

# ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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## THE ESSENTIALS FOR AN EFFECTIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

John W. Dysart  
President  
THE DYSART GROUP

Retention has become a critical issue for most colleges and universities. The importance of increased retention and higher graduation rates should be obvious.

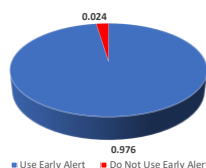
It is likely that colleges and universities are going to be held much more accountable for enrollment outcomes. It is reasonable to expect greater scrutiny by accreditors, politicians, the Department of Education and the public in general.

As demographics become more challenging, competition increases and the market for prospective students continues to decline, institutions will need to seek new sources of revenue to survive. Even marginal increases in retention rates can have significant influence on overall financial health.

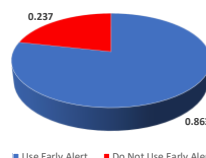
For the majority of colleges and universities, research indicates that the most effective approach to better retention is a process that tracks indicators for at-risk students and provides appropriate intervention such as academic support, counseling, mentoring, encouragement and financial assistance among others.

Most colleges and universities have early warning programs in place. The John N. Gartner Institute noted the following in a 2012 study:

Utilization of Early Alert Systems at Private Institutions



Utilization of Early Alert Systems at Public Institutions



While many schools have early alert programs in place, they are often flawed, underfunded, overly complex and ineffective. What are the basic structures necessary for an effective early warning system?

### Leadership

The most effective early warning systems begin with leadership at the top of the institution. The president or chancellor must place the early warning system as an institutional priority. Such programs are less useful if support comes primarily from the Student Services or Academic division.

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## THE ESSENTIALS FOR AN EFFECTIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM CONTINUED:

Presidential leadership touting the importance of the program in a public manner strongly and often is best. The program should be mentioned at campus community meetings. Leaders should provide updates on progress and outcomes at every Board meeting.

### The Admission Office

Identification of at-risk students should be a formal process in the Admission Office. Admission professionals are most likely to have had telephone and personal relationships with most of the deposited students. Communication with admission applicants can inform areas of concern such as family problems, financial challenges, social fears, motivation deficits, lack of self-esteem, expectations and more.

Professionals in the Admission Office also have access to levels of academic preparation such as standardized test scores and high school and college academic transcripts and the quality of courses taken.

Take advantage of the knowledge garnered during the recruitment process to identify at-risk new students prior to the beginning of the term

### Broad Participation

Early warning systems require broad participation across campus. Schools often focus on faculty as the primary source for referrals. It is important that everyone on campus participate in the referral system including faculty, administrators, coaches, office staff, food service personnel and even the cleaning and physical plant staff.

Broad participation will not occur overnight. The importance of participation must be sold by the chief executive officer as well as the leaders in cabinet constantly.

- Consider public recognition and awards for faculty, administrators and staff who participate.

- Convey success stories of students referred and subsequently saved.
- Include early warning system participation in job descriptions and employment contracts as often as possible.
- Proactively explain the importance of retention and graduation rates for budgets and accreditation as well as the impact of positive outcomes on recruitment and fundraising.

### Warning Indicators

There are a number of indicators that might suggest a student is at risk of attrition. They include, but are not limited to:

- Classroom Absences
- Lack of Academic Success
- Not Preregistering
- Not Applying for Financial Aid
- Missing Payment Plan Payments
- Residence Life Issues
- Social Issues
- Health Concerns

### Ease of Participation

Willingness to participate in making referrals for at-risk students is only half the battle. It is extremely important that colleges and universities make it easy for faculty, administrators and staff to make referrals.

Make it clear that you are looking for referrals and not necessarily solutions. We would be happy to just find out if a student is experiencing difficulty; it is not expected that the person making the referral must also intervene to find the solution.

Technology is a must. Asking personnel to make referrals by completing paper forms or complex electronic referrals is not going to work. There are a number of good companies providing excellent, easy-to-use, inexpensive software designed to make the process easy for participants. Purchasing appropriate technology from companies such as Pharos Resources is a solid investment. It makes no sense to try and reinvent the wheel on

## THE ESSENTIALS FOR AN EFFECTIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM CONTINUED:

campus when there are good companies offering proven solutions.

### Response Professionals

The greatest investment for an effective early warning system is to hire or designate a group of professionals to monitor the tracking process and intervene to assist students regardless of the issue.

