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Creating a Comprehensive Early Warning System
to Further Student Success and Retention

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Creating a Comprehensive Early Warning System to Further Student Success and Retention

Greenfield Community College currently administers an antiquated deficiency reporting system aimed at identifying students who are encountering academic difficulty and are subsequently at risk for not persisting. According to GCC retention data, almost half of GCC students (46%) take at least one developmental course, with one-fifth of them failing or dropping the course. Among first-time, full-time liberal arts students from the fall 2005, students who failed a developmental course were 11 times more likely to not register for the spring term (Matheson, 2006). This rate of attrition is an on-going concern for College administrators, faculty and staff as more and more students who could be defined as ‘at risk’ continue to come through the door. We know through research that community college students come from backgrounds that do not recognize or support higher education aspirations and which place incredible demands upon the time and energy a student is able to commit to their education (Roueche & Roueche, 1994). Brawer (1996) found that risk factors such as working full time, entering with a low high school GPA, having family obligations or financial concerns presented significant barriers to student success. These are all attributes of high risk students at Greenfield Community College leading to an attrition rate which has implications for the both the College and the local community.

The current deficiency reporting system at GCC, which was originally designed over twenty years ago in an effort to support at risk students, does not adequately address the needs of these students or provide for appropriate communication and referrals to student support services across campus. In a report written by Anne Wiley, GCC Social Sciences Chair, she states:

*In order to identify and intervene with high-risk students a systematic, continuous, and on-going advising process should be engaged.* (Wiley, 2001)
The recommendation for Greenfield Community College, which was informed by Anne Wiley’s report, and the Title III grant “Advising Initiatives” was to build a more comprehensive Early Warning System across campus. The current system does not provide the opportunity for engagement between advisors and students. In fact, the institution conducts no formal follow-up efforts for at-risk students who have received a deficiency notice. According to the Society for College and University Planning (2007) student engagement is the amount of time and energy students invest in meaningful educational practices, including meeting with their academic advisor and seeking support when experiencing academic difficulty. This type of engagement does not happen by accident, but by design (S.C.U.P., 2007). Given the retention statistics for students taking developmental coursework at GCC, an improvement in the current deficiency reporting system could affect a large number of students at risk of not returning the following semester (Matheson, 2006). Therefore, my CCLA project was to work with colleagues across divisions to create a more comprehensive Early Warning System for our campus in an effort to promote student success and retention.

My goals for this project were two-fold. First, I completed an in depth review of the current deficiency reporting system and provided recommendations for improvements to both the procedural documentation and timeline for all of our students. The GCC “Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency” form is impersonal and did not provide the student with useful feedback or academic support options. Additionally, the timeline for the existing process does not allow for ample time for the student to improve their performance. Students typically receive notification of their performance almost eight weeks into the semester under the current procedures.

My second goal for this project was to, in conjunction with the GCC Title III Grant for Advising, create and pilot an automated early warning system for a targeted group of students
and faculty on campus. Using the GCC Banner midterm grade reporting function a pilot group of faculty was trained to report mid-term progress on-line and allow the Academic Advisers to track students in academic difficulty, providing appropriate communication and support services as necessary. This was, by design, a more comprehensive approach to advising at-risk students at Greenfield Community College that had been attempted previously. The next section of my report will detail the process I used to complete my project and my resulting recommendations for ‘next steps’.

**REVIEW OF EARLY WARNING MODELS**

According to Market Street Research, a firm hired by GCC to evaluate its advising systems, students are not always achieving successful outcomes and there is a strong need for enhanced information systems (MSR, 2006). It was my belief as I selected my CCLA project that a strong Early Warning System was part of what MSR had proposed to the College. Before beginning my work I decided that it was important to review the best practices of some Early Warning models that already existed at other institutions and those that had been evaluated by an independent party. The following is not an exhaustive list of the systems I reviewed, but rather those that stood out in my mind as important to my project work.

