructors to tell students they were filling out forms so they wouldn't be surprised when contacted by SAS.

Only 12 forms were submitted last year. Alt believes that's probably because FYE instructors already had things under control for the most part.

Problems indicated on those 12 forms included absences, missing academic work, relationship difficulties, personal issues, not using e-mail, having a grade point average that was a C or lower, or enrolling in the wrong section of a class (see box on p. 5).

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When a form was submitted, Alt or the other assistant director followed up with the faculty member. Then one of them e-mailed the student. The e-mail:

- Told the student that SAS received a referral.
- Invited the student to the student academic services office to discuss how things were going. "We don't even say that there appears to be a problem," Alt said. Her office is guided by the philosophy of "appreciative inquiry," which is basically about the search for the best in people.
- Encouraged the student to speak to his teachers about difficulties.
- Reminded the student of the last day to drop or add a class.
- Informed him that he would receive a follow-up phone call from SAS if he didn't respond to the e-mail within a week.

If the student didn't contact SAS, a follow-up form was sent to the referring faculty member, and the student received a final e-mail with information on various campus resources.

If appropriate, a referral would be made to the Counseling Center, student affairs, financial aid office, or Student Success Center.

When students came to SAS, Alt or the other assistant director met with them. They would start the discussion by asking what was going well. For example, they might talk about the student's academic strengths, or what intrigued her about the major she had chosen.

"We start by making it clear we're here to support them," Alt said. They also reviewed what campus resources the student had been using, if any.

"Then we articulated the most positive outcome for the student in that semester," Alt said. Finally, the student and SAS staff member came up with a plan for achieving that outcome. The plan covered various campus resources to help the student.

The students were encouraged to come back for another meeting a few weeks later to see how it was going. Then Alt submitted a follow-up form to the referring faculty member and sent a final e-mail to the student with information on campus resources.

ESSI is being expanded this fall. Those able to use the system will include enrollment services administrators, faculty members providing supplemental instruction, and professors teaching a biology course that many first-year students are required to take.

"We want faculty members or administrators to be able to submit something about students from the moment they set foot on campus," Alt said.

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