

**The Role of CARE Teams in Supporting First-Year Student Persistence and  
Well-Being**

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## **Abstract**

Institutions of higher education are facing a growing challenge with retention. The current population of students is showing an increased difficulty transitioning to college life due to concerns such as mental health, social adjustment, and academic rigor. Early intervention programs are important in these situations to assist in the coordination of campus resources.

This paper examines the role of Campus Assessment, Response, and Education (CARE) teams, an early intervention strategy, in supporting first-year student persistence and well-being. Through a review of the literature, there are three perspectives that come into play: developmental needs, institutional outcomes, and access to student support resources. These perspectives focus on a holistic support model to aid in addressing crucial issues such as academic, social, and mental health barriers. There are four theories that guide this analysis: Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. These theories provide insight as to how support systems and resources at higher education institutions can influence a student's engagement, motivation, and transition to college.

Therefore, understanding the role of a CARE team as an early intervention system suggests that institutions should adapt this structure to better support first-year persistence and well-being.

**Keywords:** CARE Teams, Early Intervention, First-Year Students, Student Persistence, Student Well-Being, Higher Education

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## Introduction

Retention is a major concern for institutions of higher education (Tinto, 2022; Millea et al., 2017). Colleges and universities often use their first-year retention rate as a tool in promoting the reputation of their institution. Additionally, the percentage rate of retained students could influence funding and support for an institution (Schlesinger et al., 2016). Therefore, student persistence and completion initiatives are crucial in many ways. There is a sense of shared institutional accountability when it comes to retention, as academic departments, student success areas, and engagement opportunities are all relevant partners in retaining the student body.

The changing landscape of higher education has increased pressure on institutions to improve student retention and completion rates (Selingo, 2013). First-year students often feel a sense of transition when they enter their college experience (Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As a new participant in college, the academic rigor and intellectual expectations increase. The adjustment to making new friends or having a roommate for the first time can be stressful. Some may find the sense of independence overwhelming, and for resident students, the feeling of isolation can cause homesickness (Masika & Jones, 2015).

In addition to the struggles of transition, there is an increase in mental health concerns as students enter this experience with pre-existing anxiety, depression, and stress (Paralkar & Knutson, 2021; Parchem et al., 2021). This, in many ways, affects the student's health and well-being. These factors offer a distraction from fully investing in the persistence to transition from one stage to another. Institutional support structures for mental health should be readily available to students through campus connections with counseling services. While resources may be available, the stigma around seeking help still exists, causing a larger challenge for college

administrators to assist a student in impacting their academic and social success (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

These types of concerns are seen in a multitude of locations across campus, such as residence halls, classrooms, student centers, and libraries. The implementation of early intervention systems serves as an outreach approach to connecting students to the right resources (Villano et al., 2018; Delmas & Childs, 2020). The CARE team is a strong example of a multidisciplinary team that responds to a variety of at-risk student concerns through a referral system and interacts with students to address their struggles with resource intervention (Arena et al., 2024).

CARE teams serve as an integral part of student persistence and well-being, especially at smaller institutions (Arena et al., 2024). This early intervention program supports first-year success by coordinating campus resources, addressing barriers to the success of students, and includes a holistic approach to supporting students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Student Persistence and Retention in Higher Education**

Student persistence has been a long-standing central concern within higher education. Colleges and universities continue to view retention as both a measure of institutional effectiveness and an indicator of the overall student experience (Tinto, 2022). Retention rates are very telling to a university as they reflect not only whether students remain enrolled but also how effectively the institution supports the academic development, social engagement, and personal well-being of its student body. As a result, improving student persistence is typically a high priority for many institutions of higher education seeking to strengthen the institution's stability.

The research on student retention emphasizes that persistence is often influenced by a variety of interconnected factors rather than one single determinant. Millea et al. (2017) note that academic preparation, financial stability, institutional support, and engagement within the campus environment all contribute to whether a student will continue through to degree completion. This has led scholars to view persistence as multidimensional and shaped by both the student's individual characteristics and the institution's practices. Stronger retention outcomes are seen at institutions that offer an environment that offers opportunities for engagement, support for academics, and personal development.

In addition to academic preparation and institutional support, research also suggests that noncognitive factors can play a meaningful role in student persistence. Bowman et al. (2018) found that characteristics such as motivation, self-regulation, and resilience can influence whether a student remains enrolled through a challenging situation. The personal attributes a student possesses can often shape how students respond to obstacles and how willing they are to engage with resources.