It is not realistic to expect faculty, administrators and staff who already have full-time jobs to also take on the task of intervention and follow-up after a referral. These individuals must be equipped to recommend appropriate advising, academic support, financial assistance, tutoring, mentoring and student services help.

I have often visited colleges and universities with early warning systems where fewer than 30% of the referrals are acted upon because there are no clear lines of responsibility and accountability for follow-up.

When the effectiveness of early warning systems in research is mixed, it is probably due more to lax structure, lack of investment and low priority of the approach rather than the concept itself.

## FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES AND PACKAGING STRATEGIES TO AVOID

John W. Dysart  
President  
THE DYSART GROUP

I have worked in higher education for nearly forty years. I have had the pleasure of working with more than 180 colleges and universities throughout the United States on myriad issues related to enrollment management. As a recovering Director of Financial Aid, I believe I have

unique insight into financial aid issues. Instead of sharing a host of financial aid recommendations designed to support recruitment and retention objectives, allow me to offer a list of things NOT to do.

- **Do Not Cap Financial Aid Packages at Tuition and Fees if You Have Students Living on Campus**

I have run into this idea just in the last couple of years. Hoping to reduce or level their discount rates, some institutions are capping financial aid packages to cover only the cost of tuition and fees. While this might make sense for an on-line school or commuter college, it makes no recruitment or retention sense for residential colleges and universities. If any significant portion of your population demonstrates financial need, you will make it impossible for many students to attend. Those students who attend anyway are probably not going to be able to come up with the additional \$6,000-\$15,000 to cover room and board. These students are likely to end up unable to reenroll and any savings mistakenly realized

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## FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES AND PACKAGING STRATEGIES TO AVOID CONTINUED:

by such an approach are going to end up in accounts receivable.

- **Do Not Expect to Have a Below Average Discount Rate if You Work at a Private College Serving Large Numbers of Financially Disadvantaged Students**

Institutions that serve high need populations should understand that high need students often require more financial aid than students coming from middle income and upper income families. It is a mistake, therefore, to think that such an institution has somehow been doing something wrong if its discount rate is higher than other institutions who do not primarily serve financially disadvantaged students. It is reasonable to expect higher discount rates for colleges and universities where more than 50% of the student population is eligible for Federal Pell Grants.

- **Do Not Wait for the Arrival of Spring Grades to Package Currently Enrolled Students**

No one likes to complete tasks more than once and this is true for financial aid professionals. Some schools wait until the publication of Spring grades before packaging currently enrolled students to eliminate the possibility of packaging a student, only to find that at the end of the term they did not meet minimum satisfactory academic progress requirements.

It is better, however, to package all currently enrolled students as soon after October 1 as possible to increase the timeline for financial planning for both students and families. The extra work of having to repackage some students after Spring grades is worth it if it means that returning students already have their financial aid packages well before the end of the Spring term. It is not good for students to go home over the summer unsure about how they will pay to return.

- **Do Not Budget Institutional Financial Aid at a Flat Dollar Amount**

I have encountered so many colleges and universities that establish institutional financial aid budgets based upon flat amounts. Financial Aid Offices are sometime placed in a position where they reduce or cut off institutional aid funds too early.

Budgets should be based upon averages per package and not total dollar amounts. This approach allows for greater expenditures if there are opportunities to recruit more students and will result in lower expenditures if, for some reason, the institution enrolls fewer students than expected.

- **Do Not Increase Institutional Financial Aid Every Time you Raise Tuition**

Tuition increases every year are a reality at most colleges and universities as costs such as insurance, other benefits and annual raises increase operating expenses. It does not make sense, however, to increase financial aid packages every time the school implements a price increase.

- If the price increase is modest, many families will be in a position to absorb it.
- Often, increases in federal direct loan eligibility will mitigate the impact of a tuition increase.
- Finally, it is an exercise in futility if increases in financial aid packages wipe out any expected new revenue from a pricing adjustment.

Ensure that practices in your Financial Aid Office are encouraging new student enrollments and supporting retention.

## CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSFER SUCCESS

Dr. Marylouise Fennell  
Principal  
Hyatt-Fennell

Dr. Scott D. Miller  
President  
Virginia Wesleyan University

For years we have written about innovative practices in higher education. In this issue we'll discuss a community college-based concurrent enrollment model that goes beyond your typical 2+2 transfer arrangements.

