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The Impact of College Academic Coaching

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The Impact of College Academic Coaching

Postsecondary academic coaching programs have become more prevalent recently, and academic coaching as a model is one of the interventions that has been adopted with considerable success at colleges and universities as a method to increase student retention. There are many definitions of academic coaching. Robinson (2015) noted that academic coaching is the individualized practice of asking reflective, motivation-based questions, providing opportunities for formal self-assessment, sharing practical strategies, and cocreating a tangible plan. According to the Learning Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.), academic coaching assists students in developing five primary strategies: time management, active studying, reading, test preparation, and note-taking. Coaching is also concerned with what Claire Weinstein and colleagues at the University of Texas have called strategic learning: a combination of self-regulation and metacognition (Acee, 2009; Weinstein et al., 2012).

For the purposes of this critical review of the literature, we define academic coaching as a multidisciplinary, multitheory synthesis and application of applied behavioral change. Although the strategies employed by coaching programs may differ, these are the essential components of postsecondary coaching. Coaching differs from tutoring, advising, mentoring, and counseling since coaches are not typically subject matter experts, and coaches focus specifically on the skills necessary for academic success rather than a particular subject area or personal development issue. Coaching is rooted in various theoretical approaches designed to support the development of a working alliance between the student and coach.

Coaching programs are a relatively recent arrival in academics, having been implemented widely during the past 3 decades. Because of their relative recency, however, there is comparatively little information available about their effectiveness. As Singhani et al. (2022) pointed out, in spite of the proliferation of coaching programs in U.S. colleges and universities, there is a dearth of quantitative research to establish their efficacy. In this issue of RiLADE, we look at research on the outcomes of college academic coaching programs, both those offered by commercial providers and those by in-house coaches.

Efforts to Assess Coaching Programs

There are two types of academic coaching programs: one based in distance learning contracted to external providers and one campus-based. The former involves contracting with an external coaching service to provide assistance to students. The latter involves using campus-based coaching programs frequently located in learning centers. Even if coaching programs do not report directly to a learning assistance program, they are often housed within the same administrative unit and engage in close collaboration with the learning assistance program.

Distance Learning and Contracted Coaching

One of the earliest attempts to assess externally contracted services was conducted by Inside Track, a commercial coaching program based in California (Mangan, 2014). The authors studied the impact of contract coaching on students at Indiana State University. They provided half the first-year class with coaching and half without. They found that students enrolled in

STEM fields of study who received coaching had higher rates of retention, even though coaching had no measurable effect on students in the social sciences (Mangan, 2014). No explanation wasprovided to explain the lack of impact on social science students.

Rodriguez Ott et al. (2020) also studied the impact of Inside Track contract coaching at two Montana community colleges. Using propensity score matching, the authors found that the duration of academic coaching was related to student outcomes. Students who participated in atleast two coaching sessions were more likely to be retained for at least one semester longer than students who did not participate.

The largest study of the impact of Inside Track Coaching was conducted by Bettinger and Baker (2014). They examined the performance of 8,049 students randomly assigned to Inside Track coaching. These students were enrolled in eight different colleges, both 2 year and 4 year. The researchers found that students assigned to coaching had statistically significant retention, persistence, and GPA rates higher than noncoached students. For these students, the effect was also long lasting. Students who participated in coaching also graduated at higher rates than students who did not participate.

Howlett et al. (2021) evaluated the development of students' metacognition following participation in both online and in-person coaching. The authors studied 200 students divided into a control group and two experimental groups, using an online coaching program similar to that provided by Inside Track and in-person coaching. They used the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory as a pretest and posttest to assess student gains in metacognition. The researchers found that students participating in both the online and in-person coaching demonstrated greater gains in metacognition than the control group.

Campus-Based Academic Coaching

Alzen et al. (2021) looked at 526 coaching participants enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences at an anonymous Rocky Mountain university. These students participated in a locally developed coaching program. The researchers looked at the performance of 275 students who completed the coaching program. They found that those who initially had GPAs of between 1.0 and 2.0 and completed coaching had a gain of 0.4 points higher than noncompleters and were 10% more likely to enroll in the following semester.