The institutional environment has also been pointed out in the research. Classroom experiences influence persistence, as students who feel included and supported in the academic setting are more likely to remain enrolled (Herzog, 2022). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that the experiences students encounter during college, both inside and outside the classroom, influence their educational path significantly. Students develop connections with their institutions through interactions with faculty and staff, getting involved in student organizations, and attending student activities. When these connections are created, students are more likely to develop a sense of community or belonging that increases the likelihood of them remaining enrolled at the current institution.

Additionally, Kuh et al. (2008) share the importance of student engagement in supporting persistence. Their research highlights that colleges and universities that intentionally develop learning environments that allow students to actively participate, collaborate, and build meaningful interactions often foster stronger student success outcomes. Engagement is not a term used strictly for academic coursework, but also includes participation in co-curricular activities, leadership opportunities, and informal connections with faculty and peers. These experiences permit students to build relationships and develop a sense of community that supports their continued persistence.

The information connections with faculty and peers assist in shaping a student's perception as to whether they feel valued by the institution. Chambliss and Takacs (2013) emphasize that small, everyday interactions between students and campus faculty and staff can have a great impact on student experiences. These small interactions can increase over time and create a bond that influences the student to remain connected to the institution.

The literature suggests institutions that intentionally foster a supportive environment, encourage engagement in and out of the classroom, and provide accessible support structures are more likely to retain students through graduation. As retention continues to be the central focus for higher education institutions, understanding the multitude of factors that contribute to persistence provides a clearer vision as to why early intervention programs such as CARE teams are effective.

### **The First-Year Student Transition Experience**

The transition into the first year of college is one of the most significant developmental transitions in a student's education and personal journey. New college students will often be

faced with a variety of academic, social, and personal challenges as they navigate a new, unfamiliar experience. These transitions ask students to adjust to increased academic expectations and rigor, establish new social connections, and develop a sense of independence in managing their time and responsibilities. As a result, the first year of college is often identified in the literature as a critical period that influences long-term persistence and success (Upcraft et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008).

For many students, the start of their college experience includes learning how to balance multiple responsibilities, some of which have never tended to before. Academic expectations in higher education are often more intense than those of a high school. Students are expected to manage their own schedules without guidance from a parental figure; they are asked to engage in deeper critical thinking and maintain a consistent academic performance without having the same level of structure as they previously experienced. This sudden increase in responsibility can cause a sense of uncertainty and stress, especially for students adjusting to living on campus and away from their home for the first time (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Additionally, first-year students typically encounter social challenges as they establish new friendships, adapt to roommates, and learn how to navigate the art of making connections in a new environment. These actions will influence their sense of belonging on the college campus. This can be especially challenging for those who feel disconnected from their peers or are unsure of how to get connected on campus. Research suggests that students who struggle to form those meaningful connections during the first year are more likely to feel isolated, which will negatively impact their persistence (Masika & Jones, 2015).

Many institutions attempt to ease transition strategies through conducting a first-year seminar or transition course. Culver and Bowman (2019) found that participation in such a

course can positively influence a student's engagement and academic adjustment during their initial year. These courses often provide students with an opportunity to review and discuss fears such as building relationships and attending programs. The intentionality behind the programming for this course and beyond helps students in distress navigate the academic and social challenges more successfully and candidly.

Mental health is an increasing component in the first-year transition experience. Recent research indicates that many students are entering college already having managed some sense of anxiety, depression, or stress related to academic pressures and personal life circumstances (Paralkar & Knutson, 2021; Parchem et al., 2021). When that is combined with the challenge of adapting to a new environment, these concerns can influence a student's overall well-being. Colleges and universities that offer accessible mental health resources as well as early intervention support are better positioned to assist these types of students before it escalates to a crisis level.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides insight for understanding how students adapt to these changes during their first year of college. The theory highlights four central indicators that influence how individuals cope with transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies (Evans et al., 1998). The circumstances surrounding the student's transition to college life, the personal characteristics they possess, the support systems available, and the coping strategies they develop are all factors that influence this transition.

Overall, the literature suggests that the first year of college brings about transitional challenges based on students needing to establish beneficial academic habits, social relationships, and support networks that will influence their long-term persistence. Institutions of

higher education that intentionally prepare for these are more likely to see student engagement, positive well-being, and continued enrollment (Upcraft et al., 2005).

### **Sense of Belonging and Student Engagement**

An increasingly important concept highlighted in research related to student persistence is the sense of belonging. Belonging refers to the feeling of being accepted, valued, and supported while enrolled at an institution (Masika & Jones, 2015; Ahn & Davis, 2022; Dias, 2022). Many student affairs divisions focus heavily on a student's sense of belonging through engagement opportunities. When students perceive themselves as meaningful member of their campus community, they are more likely to engage in academic and social endeavors that will assist in their overall satisfaction and persistence (Masika & Jones, 2015; Ahn & Davis, 2022).