As the rate of attrition continues to be of concern for Colleges and Universities, many have stepped up their efforts to reduce the number of students who do not re-enroll (Reisberg, 1999). At Ohio State University, they have implemented an early warning system, which starts before students set foot on campus. Using a consulting company that specializes in college recruitment, Ohio State uses something called ‘predictive modeling’ to focus attention on freshmen who are most likely to leave. According to the consulting firm, “we show the college what the risk factors are for students dropping out, and help them to determine strategies that would create effective interventions” (Reisberg, 1999).
George Mason University monitors students’ performance using a mid-term progress report with faculty input and follow-up by their Academic Advising Office. Fayetteville State’s early alert system depends upon an intricate network of individuals including faculty, mentors, academic support areas, and a variety of College staff to support the process. Finally, at Winston-Salem State University, staff of the Center for Student Success monitors academic progress for all of their first year students by reviewing information such as class attendance, academic performance after the first four weeks of the semester, mid-term and final exam grades. Faculty are asked to comment using student ‘progress reports’ and choose from among 16 possible affective and behavioral concerns (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

While I found each of the above examples helpful in my research, I was most interested in reviewing models from community colleges similar to the size and scope of GCC. During my participation in the national conference for the National Associate of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), I attended a session presented by Sullivan Community College in New York. Their enrollment is very close to that of GCC. As part of their Faculty/Staff Mentoring program, Sullivan CC uses an Early Alert Report for students in academic difficulty. The forms are provided to students after the third week of the semester in an effort to give them critical feedback (Cellini & Hanofee, 2007). Both presenters stressed the importance of providing this information to students early and highly recommended follow up by faculty/staff mentors or advisors.

Finally, I found a very useful journal article (Rudmann, 1992), which reviewed the various strategies for assisting students experiencing academic difficulty at Irvine Community College in California. At the time the paper was written, there had been little research available that focused primarily on early alert programs. Although I was able to find a number of sources, which addressed early warning systems during my research, there were fewer that were specific
to Community Colleges. Based on his research, (Rudmann, 1992) concludes that the critical components of an effective early warning system should include:

- a good tracking mechanism to gauge the type/extent of students’ needs
- supportive and encouraging alert letters to students
- human contact to supplement the letters
- early delivery of alert letter balancing the needs of the instructor for assessment with the ability of the student to seek the necessary support services
- faculty support & input

These components became the premise for the work I have completed on my College project in developing an early warning system at GCC.

**GCC ACADEMIC DEFICIENCY REPORTING SYSTEM**

In light of the fact that every student who chooses not to re-enroll or who withdraws represents a lost opportunity for the individual and a financial loss to the institution, we need to provide students with tools to adapt to the demands of a college environment and the systems for them to be successful (Rickinson, B., & Rutherford, D., 1996). The Academic Deficiency Reporting system at GCC was long overdue for review when I decided to make it my CCLA project.

The process was created in the mid 1980’s and has been used by GCC since then in an effort to notify students of their poor performance in a course and to alert GCC staff of this at-risk population. The form has not been updated since it was created and the process for distribution has remained both impersonal and discouraging to students, simply by name alone. This is the first major flaw in the current process. By naming the form Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency (Appendix 1) the College has been sending a strong message to students that they are ‘academically deficient’. According to the GCC Registrar, approximately 25% of students receive a Deficiency Report (DR) in at least one course each semester. This means that up to 25 percent of our student population are being sent this message on a regular basis. Perez
(1998) notes that “institutions must assist students in overcoming such barriers such as self-doubt, fear of failure, and fear of being perceived as ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’ in order for them to be successful. The current deficiency process does nothing to support these efforts.

During each semester faculty complete the DR for students who are achieving a grade of D, F, or O (never attended class) and submit to the Registrar’s Office six weeks after the semester begins. The Registrar then mails a copy of the form to students once all of the faculty have turned in their forms. This represents the second significant flaw in the current process. Because the forms are held until all faculty have turned the DR for each class, the process results in students receiving the DR less than ten days prior to the last day to drop a course with a ‘W’ on their academic record, with little time to respond or improve their performance. At the college level, early academic warning systems should alert students to potential problems within the first five weeks of the semester (Tinto, 1993).

