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AN ACTIVE APPROACH FOR EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENT PROBLEMS

It is often difficult for larger schools to lend a personal touch to advising students. It is also hard to spot problems with students who do not come forth for assistance. This article describes a technique that helps with both problems at the College of Charleston.

Several years ago in my position as an academic dean I noticed that many students who end up in academic difficulty have earlier had good records. They seemed to experience a drop in grade point average (GPA) suddenly after successful achievement over several terms. I further noted that these early higher GPAs can carry a student for several semesters before the student ends up on academic probation. Upon meeting with such students, I concluded that if I had been able to counsel them at a time closer to the first drop in grades, I could have provided resources to enable them to resolve many of the problems they had encountered. Providing assistance earlier might have avoided a prolonged record of substandard achievement.

After examination of a number of transcripts, I decided to analyze the entire set of student grades at the end of each fall and spring term. In doing so the first time I observed that there were many students who had earned a semester GPA of approximately one full letter grade lower than their previous cumulative GPA. In each of these cases the students were enrolled full time and were not on academic probation. For example, a student carrying a 2.89 cumulative GPA one semester might earn a GPA of 1.70 the next. Although the drop is more than 1.00, the student is not put on probation, but is simply acknowledged as having had a less good semester.

In a larger school (over 6,000 students in this case) it is sometimes difficult to provide the personalization needed to reach troubled students. Identifying students who experience drops in GPA as noted above has led to letters which are sent out each major term to these students. The letters note that the student is experiencing difficulty, and the students are encouraged to call for appointments to meet with a dean at their earliest convenience. Approximately 170 - 200 such letters are sent each term and about 60 percent of the students respond. Of the respondents, thus far all have indeed had problems interfering with school. Some have already resolved the difficulty, and others are grateful for the references to services provided. In no case has a student expressed resentment for the intrusion into his/her life.

In addition to assisting students earlier, these letters create good will toward the school. Thus far no tracking of resultant semesters for these students has occurred, although it does not appear as though letters are sent to the same students in subsequent terms.

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A related technique is also used to recognize students who improve their GPA significantly in a single term. Full-time students are identified who experience a rise of one letter grade in their semester GPA over their previous cumulative GPA. These students are only singled out if they were not previously on probation, are not currently on probation, and do not qualify for honors for the semester; these latter cases are handled by other letters.

In the case of rising GPAs, the students are sent a letter of congratulations for such a fine semester. They are encouraged to keep up the new and higher level of achievement and to contact the deans' office at any time. There are approximately 100 - 150 of these letters sent each term. Once again the outcome is a very pleased student as evidenced by the calls and letters from students and their families. As with the declining GPA letters, the good will generated is enormous.

The tactics outlined above are the result of an attempt to reach troubled students early in order to provide support and assistance already available within the institution. The concept can be applied to any institution. Sample letters and more information can be obtained by contacting the author.