A study by Capstick et al. (2019) evaluated the effectiveness of a campus-based academic coaching program. Using archival data, their research looked at the records of 1,434 students enrolled at a southern university in a city with a high level of poverty and a high proportion of students of color. They found significant effects for both grades and persistence. Students who received coaching were more likely to have higher GPAs and were more likely to be retained during the semester with coaching than those who did not receive coaching. A study of Hispanic students enrolled in a STEM curriculum was conducted at a midsize 4-year institution in Texas by Cruz et al. (2021). A total of 90 students were assigned to either a control or an experimental group. The experimental group showed gains from pretest to posttest on a locally developed survey on social support and belonging. The control group also had an average GPA significantly higher than the control group (3.28 versus 2.78).

Evans et al. (2020) studied the impact of a coaching program at a branch campus of Tarant County Community College in Texas. They explored the performance of 430 students who met the criteria for inclusion in the coaching program and a comparable control group. Their analysis revealed that participants were 5.6% more likely than the control group to be retained for at least six semesters. This was particularly for female students who were more than four times as likely to be retained than the control group. This was the only study that looked specifically at the performance of women who received coaching.

Lehan et al. (2018) explored the performance of online graduate students. The researchers matched students by terms enrolled and GPA and investigated the impact of coaching on persistence. They found that students who visited the learning center and received coaching were 2.66 times more likely to be retained when compared to similar students who did not receive coaching.

Oreopoulis and Petronijevic (2018) randomly assigned over 4,000 students at a Canadian University to a control group, an online exercise group, a text messaging group, and a one-to-one coaching group. They found that the one-to-one coaching group had a 5-percentage point difference in final grades and a 0.35 difference in GPA for the one-to-one coaching group. No effects were found for any of the other interventions.

Robinson and Gahagan (2010) studied 182 academically deficient students who were required to participate in a coaching program at the University of South Carolina. They found that 92% of participating students improved their GPA within one academic year. They also reported that the percentage of suspended students among the coached group was 42% lower than predicted.

Simmons and Smith (2020) investigated the performance of 133 African American and Latinx students enrolled at a midsize comprehensive regional institution. The authors found that the 4-year graduation rate for students participating in the study was 46%, whereas the institutional average was 32%. They also found an improvement in student perceptions of the college experience and academic skills for those participating in coaching.

Singhani et al. (2022) looked at the performance of students in good standing and those on academic probation to determine the effects of coaching on persistence and retention. Students in this study utilized peer coaches retained by the university. They found that both students in good standing and students on probation were retained at statistically significantly higher rates than those who did not receive coaching. Using ANOVA, the researchers also found that the coached students had significantly higher GPAs than those who were not coached. However, a study by Hall et al. (2021) found few, if any, effects resulting from coaching. Using predictive analytics, the researchers focused on 1,224 students who were judged to be "moderately performing" (p. 209) at an open-admissions, rural, southeastern community college. Using a variety of performance measures, they concluded, "Overall, the results do not support the hypothesis that offering student success coaching…improves persistence and GPA" (p. 226).

Coaching and Students with Disabilities

A major study of students with disabilities was conducted by Ahmann et al. (2018). They conducted a review that included 19 studies assessing the benefits of academic coaching for students with intellectual disabilities. All 19 studies affirmed the benefits of coaching in improved executive functioning for ADHD students. Six studies reported improved participant well-being, and five studies documented high participant satisfaction with their coaching experience.

Bellman et al. (2015) researched 41 students with disabilities who were exposed to a locally delivered coaching program that involved weekly student meetings with coaches. While prior studies of students with disabilities focused on learning disabilities (LD) or students with ADHD, this study focused on students with a variety of disabilities. The authors used self-reported data from students to identify gains in time management, note-taking, studying, writing, and self-advocacy.

In 2011, Parker et al. used qualitative methods to study the executive functioning of seven students participating in a coaching program for students with LD at a selective Midwestern university. They used a combination of interviews and scores on the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) to assess the impact of coaching. They found that coached students had higher LASSI scores for self-regulation. Interviews revealed that there were no effects for goal attainment, but there were positive effects on enhanced well-being and self control.

Field et al. (2013) explored the performance of 160 undergraduate students with ADHD enrolled in eight universities of two community colleges in the upper Midwest. They assigned half to a group that received coaching and half to a control group that did not. Using pre- and postscores from the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) and the College Well-Being Scale (CWB), the researchers reported statistically significant gains for coached students in executive functioning from pre-test to post-test on the LASSI and improved feelings of well-being on the CWB.

Blakeslee et al. (2022) examined 35 students who had been through foster care and had experienced mental health issues. These students participated in a year-long campus-based coaching program. An analysis of outcomes showed that participants demonstrated significant gains on the Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE) scale and the Youth Efficacy and Empowerment Mental Health Scale (YES-MH). They also had stronger 1-year retention rates compared to the control group.