Finally, a copy of the DR is kept in the student’s file and a third copy is sent to the Academic Advisor. No formal action is taken to engage the student in a discussion of their progress and no follow up with the advisor is initiated. This is the final and potentially most damaging flaw in the current Academic Deficiency Reporting system at GCC. Research has shown that the primary purpose of an early alert process should be to connect those students in academic difficulty with the most appropriate support services such as academic advising, peer tutoring, counseling, or financial aid (Rudmann, 1992).

The three significant flaws with the GCC Academic Deficiency Reporting system outlined above helped to inform my development of a more comprehensive Early Warning System for GCC.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY PROGRESS REPORT (EPR)
After a review of our current process, relevant literature and best practices models for early warning systems, the next step of my project was to develop a better form to communicate information to our students. This form would be a replacement for the ‘Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency’ and was used with a pilot group of faculty during the spring of 2007.

The form I created is titled the Early Progress Report (Appendix 2). This revision represents a change in language, tone, and format from the original document and is centered on engaging in a conversation with the student as the primary goal. Throughout the development of this form, I sought out the advice, input, and myriad of experiences from the following groups on campus:

- Dean of Student Affairs
- Students
- Registrar
- Admissions
- Career Center
- Distance Learning
- Disability Services
- Academic Affairs (Dean, Associate Deans & faculty)
- Academic Advising Center
- Title III Pilot Faculty Advisors
- Developmental Education Working Group
- Next Step Up Site Coordinator
- GED Examiner
- Student Affairs Testing & Advising and Health & Wellness Clusters

I solicited feedback from all of these groups, developed the form, and then sent it back out via e-mail for additional feedback and comments. The result was a final draft of the Early Progress Report that was approved at the beginning of January, 2007 and printed for implementation as a pilot for spring, 2007.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EPR PROCESS

As I developed the EPR process at GCC I had extensive conversations with the Director of the Title III Grant, Institutional Technology, Registrar, and the Title III Research Specialist &
pilot group of faculty advisors. I also joined the Title III Grant for Advising Pilot group and participated in Banner Self-Serve training so that I had a working knowledge of the system and could be readily available to answer questions my colleagues might have as they participated in the EPR pilot initiative.

Prior to moving forward, I spent time working with our Registrar and the IT department to create the ‘grade codes’ (EPR) and (NAT) that were added to the mid-term grade table in Banner. This was a critical step in the process as it opens the door for tracking of at-risk students and the ability to generate more personal and supportive messages to the students, which I will detail later.

Based on all of my conversations and research the following pilot process was developed for the spring 2007 semester:

- 13 faculty members from the Title III Grant for Advising Pilot Group were identified to implement the EPR for students in their courses who were experiencing academic difficulty. This would replace the Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency form they had used previously. Participation in the pilot was voluntary.

- I developed a set of detailed instructions for the faculty in conjunction with the Registrar, Academic Affairs, and Institutional Technology. Instructions provided the faculty with a time-line for the process as well as technical instructions regarding how to code the EPR form into Banner (Appendix 3).

- The EPR form was delivered to the faculty along with the instructions listed above at the start of the spring 2007 semester.

- Based on all of my research and review of best practices models for early warning systems, it was decided that the EPR would be delivered to at-risk students who were experiencing some form of academic difficulty at one-on-one meeting with each faculty member during the first three weeks of the spring semester.

- To supplement the EPR, I worked with the IT department to develop a class roster for each faculty member which not only listed the student contact information, but the contact information for their academic advisor, so that information could be a part of the referral information for the student (Appendix 4). Additionally, I provided a resource sheet of student services available to at-risk students at GCC, which was provided with the EPR (Appendix 5).
Once the EPR was given to a student with supporting information, each faculty member was asked to place a code (EPR) in Banner using the mid-term grading function per the instructions I provided to him or her. This would indicate they had met with the student and an EPR has been delivered.

One copy of the EPR was given to the student. I coordinated the mailing of the advisor copy to the academic advisor assigned to each student and the third copy was kept in my office for the student file and future assessment. If a student had never attended class, they were given the code (NAT) and all three copies of the EPR were sent to me for follow up with the Registrar.

