

Ep. 087: Early Alert Grades

<https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2024/ep087.shtml>

Mid-semester means midterm grade reporting-- a task that some instructors view with mixed emotions, at best. But timely feedback to students is critical for their learning. And the grade submission process can help academic support staff intercede when students show signs of struggling. Amy Roser of University College joins Jim to discuss how the reimagined "Early Alert" grades are designed to standardize the experience for instructors while optimizing feedback for students. They explore just why changes were made, what academic support staff do with the information, and how Illinois State is including more students in the process. Plus, they have advice for instructors who feel that they haven't given enough grades to warrant a report, yet.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

AMY: And I'm Amy.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

(Music)

JIM: Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Integrated Professional Development here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. It was about five years ago that my former colleague and I, Dr. Claire Lamonica did an episode of our pokey little podcast talking about the importance of giving students midterm feedback. Well, that importance has only grown over the years and Illinois State University has made some changes in the way it is collecting feedback this time of year. And here to join me to talk about it is Amy Rossler, who is the Retention and Data Coordinator in University College. Amy, welcome to our pokey little podcast.

AMY: Well, thanks, Jim. It's great to be here.

JIM: It's great to have you. And we talk once in a great while on campus. But I was a part of some communication this fall. And of course, things were kind of rolled out differently this fall for those of us who teach as far as how we report midterm grades, so I want to, I want to talk about that - they're no longer called midterm grades and the rationale behind that because I think that's interesting. But first, you're part of University College. And I think it might be helpful for even people here on our campus to remind us what exactly is University College?

AMY: Sure. So University colleges is a national model of organizing in higher education. Lots of academic supports for students. At Illinois State that consists of starting with our preview, our freshman orientation program, as well as our transfer day orientation programming, and includes all of our first year student advisement as well as undeclared student academic advisement. It includes all of our tutoring and academic supports that we provide, as well as first year experience classes. It also includes things

like probation, reinstatement, and dismissal, which is one of my areas, and any additional targeted supports that we may provide for students to help them be retained and be successful here at the university.

JIM: So that concept of targeted support really does speak to the the topic that we're here to talk about today, which is this idea that if we don't know how students are doing, we can't get them the help that they need.

AMY: Right. Right.

JIM: Starting this past fall, and really this spring, I know there's a renewed emphasis, or there's a even greater emphasis on this new way of collecting that information about students and getting the feedback through a reporting through University College. What does that look like now? What has changed? And why has it changed?

AMY: Well, it changed for lots of perfect storm reasons. But the one that we're probably all the most familiar with is the move from Reggie net to Canvas. And one of the benefits of our system previously was that we had a direct upload option for faculty to upload their grades from their Reggienet site. So with the transition to Canvas, we wanted to ensure for our faculty that that access, and that ease of reporting continued. So that was very, very important to us, because we recognize we're all very busy and have a lot to do and so the easier that we can make that for faculty the better. Another perfect storm reason was some federal financial aid requirements, actually, where the federal government certainly has some requirements, very detailed and very cumbersome to all of us about their expectations for students who are receiving financial aid in the classroom. And one of those requirements in my my layman's understanding, I'm not a financial aid employee. In my layman's understanding of this is that to continue receiving financial aid a student needs to be attending class. And while Illinois State doesn't have a formal, non-attendance policy, per se, we needed some mechanisms to collect that information for students who weren't doing well in classes for our federal government and compliance with distributing financial aid. So to that end, we had to make some modifications to our grade collection process in relation to coming into compliance with those rules and regulations.

JIM: It used to be that these grades would only be collected, you know, we would call them midterm grades, and they would only be collected for certain students. Can you talk a little bit about how that's expanded?

AMY: Absolutely. So our previous collection process was defined by Senate policy to be population specific. So we only collected grades for targeted populations of students. With the changes in the federal financial aid compliance, and just the overall need to measure student performance and success for retention and graduation, the decision was made to collect these grades for all students to help overall our success measures as an institution.