Community colleges are a vital part of the higher education landscape. As of 2018, there were 980 public community colleges in the United States. In Virginia alone, they enroll close to 250,000 students each year and award around 33,000 degrees annually. About 60 percent of those graduates plan to pursue a four-year degree through transfer programs.

Unfortunately, many of these transfer programs come with hurdles, and there can be frustrations with the transition to a four-year institution. Loss of credits can add years to the pursuit of a degree, which in turn, can rack up student loan debt.

Based on years of extensive research and with guidance from The Dysart Group, in February 2019 Virginia Wesleyan University (VWU) formalized the Fair Transfer Guarantee concurrent enrollment agreement with Tidewater Community College (TCC).



*Tidewater Community College*

Under the agreement, TCC students who declare their intent to transfer to Virginia Wesleyan are assigned a VWU academic advisor and issued a student ID. Students who have attained a 3.0 GPA at the completion of their freshman year at TCC are eligible to enroll concurrently in 200- and 300-level VWU courses during their sophomore year. And, they have full access to the VWU campus—including use of the library and fitness center, and free admission to athletic and cultural events—before they even become students at the University.

Upon completion of their Associate of Arts or Science degree, TCC students can seamlessly transfer to VWU with a minimum of junior-class status (perhaps even senior status, depending on the 200- and 300- level courses they take at VWU while TCC students). All lower-level general education requirements—including foreign language—will be deemed complete, allowing students to focus on courses for their major and upper-level elective credits necessary for their bachelor's degree.

Another successful component of this innovative partnership is physical office space and accessibility. Virginia Wesleyan maintains an Enrollment and Advising Office on TCC's campus. VWU enrollment counselors, who are trained as academic advisors, are onsite at TCC each week assisting students in person who are interested in transferring.



*Virginia Wesleyan University*

The most common questions our enrollment counselors get are about cost. Virginia Wesleyan's goal is to offer private school quality with public school affordability. VWU's generous grant and merit award programs—along with federal and state aid—mean that community college students don't have to compromise. In many instances, they can enroll at VWU for less than the cost of attending public institutions.

## CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSFER SUCCESS CONTINUED:

Concurrent enrollment programs are not only valuable at the college level, of course, but also for pre-collegiate offerings. Virginia Wesleyan recently joined the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP), an organization for educational partnerships offering college-credit courses in high schools. NACEP serves as a national accrediting body for concurrent enrollment programs and supports members by providing standards of excellence, opportunities to network and share best practices, and access to information about research and national trends in dual and concurrent enrollment.

Virginia Wesleyan strives to be the college of choice for those students who desire to earn a bachelor's degree in a timely and affordable manner upon successful completion of their associate's degree—and their high school diplomas. The Fair Transfer Guarantee community college agreement, in addition to traditional dual and concurrent enrollment partnerships at the high school level, are substantial steps toward reaching that goal.

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of Virginia Wesleyan University, Virginia Beach, VA. Previously, he was President of Bethany College, Wesley College, and Lincoln Memorial University. He is Chair of the Board of Directors of Academic Search, Inc.*

*Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt Fennell, a higher education search firm.*

### Did You Know?

A 2014 NCES study found students who transferred lost an average of 13 credits which is the equivalent of an entire semester's tuition. A Government Accountability Office study showed students who transferred between public schools lost about 37% of their credits. Transfers involving private colleges resulted in even more lost credits.



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Mark your calendar to meet with John Dysart, President of **THE DYSART GROUP** to discuss your enrollment and revenue needs at these upcoming conferences:

**TRACS**  
**Annual Conference**  
November 6-8, 2019  
Hyatt Regency Orange County  
Garden Grove, CA

**ABHE**  
**Annual Meeting**  
February 12-14, 2020  
Rosen Plaza Hotel  
Orlando, FL

**ABACC**  
**Annual Conference**  
February 24-28, 2020  
Florida Hotel and Conference Center  
Orlando, FL

**American Council on Education**  
**Annual Conference**  
March 14-16, 2020  
Marriott Marquis San Diego Marina  
San Diego, CA

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**THE DYSART GROUP** is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided enrollment management services to nearly 200 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

### **Admissions**

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped colleges and universities increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission.

### **Financial Aid/Pricing/Net Revenue**

Client institutions have been able to transform policies and practices to significantly improve financial aid operational efficiency, design better targeted institutional scholarship and grant programs, stabilize or reduce discount rates and utilize scarce institutional aid resources to specifically support recruitment and retention objectives.

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