The code in Banner was designed by the IT department and me to trigger an e-mail communication to the student, confirming the meeting with the faculty member and providing them with a review of academic resources available to assist them. This code was also designed to generate an e-mail to the academic advisor, which indicates the student is at risk, and recommend they set up a meeting with the student as soon as possible to discuss their progress. I created e-mail scripts for both the student e-mail and advisor e-mail in consultation with the Academic Advising Center and the IT department (Appendix 6).

E-mails were sent with ‘read receipts’ during the 4th week of the semester so we could track the amount of those read by both the advisor and the student. All academic advisors were notified of the pilot and the EPR e-mail they might receive from me (Appendix 7).

**SPRING 2007 EPR PILOT RESULTS**

Due to scheduling conflicts, one faculty member was not able to participate in the EPR process. Eleven remained and in turn received all of the information about the process listed above. The total number of students for all of the classes taught by the pilot faculty was approximately 702. From these students, 69 were identified as at-risk and were given the EPR. There were 12 students who had never attended class and were coded as (NAT) for follow-up with the Registrar’s office. Both groups combined represented approximately 11.5% of the total number of students enrolled in these classes. This is significantly lower than the campus average for usage of the Preliminary Notice of Academic Deficiency; however I recognize that the students in the pilot group are also a relatively small sample of our student population.
The 69 students who received the EPR were coded in Banner and sent an automatically generated e-mail. Only two students from this group opened the e-mail that was sent to them. This suggests that either the students were aware of the content of the e-mail and chose not to open it, or they are not actively using their GCC student e-mail account. Given the pervasiveness of students on campus who do not use their GCC assigned e-mail account, I would argue the latter. Currently, there is a campus-wide initiative by our IT department to encourage broader use of e-mail by our students. As students begin to use their e-mail more often, this will only increase the effectiveness of the EPR process.

Conversely, the majority of the academic advisors who received an e-mail from me regarding their advisee did open the e-mail and acknowledge the message. Although, some advisors opened their e-mail almost two weeks after the original e-mail had been sent, which poses a problem as far as timing and follow up with the student. Looking back on my e-mail to all advisors, I could have been more specific about how critical the timing was to this process. Perhaps if I had been clearer, there would not have been such a lag in responses. I have noted this for future education to faculty and staff about the EPR and the process as a whole.

Working with the staff in the Academic Advising Center I made sure that all hard copies of the EPR were either given to the student in person or mailed to their home address with a note from me. Advisor copies were sent to each advisor to supplement the email they received. All copies were sent to advisors and students during the 4th week of the semester.

At the conclusion of the pilot, I coordinated quality control measures to ensure that every student who received an EPR had the appropriate mid-term grade code on their academic record for future tracking of historical data. Once this was completed and final grades for the spring semester were submitted to the Registrar, I worked with IT to run a report of every student with an EPR code and listed their final grade for that course. From this I created a spreadsheet to
compare each student’s final grade with the grade they were receiving as of the date the EPR was given to them. Using the excel spreadsheet I had created I worked with a member of our Academic Advising Center to enter the mid-term grade information from the Early Progress Reports for the 69 students who received them. Once this data was collected, the progress of each of the students was calculated and then graphed accordingly for assessment and future tracking of student persistence.

This type of tracking had never been done before at GCC in relation to the ‘Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency’. The resulting graph on the following page details the information we revealed about students who were part of the EPR pilot.

**Spring 2007 EPR Pilot Student Outcomes**

Although the above graph represents important data for GCC and suggests that 14 percent of students improved their performance based on receiving the EPR early in the semester, it has no statistical relevance as currently presented. Since GCC has no historical data to compare the outcomes of students who received the EPR vs. those who have received the ‘Preliminary Report
of Academic Deficiency’ in past semesters, the information collected represents, as described by the Title III Grant Research Specialist, ‘naked numbers’. Future research using both historical and contemporaneous control groups is necessary to support such a premise. Such research and on-going assessment are part of my recommendations for next steps at GCC.

**FEEDBACK & ASSESSMENT**

*Informal Feedback*

My informal assessment of the EPR pilot for spring included conversations with faculty, students and academic advisors to gain their initial feedback. The overwhelming response to this initiative was positive. Many cited prior reports and recommendations to improve the form and the system of early warning at GCC, which affirmed the work, I had done to this point.

