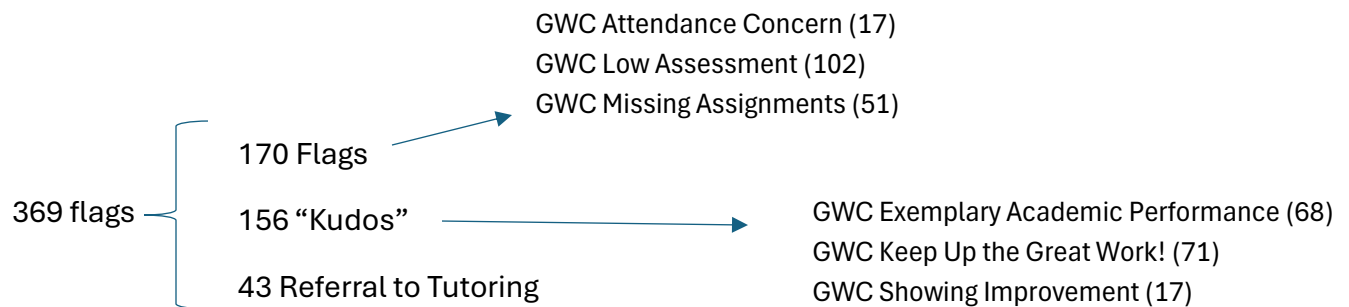# Starfish Evaluation Findings

July 2025

Summary

In Summer and Fall 2024, GWC piloted the Starfish Early Alert System. The pilot included faculty participants from English, Math, and one faculty member from Psychology. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE) reviewed Starfish flag data alongside student course completion outcomes. Additionally, peer mentors conducted telephone interviews with students (n=5), and IE facilitated a focus group with participating faculty. IE staff also reviewed notes from the Starfish Pilot Advisory Group throughout Fall 2024. This summary presents preliminary findings from the Starfish pilot.

What did the summer/fall pilot include?

GWC Attendance Concern (17)
GWC Low Assessment (102)
GWC Missing Assignments (51)

369 flags
- 170 Flags
- 156 "Kudos"
- 43 Referral to Tutoring

GWC Exemplary Academic Performance (68)
GWC Keep Up the Great Work! (71)
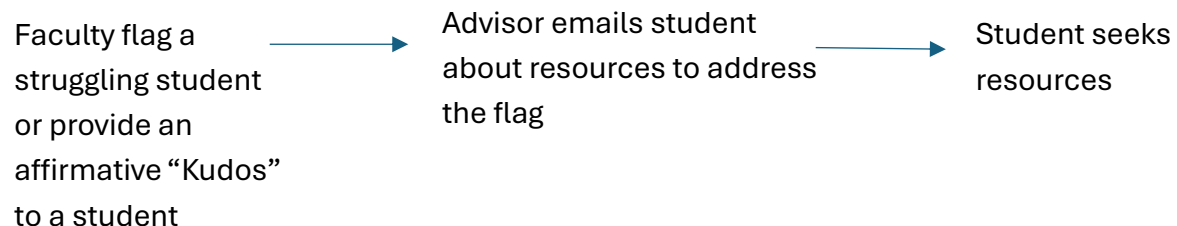GWC Showing Improvement (17)

Note: One flag raised by Student Services related to Basic Needs.

8 faculty raised flags in the English and Math disciplines

-1 faculty member raised 48% of the flags

-47 flags in summer 2024; 322 flags in fall 2024

This is an image of the process:

Faculty flag a struggling student or provide an affirmative "Kudos" to a student → Advisor emails student about resources to address the flag → Student seeks resources

Who was flagged?

Hispanic/Latine students were overrepresented and Asian and white students are underrepresented compared to the general student population.

Race/Ethnicity	Count	%
Hispanic/Latine	94	57
Asian	28	17
White	19	12
Multiple	13	8
Filipino	7	4
Unknown	*	1
Pacific Islander	*	1
Black	*	1

The gender distribution of students who received a Starfish flag mirrors the general student population.

Gender	Flagged Students	Percentage
Female	82	50
Male	70	42
Unknown	12	7
Non-binary	*	1

Students aged 18-19 are the most often flagged, representing 47% of those flagged. They only represent 22% of the general student population.