JIM: Sure, and I think one fringe benefit of that perfect storm that we talked about. And when we'll start talking a little bit more about the whys here in a moment in a little more detail. But one of the one of the fringe benefits I found as an instructor last fall was that I'm now using the same computer interface, as I used to submit the Early

Alert grades. And then also the second round are called progress reports, as we use to submit grades for the final grade.

AMY: Yeah, that's right, Jim. So we did have separate systems for our early alert and progress report grade system, and our final grade collection. And another way of making that easier for faculty with this, with these opportunities was to provide a uniform collection and a uniform place and platform that faculty could go and utilize. So you didn't have to relearn something every time you had to go do, comply with our requests.

JIM: Right. Yes, I certainly understand it. I mean, I only teach one course this semester. So I do forget quite a lot between that. But it's coming back more quickly every time now. And I will say the one other thing that I as an instructor found very gratifying about the change was that since we are casting such a wide net now, I would in the past, have students that I've certainly tried to reach out to that were having trouble with attendance or were having trouble with achieving in the class. Were just not engaged. Maybe some people I hadn't seen for quite a while, you know, ever. That does happen sometimes. And once in a great while, I'd run into the frustration that they weren't one of the ones that we were asking for midterm grades for because they didn't fall into a particular category that had been predefined.

AMY: Absolutely. And that was another impetus for some of the changes because we continually heard from faculty, you didn't request grades for these students who I really want to report on, who really could benefit from some type of intervention. So our population approach didn't always catch the exact right students in a particular class. And so we had faculty requesting ways to report performance on other students.

JIM: And the experience now is, is still - it's similar to the old experience in that you're not just providing a letter grade, you have the option of providing more information. In some cases, you're asked to because as you said, the federal requirements on attendance and stuff like that,

AMY: Right, right. So yeah, in addition to the grade, instructors can report additional information. So some of that could include, you know, just a drop down about a student performance, some general categories. But when the instructor provides a non passing grade for a student, then we are required to collect some additional information about that student's attendance in that class. And those have to do with those federal financial aid reporting requirements.

JIM: And I think it's actually - the phrase is actually the last day to student engagement because I know that the student can still engage in the class without actually showing up for class, for example, if they had been doing homework or if they had contacted you during your office hours as a faculty member, so I know that I think for students who get a non passing grade, if you're importing it in from Canvas, in that interface, it will take his best guess based on what was the last time they turned something in.

AMY: It does. Yeah, it does some fancy calculations behind the scenes.

JIM: And so the whole point, obviously, is to make it as easy as possible, especially, you know, I teach a class where there may be 18, there may be 23, 25 students at most, if you're teaching a lecture of 300 students, you know, any help the system can give you.

AMY: Right. And so that would calculate then if the student had a graded assignment as their last date of attendance, but, but also then provides us some other mechanisms to, to report engagement, you know, sometimes engagement is, it looks differently in some of our different course formats as well.

JIM: Right. So of course, everything that we're talking about here has been communicated to faculty at one point or another. And regularly because we just every semester, we will get an alert, an email saying, Hey, this is coming. And hey, now's the time to do this. And hey, you have you have a day left to get this done. So there are resources I know, out there, on the university Help Desk website, we'll link to some of those that did explain step by step, what we're talking about, what may not be as obvious to instructors is what's done with this data? After they submit it, because we're submitting it essentially to the institution. So what is the institution doing? When do students get feedback? What kind of feedback do they get? What sort of interventions are possible?

AMY: Absolutely. So I think it's important to recognize that on the academic support side, so those that are those of us who are working one on one with students, advisors and targeted population, retention, staff and whatnot, those grades are our lifeline to working and helping with an individual student. If you can imagine, students will come in maybe weeks one through four, and, and we can meet with them and say, so how are you doing? How are your classes going? And magically, they are all doing great, they are all doing amazing. And we certainly hope and want that. But oftentimes, those early alert reports will come in and provide us on the support side, a snapshot of how that student is performing. It's not only though how that student is performing in the individual class, that your teaching Jim, but it's how they're doing in all of their classes. And that helps greatly in identifying those students who really need a touch point and some support, and to help redirect perhaps to some services or change some behaviors. I also find that it's very important for the individual student to have that report, you know, in working with students over you know, just the few years that I have, and I'm being sarcastic there.