Academic advisors on campus were appreciative they had the progress information about their advisees early in the semester so that they might do the appropriate outreach and referral. One advisor felt that it was not his role to reach out to the student, but rather the role of the faculty and administration only. He felt that the student knew he was available and they should seek him out if they were having difficulty without him having to be notified of their progress. While I believe that others do not readily share the opinion of this advisor on campus, it raises the question of responsibility the students have as part of this process. The relationship between both the advisor and the student is one that does need to be nurtured by both parties as we consider the factors, which contribute to student success on campus.

*Formal Assessment Method*

The formal assessment tool I used for the EPR pilot was developed for the faculty who participated in the pilot to share their feedback and suggestions for improvement. I worked with Pam Matheson, GCC Research Specialist, to create a one page assessment tool which allowed the pilot faculty to offer feedback on the process and then answer more open ended questions
about the usefulness of the EPR and future implications for the College (Appendix 8). After two requests to the pilot faculty, I received responses from six of the eleven who participated rendering the following information:

**Answers to open-ended questions about the EPR process rendered the following anecdotal responses:**

- The early timing of the form vs. the existing process was critical to student awareness of their progress and need to improve performance.
- The EPR supports faculty in supporting students earlier in the process.
- The EPR is more personal and encouraging than the existing form.
- It would be helpful to offer feedback with the EPR two times during the semester. Once at four weeks and again at mid-term.
- Offer flexible dates of EPR delivery to students.
- Make the process more electronic.
- Use at mid-term to account for courses that rely on milestone work rather than cumulative.
- Students in Developmental Education classes did not respond as favorably to the form as those in college level courses.
- Roster verification should happen at the same time so that the EPR roster is as accurate and up to date as possible.

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<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
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<td>The EPR procedures were clear and easy to understand.</td>
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<td>The class rosters provided all of the necessary information to complete the EPR.</td>
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<td>The EPR form was easy to use.</td>
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<td>The student response to the EPR was positive.</td>
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<td>This is the right process to support student success and retention.</td>
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CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

I am very pleased with the outcome of this first pilot of the Early Progress Report at GCC. Based on the feedback I have received from the pilot group and other faculty and staff on campus, the majority opinion is that the EPR form and the process was simple to understand and implement. The Early Progress Report has been seen as much more encouraging and supportive to students in comparison to the Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency form that has been in use for over 20 years. Most agree that this is the right direction for GCC to proceed in our efforts to increase student success and retention and that the process promotes better communication with our students who struggle with their courses.

As I stated earlier in my project, the five critical components of a successful Early Warning System based on my research include:

- a good tracking mechanism to gauge the type/extent of students’ needs
- supportive and encouraging alert letters to students
- human contact to supplement the letters
- early delivery of alert letter balancing the needs of the instructor for assessment with the ability of the student to seek the necessary support services
- faculty support & input

I am confident that each of these components exists in the Early Progress Report and the process we have established. Most importantly, we have developed a process that is supportive of our students rather than a process which had quite often been described as one which
discouraged students from attending college all together, without considering the possibility for improvement or formal withdrawal from the course.

Using the Banner mid-term grading functionality, we are now able to track students experiencing difficulty and provide them with the human contact necessary to address their needs and seek out the appropriate support services. I have learned through my research that the practice of early alert letters or forms is not enough; they must be the components of a more comprehensive program (Santa Rita, 2003). As I had stated earlier, no formal intervention strategies had been developed as part of the current GCC Academic Deficiency reporting process. Clagett (1996) states that an Early Alert program should include personal follow-up contacts with all identified students. The Early Progress Report at GCC makes those personal contacts on many levels, providing students with the support they need to make good decisions about their education.