Age Group	Flagged Students	Percentage
Under 18	20	12
18 to 19	78	47
20 to 24	48	29
25 to 29	15	9
30 to 34	*	1
40 and Over	*	1

Who received a "Kudos"?

Hispanic/Latine students were overrepresented and Asian and white students are

Race/Ethnicity	Count	%

Hispanic	73	52
White	25	18
Asian	26	18
Multiple	7	5
Filipino	4	3
Unknown	*	2
Black	*	1
Pacific Islander	*	0

Gender	Flagged Students	Percentage
Female	73	53
Male	53	38
Unknown	7	5
Non-binary	5	4

Age Group	Flagged Students	Percentage
Under 18	65	46.76
18 to 19	43	30.94
20 to 24	22	15.83
25 to 29	7	5.04
30 to 34	*	1.44
40 and Over	*	0

What was the Starfish purpose?

During the pilot terms, the purpose of the Starfish system had not been fully defined. It wasn't until late in the fall term that the Dean of Counseling articulated a more fully developed, dual-purpose vision for the system.

1. **Early Alert**: A platform to identify students who need help and connect them to GWC resources (e.g., academic support, basic needs). Faculty also suggested using it to connect students to new programs, like the faculty refer Latine STEM students to the HSI STEM grant.
2. **Wrap-Around Service Platform**: Starfish is a portal where student services can see a fuller picture of student need. When working with a student, it can be used by Counselors and Advisors to see when a student was struggling and what programs, services the student is involved in across campus.

What was the Starfish process?

In summer 2024, many students were flagged but few students responded to the follow-up emails from GWC. In response, GWC changed the follow-up process to allow for three follow-up communications and then the flag was lowered.

IE is still working on determining which students referred to tutoring accessed tutoring.

GWC Peer Mentors (GWC students conducting data collection for the college) also interviewed these students to understand why they did not attend to the emails. Findings suggest that students irregularly check email and/or were torn between responsibilities. The Peer Mentor reported:

> During the summer, several students found themselves irregularly checking their emails, canvas notifications, and or announcements professors would post. One student reported; "No, I did not check my email at all." However, most students received the Starfish tutoring notification, but did not try to use its services. One student said, "I think I received [the starfish notification] but I think I ignored it." Students suggested that they would not pay attention to their email/messages due to outside responsibilities like homelife or working.

Did it make a difference in course success or retention?

Students who received a Starfish flag or referral (Kudos were excluded) were less likely to succeed in their course than comparison students.

	Treatment	Comparison
Success	15	84
Not Successful	111	42
Total	126	126

z-statistic: 8.90, p=.00

Note: IE created a one-to-one match by matching the treatment group to enrolled students within the same term and closely aligning students based on course, ethnicity, age group, and department.

Starfish is designed to identify students who are struggling, therefore, it is not surprising that students with flags are not doing as well as other students.

Student interviews revealed key insights into students' expectations regarding the summer online course workload, as well as limited awareness of the academic support services available to GWC:

Students found it difficult to keep up with the course load. One student recounted that, "[He] underestimated the workload of an online class." Unfortunately, some students were not able to keep up, due to their life circumstances, responsibilities, and time management skills. One student reported, "I didn't talk to a counselor before signing up...I wasn't prepared for the online workload."

Three of the students who had failed this course agreed that through their failure, they have learned to take their classes more seriously. One of these students re-enrolled in the class in person at Golden West in fall 2024 and is doing much better the second time around. The student attributed their success to the in-person modality and how they are taking the class more seriously this time.

Another student suggested that they were unaware of academic resources on campus and would like to know more about them.

Looking at persistence, we see students who were given KUDOS within Starfish are significantly more likely to re-enroll in courses for the following term. While the comparison group (students who were not tracked through Starfish) and the treatment group (students who received flag or referral within Starfish) had a higher percentage who did not persist.

	Comparison	Treatment	Kudos
Persisted	337	86	130
Withdrew	169	53	9
Total	506	139	139
Percentages	66.60%	61.87%	93.53%

Note: Comparison students are students who have the same courses and terms as the treatment and kudos groups.

What are some of the challenges to the Starfish implementation or from the faculty perspective?

Faculty provided feedback through a faculty focus group, the Starfish Workgroup, and follow-up emails to the IE team. Themes were identified and direct quotes used to illustrate the themes.