JIM: This is not your first rodeo.

AMY: You know, students always, like most of us, they're very optimistic, and they assume the best. And while they may earn a grade in a class on a first assessment, that isn't what they would expect, or typically earn, they know that they can do better. And they can. So in the students mind, they are projecting that well, that grades temporary, and I really have, I'm going to get this. And when that pattern happens in multiple classes, it's important that the students see that snapshot of, well, I'm here at this particular point, today, which isn't where I'm used to being. So now I need to change behaviors. And now I need to get some supports in order to help me get to where I really want to be, or where I know I could be. And so it's kind of, it's a little bit of a reality check, oftentimes, our students to get that snapshot of how they're doing at a particular point

in time in all of their classes and to see, gosh, you know, this isn't reflective of who I am as a student. And to start them thinking about what do I need to change in order to have more success?

JIM: Sure. Sure. That makes that makes perfect sense. I think that there, I think it's kind of a continuum of different attitudes that students bring, or habits that they bring to this because a lot of students, you know, we're finding more and more have not had as much experience learning how to learn before they come to campus, and maybe they learn to learn in a certain way. And you could argue if it's even learning or not, but you know, they navigated for example, incoming freshmen, they navigate Did High School in a certain way, and all of a sudden they find out that doesn't fly. And then I think also to speak to a variation of what you talked about. They don't engage with the content, they don't do the first couple assignments, because there are plenty of points left in the semester. Right? And they don't realize that yeah, there are points and it's a grade, but the learning has to begin to ground, you know, it's step one,

AMY: Well, and we really want them to build that solid foundation, from the start of the semester, and changing those behaviors, those academic behaviors early on in the semester. Because it's a lot easier if you have a solid foundation than to try and come back from behind.

JIM: So for the students, what do they get to do they get an alert saying, hey, your earlier grades are available to view? Do they get a phone call from someone, but what's the spectrum that we operate on?

AMY: There's a wide spectrum. So all students are notified that the grades are available, and they would go to their my.illinoisstate to view their grades. On the administrative side, advisors receive regular reports, they can query regular reports through our Cognos system. And I look at how students who are assigned to them are doing individual advisors then make outreach to their students based upon those grades, saying, hey, you know, have you thought about support in this particular class? Or can we come in and chat or have you talk to your instructor about this, those types of things. And then collectively, we run some data on the students that on all of their grades, and identify students who have GPAs that look to be maybe closer to academic probation versus good standing, and do targeted follow up and intervention with those students. That includes email campaigns, targeted phone calls from staff, support measures where we put you know, we have a club success model where we have students that meet weekly, who have early alert grades that they hope to improve. So we meet weekly with those students just to provide them that constant ongoing support and encouragement of trying to improve those and try new strategies to make some progress.

JIM: Right. I think this is one that Claire and I had talked about all those years ago when we did an episode on this topic. But there is a little bit of pushback, I think. I hear from the faculty members, I work with the instructors. And I think I was probably one of them once a while I'm like I haven't really done enough assessments yet to really give them a solid grade. So I think it's important to remember that we're talking about importing from the gradebook in Canvas, which implies that you've actually graded something.

However, you can go in and just give them a grade. Just a here's where I think you've been so far. And I think the other important thing is that there are certain avenues that you've illustrated here that University College does. But that doesn't mean that the instructor, you can't have your own midterm or early alert conversation with your students as well.