In 2018, Qian et al. also studied the effects of coaching on the intellectual development of students with disabilities. They performed a qualitative evaluation of interviews from 39 students with intellectual disabilities who had participated in a coaching program at two community colleges in the upper Midwest. Students reported improvement in academic success and academic motivation and engagement due to their participation in coaching.

In another study, Weiss and Rohland (2015) explored the effects of a communication coaching program on students with autism spectrum disorders attending the University of Rhode Island. They looked at 20 students participating in communication coaching that collaborated with a peer coaching program. Interviews with and reports from coaches suggested that participating students improved their executive functioning, were more able to set attainable goals, and improved their social communication skills.

Richman et al. (2014) looked at the intellectual development of 24 students selected from a population of students with LD. The researchers used a quasi-experimental research design to determine the effects of coaching on executive functioning, self-determination, and academic success. Using pretests, posttests, and student self-reports, the authors found that the coaching experience yielded positive results along the dimensions measured.

Mitchell and Gansemer-Topf (2016) worked with 60 students with disabilities such as ADHD, ASD, psychiatric disorders, and LD. They conducted 300 individual academic coaching sessions during the academic year and focused on humanistic and self-regulated learning approaches. They used a specific session structure around the students' self-selected goals. They reported that empirical data supports academic coaching as an effective practice. They also cited students' developed study skills, critical thinking skills, and goal attainment.

Finally, Scott et al. (2015) studied the performance of 41 students with various disabilities enrolled in STEM Programs at three different colleges. In the sample, 29 of these students attended a community college and 12 attended a university. Each student was required to attend weekly meetings with coaches during the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 academic years. Interviews and questionnaires with these students indicated that they had developed in the areas of goal setting, time management, and self-confidence. They also showed improvement on many other variables related to metacognition.

Conclusion

Considering the overall efficacy of coaching found in this review, we support the concept of academic coaching and are optimistic about the future. There are many populations in which coaching has been used, including students with disabilities, students who have low GPAs, students involved in skill-building, and students in professional programs, such as nursing and medical school. However, it was a surprise to us, perhaps because we have not been involved with the disabilities community to a large extent, that so many studies had been done on the effects of coaching on students with various LD and that nearly all show positive outcomes.

Of the research reported in this paper, 13 studies cited reported gains in metacognition and intellectual development. There appears to be little question that coaching in metacognition and intellectual development positively affects LD students. Another finding of interest was that coaching is most consistently associated with student persistence and retention. Ten studies reviewed reported gains in student retention for students receiving coaching. Moreover, eight of the studies reviewed cited improvement in students' GPAs. Table 1 summarizes all of the research provided in this review, with marks in corresponding columns that describe outcomes for each study.

      As noted at the outset of this article, coaching is unlike academic advising, mentoring, tutoring, or counseling. While it is clear that coaching has several positive benefits for college students, it is, nevertheless, an expensive and time-consuming process. If an institution is concerned with its students' academic persistence and retention, this investment will far outweigh the potential cost of losing a student. An institution can choose to pay an external provider to offer coaching or hire its own cadre of coaches. Either one will involve extra costs. Nevertheless, as Noel et al. (1985) argued, an institution that values retention will invest the money.

Table 1

Results From Studies Involving College Academic Coaching

Study	Improved retention	Enhanced GPA	Improved mental/social function[a]	No difference
Ahmann et al. (2018)			X	
Alzen et al. (2021)	X	X		
Bellman et al. (2015)			X	
Bettinger & Baker (2014)	X	X		
Blakeslee et al. (2022)	X		X	
Capstick et al. (2019)	X	X		
Cruz et al. (2021)		X	X	
Evans et al. (2020)	X			
Field et al. (2013)			X	
Hall et al. (2021)				X
Howlett et al. (2021)			X	
Lehan et al. (2018)	X			
Mangan (2014)	X			
Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf (2016)		X	X	
Oreopoulis & Petronijevic (2018)		X		
Parker et al. (2011)			X	
Qian et al. (2018)			X	
Richman et al. (2014)			X	
Robinson & Gahagan (2010)		X		
Rodriguez Ott et al. (2020)	X			
Scott et al. (2015)			X	
Simmons & Smith (2020)	X		X	
Singhani et al. (2022)	X	X		
Weiss & Rohland (2015)			X	

[a] Includes variables such as improved confidence, time management, self-regulation, and test preparation skills.

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