

Office Hours and Early Alerts: Oh My!

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Over Like Rowan-Cabarrus Community College (RCCC), many community colleges are pioneers for new initiatives. Often and rightfully so, those initiatives revolve around student success by providing just-in-time, personalized, or additional support systems for students. Since community colleges make continuous efforts to put students first by placing an emphasis on learning, hallmarks of these institutions include innovations in curriculum, highlighted teaching strategies, and support services for students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016).

In the spring 2015 term, RCCC students assessed faculty as their greatest support system. Through follow-up focus groups and interviews, students expressed an interest in a more flexible and accessible office hour model that allows for more access to faculty and the support they provide.

Students who engage with their instructors in or outside of class perform better academically and have increased persistence and retention rates. When support services are linked to everyday classroom learning, students are more likely to take advantage of the services and succeed (Tinto, 2004). Academic support services are services that directly influence or are related to learning in the classroom that influences a student's overall academic success. Services include tutoring, office hours, peer mentoring, study groups, faculty-student relationships, and academic advising (Community College Research Center, 2013).

In 2017, Dr. Jenny Billings, the chair of the English department at RCCC, looked closely at our office hour policy and challenged the expectation that faculty should hold office hours during a time "reasonable for conducting college business" (typically 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday – Friday). After all, community college students often have jobs and family requirements that limit their time on campus. While the factors that influence students' decisions to use office hours are largely beyond instructors' control, instructors can encourage their use by offering more flexible days, times, locations, and methods (Weimer, 2015). Soon after Dr. Billings reviewed the office hour policy, two initiatives were created: The Office Hour Initiative (OHI) and Signals of Success (SOS), a homegrown, early alert platform.

Before OHI, office hours at RCCC were stagnant. Some faculty members were not available during their advertised hours; other faculty members were in their offices, but never saw students. Students did not use traditional office hours due to inconvenience, intimidation, or poor scheduling. Realizing this, Dr. Billings and Melissa Reid, the chair of the mathematics department at RCCC, designed a more flexible, accessible, and approachable model. They first defined how office hours could be conducted (i.e., in person, over the phone, or virtually using various digital resources). Next, they made sure that the OHI taught students to advocate for themselves and reach out for help before it was too late. According to RCCC syllabus language, a student should reach out to faculty when one or more of the following occurs:

- an important assignment is missed (accounting for 10 percent or more of the grade).
- an extenuating circumstance occurs.
- their running grade average in the course is "D" or lower.
- RCCC recognizes that this is a balanced relationship between the student and faculty member. If the student does not reach out, the faculty member contacts the student instead.

As one can imagine, documenting required office hours was quite tedious. When OHI first rolled out, Billings and Reid asked faculty to document each office hour with a Google form. After the first semester, it was clear there needed to be an easier way to document all student contact made so the documentation process did not detract from the contact made. This, combined with the need for an early alert platform, brought forth Signals of Success.

SOS was designed with a traffic signal in mind: Red if a student is failing, worsening, or in need of immediate assistance; yellow if there is a worrisome change in behavior that may require intervention; green if the student is passing or showing improvement without requiring additional resources. With a click, faculty members send color-coded signals while tagging recommended resources. The faculty members (signal senders) and resource contacts (signal receivers) work together within individual student records.

Timeline for OHI and SOS at RCCC:

- October 2016 – January 2017: Barriers to success identified and research collated.
- February: Students were interviewed to understand barriers and design solutions.
- March: A process and plan developed with the vice president of academic programs.
- July: Training began for pilot faculty; syllabus language developed; initial conversations about SOS began.
- August: The OHI pilot started (semester one) and communications were sent out to students.
- December: We used survey data and academic trends to drive pilot decisions for semester two.
- October 2019: SOS was piloted in the second eight-week and 14-week sections of ACA, ENG, and MAT.
- January 2020: SOS was implemented across all ACA, EDU, ENG, and MAT sections.
- May 2020: Partnered with tutoring on SOS tutoring referrals.
- January 2021: Added TRIO reporting feature to SOS.
- August 2021: SOS will be adopted by the division of arts and sciences.

To evaluate success in fall 2017, faculty measured student participation numbers, the number of student contacts made, and how many OHI students improved their grade to pass their ENG-111, 112 or MAT-171, 172 class with a transferrable grade of “C” or better. Positive findings were reported for each of these metrics, first comparing fall 2016 to fall 2017, and then spring 2017 to spring 2018. Beginning in fall 2017, 759 students met with their instructor, which encompassed 13.9 percent of all students taking English or Math that term. In spring 2018, 880 students took advantage of an office hour, which encompassed 16 percent of all students taking English or Math that semester.

Faculty reported a 31 percent increase in student contacts (1,529 to 1,996) from fall 2017 to spring 2018. ENG-111 students receiving a grade of “F” decreased by 14 percentage points (down from 16 percent to two percent). Similarly, MAT-171 students receiving grades of “F” decreased 10 percentage points (down from 17 percent to seven percent). ENG-112 and MAT-172 saw comparable results with decreases of nine and three percentage points, respectively. In fall 2017, out of 337 OHI students, 116 (34 percent) passed with a “C” or better. Likewise, in spring 2018, out of 200 OHI students, 93 (47 percent) completed with a “C” or better. Why is this so important? Most of these students were on the verge of earning a “D” or “F” prior to participating in the OHI.

Other successes noted:

- There are fewer student complaints since rolling out OHI and SOS.
- Faculty are more engaged outside of class with their students.
- Student satisfaction is higher than ever.
- More students withdraw from courses rather than fail.
- OHI courses see higher success and retention rates from semester to semester.
- Office hours serve their purpose resulting in more student participation.
- There is a new appreciation and acknowledgment of faculty going above and beyond.
- Through SOS progress reporting, advisors and high schools receive timely information to monitor students’ success.

In SOS’s first year, English and math courses saw significant gains, even during emergency remote teaching due to a global pandemic. Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 were used as baselines; success was defined as grades of A – C. In Fall 2019, transferrable math and English courses encompassed 3,001 students. When counting grades of “W” as “F,” Math saw a 2.79 percentage point gain and English saw a 5.12 percentage point gain; when removing grades of “W,” Math saw a 2.73 percentage point gain and English saw a 3.75 percentage point gain. In Spring 2020, transferrable Math and English courses totaled 2,630 students. When counting grades of “W” as “F,” Math saw a 7.44 percentage point gain and English saw a 1.08 percentage point gain; when removing grades of “W,” Math saw a 10.35 percentage point gain and English saw an 8.8 percentage point gain.

To ensure success, our advice is:

- Require Office Hours. Students do not do optional. Shifting attitudes while making services required was not easy and required buy-in from everyone, including (and most importantly) students.
- Allow for flexibility. This does not just refer to the types of office hours or when they are offered. It is also important that each program determines what best suits their students; this is not a “one size fits all” model, but should be customized by the program chair, keeping the student population and their needs in mind.
- Support your faculty. Change takes time. While it was without cost, it was not without sacrifice. To make sure faculty feel valued and appreciated for their extra efforts, they too must be supported by the institution. As a RCCC student said, “Support strong faculty and they will produce well-prepared graduates.”

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- Use SOS. We would love to demo and share Signals of Success with you.

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