The timing of the Early Progress Report seemed to be the one area that most members of the pilot group felt could be improved in some way. Our goal was to implement the process earlier than in the past. Typically, the Academic Deficiency forms were distributed at mid-term, leaving little time for the students to improve their performance. Again, research shows that if letters to students arrive too late into the semester, the students may not have the time they need to take remedial action (Geltner, 2000). However, the feedback I received from faculty was that the process may have been implemented a bit too early in the semester. Students received the Early Progress Report approximately three weeks into the semester, which for some instructors offered little opportunity for assessment prior to completing the form. For some this might mean an adjustment to their syllabus, but for others who may grade based on milestone work rather than cumulative, the process is potentially too early to be effective.
Finding the balance in the timing of the Early Progress Report will be one of my action steps for follow up. Rudmann (1992) states, “Instructors need time to gather enough information if they are to make a valid assessment of their students’ progress. However, instructor feedback must be gathered early enough to offer and provide help before it is too late in the semester.” I am going to propose offering the EPR at two different times during the semester. From the information I currently have, I think offering the EPR four weeks into the semester would be a better time frame than we did for the pilot. We could then offer it again at mid-term for the faculty who felt they needed more time for further assessment.

After my strong consideration of this pilot, the feedback and suggestions from multiple offices and staff mentioned in this report, and my review of the literature around early warning systems, my suggestions of next steps for the Early Progress Report and process would be as follows:

- Make language & text changes to the EPR based on faculty feedback during the summer, 2007.
- Discontinue using the ‘Preliminary Report of Academic Deficiency’ and replace it with the Early Progress Report for fall, 2007. (I have already begun discussions for this with the Registrar and Academic Dean).
- Seek members of the Title III Grant for advising pilot group to participate in another EPR initiative for fall, 2007, which would offer the EPR to students at four weeks into the semester and again at mid-term.
- Develop on-going assessment of the EPR and the process using contemporaneous and historical (as it becomes available) control groups in collaboration with the GCC Title III Grant Research Specialist.
- Work with the Registrar, MCCC union, and others on campus to change the spring, 2008 academic calendar to allow for an earlier delivery of the EPR to students.
- Educate faculty and staff regarding these changes and stress the importance of the process for our students using information gathered during this project.
- Work with IT to determine the ability to make the EPR an on-line form to increase efficiencies of the process.
- Implement the EPR and process campus-wide for spring, 2008.

I am confident that the above steps are both achievable and critical for the College at this time. I look forward to further implementing the Early Progress Report at GCC and further developing support systems for our at-risk students.
PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS

Throughout the course of my project over the last year I have had the opportunity to reflect upon the professional challenges and learning opportunities that have been presented to me. As I stated in my project update, two of the areas that I felt potentially posed the most significant challenge to the work of my project: Institutional Culture and Technology. My experiences throughout the course of developing my project and seeing it to implementation have proven that these areas were in fact where most of my challenges were presented.

Our institutional culture questions change, especially for something that has existed for over twenty years. Although people felt that the current Academic Deficiency Report process needed to be improved, there was hesitation when I suggested eliminating the current form and changing the timing of the process. It took time to assure people, including our own Registrar that my plans were to first run a pilot with a select group of people before implementing anything campus-wide. Any changes would be incremental and well planned. This seemed to allay some concerns, but change is difficult for people here and there continued to be skeptics. As I move forward with my action steps, I anticipate there will be concerns from different areas on campus, especially when it comes to altering the academic calendar. My work on this project and review of the literature has prepared me for this challenge and I look forward to the dialogue that will ensue.

Our technology continues to be a challenge for this process. Although I was happy to work with IT to utilize the Banner mid-term grading functionality in an effort to code the students who received the EPR, it does not feel like a permanent solution. As we move in a direction of implementing this campus-wide, my hope is to work with IT to build an early warning system within banner that was designed specifically for this purpose. This will allow for improved functionality, ease of use, and better communication ultimately with our students. I
am confident I will be able to work out alternatives with our IT department as we move forward with the next steps for the Early Progress Report at GCC.

Seeing this project from development to planning, and then execution and assessment has been incredibly fulfilling. From this process I have been able to identify that key staff on campus that are critical to the success of any project I might develop in my role as Associate Dean for Student Affairs. I am also well aware of those people who are likely to present roadblocks as I continue to gain experience at GCC. For these people I know it will be important that I have done my ‘homework’ around an issue so that I am able to address skepticism while promoting support for the initiative. I have no doubts that successfully implementing my next steps of this project will pull together all that I have learned throughout my experiences at CCLA and I am thankful for the opportunities I have had, including this project, to grow as a leader on my campus and in the Massachusetts Community College system.
References


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