Faculty questioned why they were using this system, which seemed like an extra step in providing feedback. Faculty also were not always aware of when a student received follow-up, leaving them questioning what was happening.

> *I thought it would be like a connection between the student, myself and the counselor, and we would have more collaboration. And there would be more*

communication between those three pieces. I felt like I was putting stuff in Starfish, and it was like sending it out into a black hole. And then I never really had contact. I didn't know if the student got it. I didn't know who got who else got it.

The turnaround time from the time I sent it to the time I got notified that it closed was literally, like a month, and that's like almost two semesters over.

I felt like I was already doing all the Starfish work in my class, and this was just adding an extra step and extra time and I wasn't seeing any results from it...Even something as positive as the kudos, it was like I already give my students kudos in Canvas on specific assignments. It's very direct...

We are a very like personal, on the human side, relationship-based place. And my gut or thought might be like, well, when students are used to getting that version of care and support ... an automated kudo is like, what? What is that?

I don't think we need to spend $100,000 on an email program when we could have a few people in each division or department who are the success coaches that we all have access to.

Faculty were concerned that the feedback took too long, especially when the course was an 8-week course.

I think for me, I was teaching an eight week asynchronous class and I had concerns about that coming in anyway because I notoriously grade as things are coming in and my feedback is immediate and it is really thorough and detailed. And so I had a lot of concerns about how confusing it would be if, for example, I had a low assessment score flag for a student on Tuesday.

I used it for my on campus and my online classes, and I had three first eight week and mid eight week and then a second eight week. That's going on right now, right so I flagged students after the second week, when I noticed, you know, that they're already failing because of either missed assignments or low assessment. ... the eight week classes, it's very different than the than the 16 week.

Faculty wanted to give students the support/resource information directly to cut out the wait time for a response. Faculty also seemed to lack trust of the follow-up.

Why do I need to go through all the different steps of logging into Starfish, going through all the stuff, when I can just mark it on a paper in Canvas, and they're going to get it immediately, and then they can, they can write me back...

I have a ton of friends at Fullerton College, they've had this for a long time. Similarly, the faculty sentiment is like, I'm not really sure like what this is doing for me. I don't really know the feedback loop.

When I'm watching a wait time of a very long time for things to be closed or followed up, but then I'm acting like immediately and triaging my students, I felt like it was a waste of an effort, because it was like I had a quicker touch to them, as compared to, like, waiting, hoping...

Desire for more collaboration with student services

Since I've been here, it's definitely felt like instruction versus student services, us versus them culture. And I'm curious about how we could make changes to collaborate better and to operate better in a more sort of guided pathway, sort of centric type of way.

I think we need to find ways to work across aisles. We need to start to communicate, and we need to, like, really put the student at the center of this.

We need to have better faculty training regarding student services and what services are provided by which offices and like what resources are even available.

Insufficient Training and Pilot Organization

There were meetings set up, but then they weren't set up. They were canceled. ... There was no real training.

My training was a Zoom meeting with a few people... less than half an hour, and it was like, boom, boom. This is what it is. I took, like, a list of notes so I could remember how to log in. And I kind of just had to figure it out on my own...

We're not ready. ... If we do roll it out and it doesn't work, we will never recover from that. We will never gain the trust of faculty to believe, like, oh, but now it's fine. I think it needs to be in really good working order before we roll it out.

While some faculty were critical of the system and the pilot organization, another liked using the tool and wanted to keep using it. One faculty member said:

I'd really like all my classes to be in the Starfish program next semester. I also plan on using the Starfish program earlier in the semester. I believe by having counselors help me figure out why some students weren't keeping up in the first couple weeks, it could've made a difference for some students who might've felt overwhelmed by the workload.

Other Faculty Comments/Recommendations

Faculty wanted a "Recommendation for Course Withdrawal" flag to add to the available flags.

Faculty also expressed concerns that GWC is lowering flags without intervention because students were not responsive. Student reports presented above suggest that students were overwhelmed, and not responding to the flags.

Next Steps:

The College should refine future Starfish implementation to bolster faculty engagement and training. Additional training related to academic and basic need supports may help across the entire faculty ranks to provide resources to students more directly and quickly. Future planning about the use of Starfish should consider both purposes (e.g., early alert and the wrap-around service platform). The College should also consider how to more transparently communicate the progress of Starfish flags and students accessing resources.