# Starfish at Nazareth: Strategies for Effective Use

## Introduction

The Starfish Early Alert System is based on the premise that a campus community engaged with a student will lead to that student's success. Effective campus engagement happens through collaborative efforts between faculty, advisors, and support offices. In addition, individual outreach to students and face-to-face conversations are critical so students know that there are people at the college who care about their success.

Starfish is intended to promote these important interactions by providing a quick and simple way for faculty to notify students, as well as their advisor and appropriate support staff, when they have a concern about the student's performance in their class.

If you have any questions about using the Starfish Early Alert System, please visit https://www2.naz.edu/center-student-success/starfish/ or contact Andy Morris, Associate Vice President for Retention and Student Success at amorris8@naz.edu or 585-389-2113.

## Tips for instructors

- It is common for students to perceive a Starfish alert as something punitive but ideally, messages sent through Starfish are framed as opportunities to improve performance sent from an instructor who cares about the student and their success.
- To help ensure Starfish messages are received as intended, instructors are encouraged to discuss with students early in the semester what Starfish is and how they will be using it in their class.
- If you are looking for appropriate language to frame your discussion of Starfish with students, you may want to consider using the syllabus statement available at https://www2.naz.edu/center-student-success/starfish/.
- The "early" part of the Starfish early alert system is key. It is important to let students know about concerns you have about their progress in a course when those concerns are still manageable.
- Part of the power of Starfish is the pooled information about a student's progress across their courses, which advisors and service providers can leverage to provide appropriate support. However, students, not these support providers, are the primary audience for the messages entered in Starfish. As such, instructors are encouraged to address comments associated with a flag to the student.
- When entering comments on a Starfish flag, it is important to be specific about the concern(s) and to focus on objective facts rather than make assumptions or general assessments of students' abilities.
- Offering strategies that you recommend the student should consider to address the concern(s) can help make it clear that the student has responsibility for taking action.

# Related Research

The following points on student motivation and learning  may be helpful to keep in mind as you use the Starfish Early Alert System.

- **Sense of belonging** has been defined as "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (Hausmann, et al., 2007, p. 804).
    - Fostering a student's sense of belonging has been shown to positively impact student success, especially for students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Strayhorn et al., 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2011).
    - Walton and Cohen (2011) found that when students of color received messages that encountering challenges and failure was a normal part of the college experience and something to be expected, the students were less likely to attribute failure to a fixed attribute unique to themselves. These students also had higher GPAs and greater retention and graduation rates than those students who did not receive these kinds of messages.
- **Academic self-efficacy** has been described as "personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances" (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 204).
    - Studies have shown that a strong sense of self-efficacy is associated with greater levels of academic success (van Dinther et al., 2011).
    - "Social persuasion", the verbal and written messages students receive about their capabilities, has been shown to have a powerful impact on academic self-efficacy beliefs and student motivation. When students are told they are capable of success, their confidence and effort level are likely to increase, whereas being told they are not capable of success can have the opposite impact (Bandura, 1995).
- "**Growth mindset** is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (Dweck, 2006, p. 7), whereas someone with a fixed mindset believes those basic qualities are set at birth and can't be developed later in life.
    - Stanford professor Carol Dweck has shown through a series of studies that this fundamental belief about our basic abilities can have a profound impact on our learning and academic achievement.
    - When it comes to giving students feedback, Dweck urges instructors to focus on students' approach to the learning process (amount of time and effort put in and strategies employed), rather than on assessments of their intelligence or talents.
- **Self-determination theory** is a theory of motivation that assumes "people are innately curious, interested creatures who possess a natural love of learning" (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 133).
    - Many studies in educational settings have found that intrinsic motivation is more beneficial to learning than extrinsic motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).
    - Self-determination theory focuses on fostering intrinsic motivation by supporting students' competence (appropriate level of challenge), autonomy (opportunities for self-direction and choice), and relatedness (feeling that the instructor cares about them and their success).

# References

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