Student engagement plays a vital role in shaping a sense of belonging. Students actively participating in opportunities hosted by the institution will increase their feeling of connection. These experiences include participation in class discussions, joining a student organization, attending a campus program, or having an informal conversation with a faculty or staff member. Kuh et al. (2008) emphasize that students who are actively engaged with their campus tend to be more successful in the classroom and remain enrolled at the college or university. Research also highlights that institutional programs designed to support engagement and belonging can play a meaningful role in student persistence (Coleman et al., 2021).

A sense of belonging for a college student develops through interactions that occur within their college experience. Learning communities and collaborative environments can also contribute to the development of community building and a sense of belonging among students. Producers et al. (2022) explain that students often develop stronger connections when they are

placed in environments where collaboration and shared learning experiences are encouraged. Connections with faculty, staff, and peers often help students to feel more part of the community. These connections also open the door for stronger support systems as the student is less intimidated to find applicable resources when in need. When students feel recognized and supported, they are more likely to show satisfaction in their experience and develop a commitment to the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

On the reverse side, students who struggle to develop a sense of belonging tend to feel isolated and disconnected from the campus. This feeling often leads to students being disengaged from both the academic and social opportunities afforded to them. Research suggests that students who do not feel connected to their campus community are more likely to consider leaving their institution (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

Colleges and universities often attempt to create opportunities for a sense of belonging through their orientation programs, first-year seminars, student groups, residence hall floor programs, and campus-wide events. These initiatives provide students with an intentional opportunity to develop relationships and explore their interests while becoming integrated into the campus culture.

Within this context, early intervention initiatives such as CARE teams can contribute to strengthening students' sense of belonging. When a student struggles with academic or social challenges, timely outreach from an institutional representative can reinforce that their success is important and their well-being is valued. Connecting students to campus resources and supportive relationships can help restore engagement and strengthen their relationship to the college or university, in turn increasing the chance for persistence.

## **Early Alert and Intervention Systems**

Colleges and universities have increased their use of early alert and intervention systems in an effort to identify at-risk students in a timelier manner. These strategies help improve student persistence. Early alert systems are designed to notify appropriate institutional representatives of students who may be experiencing academic, behavioral, or personal challenges early in the semester so that intervention conversations can occur before a situation becomes too complicated. Rather than waiting until a student is failing a course or submitting transfer paperwork, early alert systems allow for faculty, staff, and peers to refer a student once warning signs occur in order to decrease the chances for escalation (Jokhan et al., 2018; Villano et al., 2018).

Typically, alert programs of this nature require faculty and staff observation of student behavior that facilitates the need for intervention. Faculty may submit a student's name if they see a pattern of repeated absences or declining academic performance. Staff may submit a name if they observe a decrease in engagement, or a peer could submit a referral if they see a noticeable change in mood or behavior. These alert systems are often managed through a platform that communicates with the appropriate institutional representatives who can determine the next steps for outreach (Delmas & Childs, 2020).

Research suggests that early alert systems can influence student retention in a positive way when implemented intentionally and effectively. Villano et al. (2018) found that early intervention programs allow institutions to identify at-risk students who may be considering withdrawing and provide them with support services before their academic challenges become difficult to manage. In the same way, Jokhan et al. (2018) highlight that early warning systems allow an institution to monitor patterns of behavior and predict potential struggles. These

findings suggest that early detection of concerning behaviors allows colleges and universities to respond proactively rather than reactively.

Academic coaching programs are another form of support structure that has been linked to improvements in student success and persistence. Howlett et al. (2021) found that academic coaching can help students to develop metacognitive skills that improve their ability to manage their coursework and academic expectations more successfully. When used alongside the early alert and intervention systems, these types of support initiatives strengthen the institutional efforts to address academic success and the barriers that may arise.

With that said, an early alert system is only as beneficial as the importance placed on the process. If an institution does not clearly communicate the process and make the campus community aware of the system and its role, it becomes an ineffective tool. Faculty buy-in remains critical to this system as they are typically the first to notice a change in behavior or academic performance. Delmas and Childs (2020) share that when faculty members are actively involved in the early alert process, it positions the institution to better connect students with respective resources. Therefore, training and communication surrounding these systems can increase participation and usage, ultimately resulting in stronger student persistence.

Training and communication should not be limited to just faculty and staff. Students who are aware of the early alert systems and understand their process and purpose are more likely to view the resulting outreach as supportive rather than punitive (Imundo et al., 2025). When systems such as this are framed as an effort to assist students in need, they are more receptive to accepting the assistance from a campus representative.