AMY: Absolutely. And we encourage that. So we certainly do identify students who have early alert or progress report grades that could benefit and one of the main strategies we encourage them to do is to talk with your instructor. And we'll talk with students about how to have that conversation because that can be a little scary for a first year student. But I'd say broadly, though, it's not uncommon for a faculty member to feel as if they don't have enough material to report a meaningful grade. Or to see that, gosh, if we waited just one more week, I'd have this additional assessment, and that that feedback would be so much more valuable. But I I point back to the fact that on the academic support side, I have that student in front of me is telling me how wonderful they're doing. And that I have nothing else to go on. And in the student's mind, they're doing just fine. So any feedback that an instructor can provide to an academic support personnel person is really going to make a world of difference and we're not only looking at I mean, advisors and staff, no, these are temporary, these are fixable situations, they can improve and they can you know, do worse we get that we've been around academics for a little while. But, but we certainly recognize that, that it's a point in time snapshot and then it is our lifeline to providing the realistic student support that we need to provide.

JIM: Right. And so if I understand what you're saying it is the timeliness factor, which we may not appreciate as much as an instructor actually has a lot more benefit than we might think. As opposed to the quantity of assessment data that we can provide. We want to put it in those sorts of terms. So we're talking about early alert grades, which we're in we're recording this in week, six of the spring semester of 2024. They start being collected next week, I think we talked about, and then a few weeks after that we're, you know, several weeks, I don't know how you want to characterize it somewhere around week 10, or 12, or something like that, or the progress reports, what's the difference between the two? Or is there as much of a difference nowadays?

AMY: Right, so the Early Alert collection is designed to give us just that, that early pulse check for a student, the progress report campaign is specifically timed with the university withdrawal date. So are currently current university, withdraw date to drop an individual class or withdraw completely from the university as at the end of week 12. So we time that progress report collection to be collected during week 11 of the semester. And so by the start of week 12, that student has, again, another snapshot of how they're doing, and then can go about gathering information to make a decision as to is a withdraw a good option for me, so so that gives the students some some a few business days to have some of those important conversations, you know, they need to have conversations with their advisor of how will dropping this class, impact my time to degree, you know, there are some programs where if you drop a class, you've just added a whole year to your time to degree and that's significant. It has impacts on - withdrawals have impact on financial aid, there's only so much withdrawing that you can do before that has an impact on your financial aid. So that's another lens that that

students need to inquire and they of course, need to assess how they're doing individually and what their chances are for improvement in a particular class. And so that sometimes involves conversations with the instructor looking at their Gradebook, and then assessing their performance and how well they feel they can do from this point

JIM: Right. Right.

AMY: I, I would just, I think broadly say that administering this process, and seen the amount of care and compassion that our faculty have for students, is so heartwarming, because our faculty really do want to provide very accurate information. They're very concerned about their student's success and want their students to master the content of their class. Right? And, and I see that firsthand, through administering this process. And, you know, that is just so rewarding to see how much care and how much compassion is out there for students and their success. And so I really want to just complement our faculty for those efforts. Because, you know, sometimes there's a perception that may be a little bit different, but I think on a whole we are doing a fabulous job.

JIM: No, that's wonderful to hear. And without putting you on the spot for exact numbers, my recollection is that when this was kind of piloted in the fall, we had a pretty good response.

AMY: Yeah, we collect upwards to 90% of those early alert grades, and progress report grades. So we have an excellent response rate. And we have seen some improvements. In just this first semester of since collecting grades for all students, we've seen some notable differences in student success. So the first one that I would point out is our freshman fall to spring retention rate was higher than it's been in recent years. So we're, we're - that sets us up in a in a good position to have a solid Fall to Fall retention rate for our first year students. So that is a marked improvement. We also saw on the academic probation and dismissal side, very low numbers of students at the end of the fall term, who were academically dismissed and students who went on first time probation. So actually, our academic dismissal numbers were the lowest on record, and our records go back to 1998. We're very, very - we were very pleased with those measures.

JIM: Well, I think that's a great high note to leave it on. Amy, thank you so much.

AMY: Great. Thank you, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about early alert grades and the great collection process and, you know, how to speak with your students and to give them other types of mid semester feedback. Go to our website, it's P R O D E V prodev.illinoisstate.edu. For Amy Rosser, for all of my colleagues here at the center. Until we talk again, happy teaching!