Overall, early alert and intervention systems are important strategies in supporting student success. By identifying concerns early and coordinating proper outreach to students, these systems allow colleges and universities to be proactive in their efforts and take a proactive and supportive approach. When done correctly, early alert systems serve as a fundamental intervention effort, such as CARE teams, which coordinate the institutional response to student concerns.

### **CARE Teams and Coordinated Student Support**

CARE teams have emerged on college campuses as an institutional approach to supporting students who may be at-risk and experiencing academic, behavioral, or personal challenges during their time at the college or university. These teams are typically collaborative in nature and multidisciplinary in structure. This make-up allows for the professionals from different areas of the institution to provide a holistic review of the student concerns and determine an appropriate course of action for outreach. CARE teams typically respond in a more coordinated fashion rather than through isolated efforts. This structure recognizes that student concerns are often interconnected and may involve a variety of aspects relating to the student experience (Arena et al., 2024).

The purpose of a CARE team is to provide students with resources through coordinated outreach based on submitted referrals from campus colleagues and peers. Referrals are welcomed by faculty, staff, residence life professionals, campus security, and students who may witness concerning behaviors. Once a referral is submitted, it is reviewed by the CARE team members and evaluated for next steps. Depending on the situation, outreach can occur from a member of the CARE team to the student, or a recommendation for a secondary connection

could occur. Typically, these result in a conversation with an institutional representative from academic advising, the Dean of Students' office, counseling services, or other area of support.

A major strength of the CARE team model is the collaborative structure it provides. Student challenges are typically layered and rarely fall into a single office. A student struggling academically may also have emotional or personal barriers at the same time. When institutions rely on individual offices to respond to concerns, this could overwhelm a student, as there may be multiple areas that need to be tended to. CARE teams provide a coordinated environment where representatives from across the campus can work together collaboratively to address the situation and create a plan for outreach.

This coordinated effort also allows the college or university to understand its demographics a little more and identify student behavior patterns. When multiple areas on campus come together to share information and perspective, the institution is able to respond not only more proactively but also more holistically and thoughtfully.

In addition to the response to referrals, CARE teams also work to contribute to the broader culture of care across the campus. When faculty, staff, and students are visibly aware that there is a structure in place for addressing student concerns, there is a stronger sense of trust and comfort in raising those concerns. This helps create an environment where members of the campus feel a sense of responsibility to help support each other's well-being rather than assuming another department or office will handle it.

Overall, CARE teams represent an important extension of the early alert programs. This intervention system serves as a strong early alert to identifying students who are experiencing a challenge and may need additional attention, resources, or assistance. By bringing multiple

campus perspectives together, CARE teams help ensure students receive the necessary support to navigate future challenges and remain engaged in their college experience to help persist to degree completion.

## **Analysis**

### **Early Identification and Intervention**

Early identification of students who are experiencing at-risk academic, social, or mental health behaviors is an important factor in student persistence (Villano et al., 2018; Delmas & Childs, 2020). The research shows that institutions that implement early alert programs are more successful in supporting at-risk students at their institution (Jokhan et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2023). This early approach addresses challenges or concerns before they escalate to a larger academic problem that could create a barrier for course completion or even progressing within a major. It also helps to decrease any personal challenges that could later result in a more damaging outcome. First-year students often lack the experience to independently handle difficult situations, particularly as they are simultaneously learning how to navigate institutional resources and support systems. Small problems such as homesickness or stress quickly escalate for residential first-year students as they are unsure how to personally process such a change and are new to the outreach for assistance (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration suggests that students who are academically and socially integrated into the college environment are more likely to persist to graduation (Tinto, 2022) because they feel strongly connected to the academic and social life of the institution. When students feel more connected, they are more likely to be retained (Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). CARE teams work directly with situations of this nature, as they

are typically having conversations with students who do not feel well-connected to the campus community and are looking for a way either to connect or to get out. CARE team members find these challenges and work to connect students to a club or organization, a faculty or staff mentor that can motivate them, or another institutional resource that can help change a negative situation to a positive outcome (Arena et al., 2024). The goal of the CARE team is to catch these situations before the disengagement leads to attrition. There is a direct correlation between Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and the purpose of a CARE team, as it supports persistence by identifying the barriers that are preventing a student from integrating into their campus community. Tinto identifies two key forms: academic integration and social integration. Actions such as connecting students to tutors, advisors offering academic coaching to students, and getting a student connected with a peer in a student organization they expressed interest in are all ways in which the CARE team offers support to students using Tinto's theory.

Additionally, Schlossberg's Transition Theory concentrates on how individuals adapt to and cope with transitions (Evans et al., 1998). The theory emphasizes four key components: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. College is a major life change for students, and therefore, this theory directly relates to the first-year experience. In a college setting, there are frequently examples of transitions that students encounter, such as adjusting to campus life, changing majors, transferring from another institution, and entering college. Schlossberg explains that a transition is any event or non-event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, or roles. This definition directly relates to many aspects of a college experience. From a CARE team lens, there is direct support provided with coping strategies and institutional resources when it comes to referred students. Each situation is assessed and evaluated to ensure the proper type of support

is offered. Results directly relate to this theory as CARE teams help students to develop strategies to navigate these situational challenges within the first-year experience.

### **Holistic Student Support**

The literature shows that student success is not solely determined by academic factors (Kuh et al., 2008; Chambliss & Takacs, 2013). Student persistence is influenced by academics, but there are also social and emotional factors that play into it. Students who are facing challenges typically face them on multiple levels and need a layered approach when it comes to support. For that reason, many institutions adopt a holistic support model. This model would touch upon academic performance, personal well-being, and social integration into campus life (Braskamp et al., 2016). Financial literacy and financial stress management programs have also been linked to improved retention outcomes among college students (Eichelberger et al., 2020).

The review of these three areas (academic, social, and emotional support) is directly correlated to the mechanics of a CARE team. The multidisciplinary committee assesses each layer and works to navigate which support systems could best serve the student in need. This includes but is not limited to counseling services, academic advising conversations, financial review, opportunities in student engagement, or ministry-related support. CARE teams are a central coordination point for connecting students to the appropriate resources based on their needs (Arena et al., 2024).

The Self-Determination Theory proposes that people are naturally motivated when they have a sense of control and choice (autonomy), when they feel capable of success (competence), and when they feel connected to others (relatedness) (Evans et al., 1998). When an individual

finds that these three areas are met, they are more likely to persist and have a stronger sense of psychological well-being (Kuh et al., 2008).

The three psychological necessities within this theory relate heavily to college student experiences. From an autonomy standpoint, college students feel this by selecting their major, registering for courses, taking on leadership roles, and joining student organizations, even as simple as selecting what they will eat for a meal. In many ways, prior to college, these decisions were made for them. In regard to competence, they gain this through reviewing a course syllabus that sets clear expectations on how to be successful in a course, passing an exam or improving a grade, solving a roommate issue on their own, doing laundry correctly for the first time, and completing the first semester are all ways of reinforcing a sense of competence. And then for relatedness, this can be seen through active friendships, positive mentorships with faculty or staff, roommate or floor hangouts, and participating in campus life are all ways to show that a student is adjusting well to their environment (Masika & Jones, 2015).

CARE teams work to connect referred students to one or more of these characteristics. The CARE team works to ensure that a student feels competent, and if they do not, they provide resources to get them to that level. If a student is not feeling connected, the CARE team works to facilitate conversation between the student and the respective area that can assist in making them feel more welcomed. CARE teams directly support the conditions that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Arena et al., 2024). Students who feel competent are less likely to remove themselves from the situation as they develop a deeper connection to the people and surroundings. The intrinsic motivation this theory speaks of can be implemented through the CARE team, resulting in increased persistence.

### **Help-Seeking and Campus Support Culture**

The literature suggests that many students remain hesitant to seek help even when the institutional support services are readily available (Masika & Jones, 2015; Ahn & Davis, 2022). This includes tutoring services, mental health assistance, campus safety outreach, and residential life connections. Much of this is based on mental health stigma and social norms (Paralkar & Knutson, 2021; Parchem et al., 2021). However, in some cases, it relates to a lack of familiarity that prevents them from taking advantage of assistance.

The research shows us that students who feel a stronger connection and sense of belonging to their campus are more likely to seek assistance when challenges arise, as there is a sense of trust and security between them (Masika & Jones, 2015; Ahn & Davis, 2022). The sense of belonging reduces the student's hesitation about asking for help and, in turn, could increase their engagement with resources. Students who feel valued as members of the community are more likely to engage positively with faculty, staff, and their peers. This sense of connection can be seen as a proactive factor in encouraging students to remain engaged rather than withdrawn from the overall college experience. For that reason, it is important for the institution to create a space where seeking out help is not only welcomed but championed across the community. Faculty, staff, and peers contribute to this campus culture by openly discussing resources at venues such as orientation, first-year experience courses, leadership days, open houses, and anywhere that students may gather. CARE teams specifically contribute to this supportive environment as they coordinate efforts for intervention to ensure student challenges are met with appropriate resources, but also a sense of confidence-building once those resources are tapped into by the student (Arena et al., 2024).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes that individuals learn behaviors through observation, modeling, and social interaction (Evans et al., 1998). In a college setting, students

constantly observe behaviors around them. From faculty serving as role models in the classroom to upper-class students providing an example as a team captain or as a club leader, there are observations that occur regularly for first-year students.

CARE teams work to model supportive behavior that showcases that help-seeking behavior is normal and a good idea. They work to encourage students to gain the support necessary for them to be successful. This example may influence students to feel more capable and comfortable seeking assistance in future scenarios.

### **Synthesis of Key Themes**

The themes identified in this analysis provide a glance at the importance of coordinated institutional strategies that support a quality and holistic first-year experience. They focus on student persistence and well-being while ensuring a sense of belonging and culture of care. Through early alert programs, like the CARE team, at-risk students are tended to quickly and appropriately based on need.

Addressing concerns from academic, emotional, and social corners is essential to the success of the student. As one area may be a glaring issue, the others may still remain a part of the problem. For example, if a student is failing a class, the original outreach may be to a tutor to assist them academically. Through some digging, there may be some concerns with the student not connecting to their peers, or they find themselves struggling to retain the information they are reading. Approaching each situation with a holistic view allows for avenues such as disability services or residence life to come into the conversation to connect the student.

Effective CARE teams are inclusive of representatives from academic affairs, student affairs/experience, counseling services, residence life, faculty, and campus security. The

cross-departmental approach ensures that student concerns brought forward are addressed from a variety of perspectives and lenses rather than isolated considerations. When the structure of a CARE team represents multiple areas across the campus, the student benefits as they are being reviewed from a network of institutional resources. This collaborative structure allows for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting student well-being and persistence.

The culture of help-seeking behavior begins with the encouragement of students as they take that step. CARE teams naturally contribute to reinforcing the positive message that reaching out for assistance is normal and beneficial. The emphasis on belonging also aligns with Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, which highlights the importance of social and academic connection in supporting student persistence (Tinto, 2022).

Together, these themes showcase how early intervention programs, holistic student support models, and a campus culture that encourages help-seeking behaviors can strengthen the first-year student persistence and well-being on a college campus. These findings further support the importance of institutional efforts, such as CARE teams, that produce efforts and provide intentional and critical support to students who may not even realize they need it at the time.

While these themes highlight the positive impact that CARE teams can have on student persistence and well-being, they also raise ethical considerations related to the privacy of a student, responsivity of the institution, and the balance between a supportive intervention and student autonomy.

### **Ethical Implications**

CARE teams often operate through a referral system regarding students who are experiencing some type of at-risk behavior. This type of system requires the collection and

sharing of personal student information between the parties, which mandates careful consideration of student privacy and confidentiality (Arena et al., 2024). In addition, as students are discussed within the multidisciplinary committee that offers intentional interactions, there needs to be protection of sensitive information bound by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) where necessary. There is ethical tension between protecting a student's privacy and knowing the situation fully to support and provide resources that would be beneficial to the student (Arena et al., 2024). In terms of CARE team collaborations, many institutions control access to student information through an online platform for case management (Arena et al., 2024). Not only is access limited to the platform itself, but some offer leveled controls based on role. This allows for the management of information and assurance of privacy to non-necessary partners. This process helps to decrease the risk of unintentionally disclosing situational details or student information to uninvolved parties (Arena et al., 2024).

Another ethical consideration is the duty to care versus the student's autonomy in becoming a well-rounded, life-skilled adult. CARE teams are designed to assist students in distress, yet there are times when a student makes the decision to deny the outreach being offered in an effort to stand on their own in becoming an adult. As educators and administrators, there is a responsibility to support student well-being while still needing to balance the need to respect a student's independence. CARE teams need to consider whether their interventions are empowering students or impeding students' autonomy. While the goal is to develop personal autonomy, if the student believes they already possess that autonomy, outreach may be perceived as control rather than support (Evans et al., 1998). Of course, this becomes secondary in the case of an emergent situation where harm to oneself or others comes into play, but from an academic

or social standing, institutional personnel need to ensure students maintain their right and ability to think critically for themselves and own their decision-making.

In the referral process for CARE teams, the faculty, staff, or peer making the referral may be influenced by a previous encounter with someone else or even personal experiences, causing that referral to be more of an implicit bias than a realistic revelation. This type of behavior happens more often in marginalized populations where cultural misunderstanding can cause unintentional concern (Ahn & Davis, 2022). For that reason, the CARE team would need to ensure equitable intervention practices when approaching each case. Maintaining an accurate database of submissions along with outreach processes is helpful in ensuring there is not an unintentional stigmatization of particular groups, especially marginalized populations.

While the intent of a CARE team is to showcase support and motivation to those recommended for outreach, it can be argued that such an intervention of support can make a student feel targeted or monitored (Villano et al., 2018). It is crucial for the success of the CARE team that the purpose of this early intervention program is explained to all parties on campus. This process should build trust and motivation between the campus, encouraging a supportive campus climate.

Another ethical implication relates to the broader institutional responsibility associated with CARE team interventions. Institutions have a duty to provide a reasonably safe environment for their students while also respecting the students' personal rights and freedoms. When warning signs are visible or known but ignored, the institution can face liability for neglecting the duty of care. Therefore, CARE teams operate in a complex space where decisions must be made to balance the safety of each student, personal autonomy for the student, and institutional

accountability. One way to ensure this happens is to clearly define CARE team processes and policies in a transparent, consistent, and intentional manner with a focus on student well-being.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Strengthening Early Alert and Referral Systems**

One recommendation is the strengthening of early alert systems to allow faculty, staff, and peers to identify students who are exhibiting at-risk behaviors in the academic and/or social settings. These platforms provide an outlet for members of the campus community to submit a recommendation or referral for review when they notice concerning behaviors such as repeated class absences, noticeable changes in behavior or attitude, increased stress or anxiety, or a behavior that is unbecoming of a particular student. When these alert systems are in place and functionally effective, institutional representatives can intervene early and connect students with resources before the behavior escalates to a crisis level.

Institutions should ensure that these early alert referral systems are user-friendly, accessible at any point, and marketed adequately to the campus community to ensure proper usage and effectiveness. Training the faculty on how and when to use such a system, letting residence life teams know how to input referrals, and providing a clear message of the purpose to the student body will reduce any confusion. Strengthening this early alert program will ensure that CARE teams receive timely information, which in turn allows them to act and intervene more promptly before situations negatively impact student persistence.

### **Expanding Holistic and Coordinated Student Support**

Another policy recommendation is the intentional coordination of campus resources through multidisciplinary committees such as CARE teams. Student challenges are often layered

and not based on a single factor. For example, a student struggling academically may also be experiencing mental health issues or family concerns that are linked to the change in academic behavior. Based on this, institutions should adopt a policy or process that supports students through a holistic and collaborative cross-departmental approach rather than relying on specific offices to respond individually. This approach also decreased the amount of communication going directly to the student, which could overwhelm them and discourage them from connecting with resources.

CARE teams should include representatives from academic affairs, student affairs/experience, campus security, counseling services, residence life, faculty, and other relevant departments. This structure allows for colleges and universities to review situations with multiple perspectives. CARE teams should also have secondary support lines for offices or departments that may not be as consistently connected, but should be a team player when necessary if the time arises. By developing a diverse team, the institution is creating a highly supportive network of resources that can address the full scope of student needs.

### **Promoting a Campus Culture of Help-Seeking Behavior**

Institutions of higher education should implement policies that promote a campus culture where seeking help is normalized and encouraged. Many students, both first-year and returning, remain hesitant to utilize available support services due to stigma, lack of familiarity, or fear of being seen as incapable. Institutions that actively frame outreach to resources such as the tutoring centers, counseling services, and academic advising as a positive step toward success are more likely to improve student persistence.

Promotion of this culture can be done as early as new student orientation or first-year seminars when students begin their college experience. Residential students can hear about it at floor meetings, while commuters can see it through marketing in a commuter lounge. Faculty and staff should also share this information at the start of the semester with their classes, student staff, advisees, and other cohorts. When students consistently hear the message of positivity surrounding seeking help, they will feel encouraged and empowered to take that step if and when the time comes to need it. This practice helps students perceive the CARE team as a trustworthy and supportive outreach.

### **Establishing Ethical and Equitable CARE Team Practices**

In order to ensure CARE teams are remaining respectful of student rights and institutional responsibilities, another policy recommendation is to develop ethical guidelines that outline how to handle sensitive student information. The nature of CARE teams requires the review of student demographic data and personal circumstances; therefore, establishing clear policies that protect confidentiality and information sharing is essential to building trust within this process. These policies should align with the already existing federal regulations, such as HIPAA and FERPA, while also ensuring relevant information can be shared among the appropriate professionals when necessary.

Institutions should also provide training on implicit bias to ensure equitable practices when assessing and referring students. Research has shown that, in some cases, unintentionally, referral systems can reflect personal assumptions about others or provide cultural misunderstandings, especially toward marginalized student populations. Training and assessment can help to identify any inequitable patterns that occur and also help to decrease any disparities

in reporting or intervention. Establishing these ethical guidelines and training expectations helps to ensure CARE team efforts support all students.

### **Increasing Transparency and Student Awareness of CARE Teams**

Institutions should include policies that increase the awareness of the purpose and role of CARE teams on a college campus. Many students are unfamiliar with CARE teams and may not understand how they function to support the well-being and persistence of students. Providing marketing and training behind the purpose and influence of CARE teams can help decrease the misconceptions and increase student trust for these support mechanisms.

Colleges and institutions can promote CARE teams by including information about them in student handbooks, course syllabi, orientation materials, and campus websites. This will help to increase awareness and normalize the efforts of the multidisciplinary committee. Another way to assist in the promotion is to offer programming surrounding some topics that may be central to the CARE team: homesickness, how to study effectively, mental health awareness, and community standards/expectations. When students understand the purpose of the CARE team, they are more likely to accept the outreach. Transparency not only strengthens trust but also reinforces the college or university's commitment to the well-being and persistence of the student.

### **Summary**

The transition to college is one of the most significant developmental periods in a student's academic and personal life. First-year students enter higher education with expectations, experiences, and personal circumstances that influence their ability to adapt to the college environment. For many students, the transition to increased academic rigor and

expectations, along with new levels of social independence and personal responsibility, can be a significant challenge. These adjustments are often added to potential mental health concerns, homesickness, academic pressures, and the need to build a network of friends in a new location. Because of these factors, student persistence during the first year of college remains a critical focus for colleges and universities.

The literature reviewed throughout this paper highlights that student persistence is impacted by academic, social, and personal factors rather than one single area. Research suggests that institutions that create environments that encourage engagement, provide support resources, and foster meaningful relationships between students and the campus community are more successful in retaining their students. When students develop a connection with faculty, staff, or peers, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging, which often results in continued enrollment and engagement during their college experience.

The first-year transition plays a very important role in shaping student persistence. Students who are entering college are expected to adapt to new academic habits, build relationships with the campus community, including faculty, staff, and peers, and learn to navigate a campus and culture that is new to them. During this time, students are also asked to develop a sense of independence that was not there previously. They become the owners of their own success, which in many cases increases a sense of stress within them. When institutions provide intentional support during these transitions, students gain a stronger sense of confidence and competence to succeed as they have the resources to supplement these fears or challenges.

A strong sense of belonging also plays a heavy role in student persistence. Many student affairs/experience areas are focusing heavily on creating a sense of belonging for students. When students feel valued and connected to the campus community, they are more likely to remain

engaged and invested in their current institution. Engagement opportunities range from student groups to campus programs, and students who are engaged develop a stronger sense of belonging and remain enrolled. When students feel recognized, typically at smaller institutions, they are more likely to seek assistance when a challenge arises. This outreach to resources showcases a commitment to the college or university and, in most cases, to their degree completion.

The literature also demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of early alert and intervention systems in supporting student success. The research shows that allowing institutions to implement such a system permits them to provide timely outreach to at-risk students in an effort to assist them with their struggles before they reach a point of failure or withdrawal. Faculty and staff play a large role in these processes as they are often the ones observing the change in behavior or are the connection to the challenge. When an early alert system is effectively in place, they serve as a valuable mechanism for identifying these students who may benefit from additional support.

The analysis presented in this paper further highlights the way in which CARE teams can contribute to student persistence and well-being. This type of approach also encourages a campus culture of care. Students who may be hesitant to connect to resources based on stigma or fear of judgment, when welcomed by a campus culture that encourages this type of support, are more likely to find those resources and perform more successfully. CARE teams help to reinforce the acceptance of help-seeking behavior and taking a proactive step to success rather than failure.

While CARE teams highlight a considerable number of positives, there are ethical considerations that need to be addressed on college campuses. The confidentiality of student information and situations should remain a priority for those involved in the support structure. There are great risks in information sharing when it comes to situational details as federal

mandates such as HIPAA and FERPA require confidentiality to be followed. Therefore ensuring transparency while respecting privacy is crucial.

The policy recommendations shared in this paper emphasize the importance of strengthening early alert systems, expanding student support structures, promoting a culture of help-seeking behavior, establishing ethical guidelines for CARE teams, and increasing marketing regarding the role of CARE teams on campus. These recommendations highlight the need for institutions to approach student success through collaborative and proactive strategies rather than relying on individual offices to address student concerns.

Ultimately, supporting first-year student persistence asks institutions to recognize the in-depth and interconnected challenges that students may face during their college experience. CARE teams provide an important institutional structure that allows colleges and universities to respond to challenges in a thoughtful and collaborative manner. By identifying concerns early, connecting students with appropriate resources, and fostering a supportive campus culture, CARE teams play a valuable role in promoting both student well-being and long-term academic success leading to overall student persistence.

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