

Understanding academic coaching at community colleges: a multi-case study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges provide access to higher education for many underserved student populations in the United States, and many community college students enroll in classes underprepared for academic rigor of college classes. In support of underserved and underprepared students, community colleges are implementing academic coaching programs with goals of increased persistence, retention, and completion rates. As a growing practice in higher education, the limited studies on community college programs have had a narrow focus and have struggled to identify a consistent coaching process that could be applied or evaluated beyond individual programs. This qualitative, multi-case study employed cross-case analysis to identify shared practices and experiences among three academic coaching programs in the community college setting. This analysis identified shared practices among coaches and programs, identified clear distinctions between academic coaching and other student support programs, and led to a new definition of academic coaching specific to the community college setting. This study is significant as it is the first multi-case study of academic coaching at community colleges that provides a holistic understanding of the practice.

INTRODUCTION

Academic coaching is a relatively new practice in higher education with limited research creating gaps in understanding of the coaching practice in higher education. While positive impacts have been documented (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Capstick, 2018; Mingling, 2019), there exists a limited amount of research focused on the practice in the community college setting leading to difficulties in identifying shared practices or application of coaching frameworks among academic coaches (C.E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2020). The research gap is particularly notable as community colleges often serve student populations who are underprepared for and underserved by institutions of higher education (Cohen et al., 2014). Open admissions policies of community colleges often result in students who require academic remediation or have limited exposure to collegiate culture or expectations (Levin, 2008) impacting efforts to support retention, persistence, and completion goals of coaching programs in the community college setting (J. A. Robinson, 2019). The holistic approach of this study addresses the gaps in the literature by identifying shared practices and experiences among academic coaching programs in the community college setting and creates an updated definition of academic coaching based on the identified shared practices and experiences. Additionally, Ives' (2008) coaching dichotomies provide a conceptual framework for understanding the practice in the community college setting where previously applied frameworks from four-year institutions have fallen short. The updated definition and understanding of the community college academic coaching framework provide criteria for the development or evaluation of these growing support programs.

METHODS

A multi-case study with cross-case analysis was conducted using three very large community colleges in the

United States. Each college identified and publicly promoted a coaching program distinct from other support services, staffed by campus employees, and in existence for at least three years. The multi-case design of this study allowed for comparative analysis of data collected through observations of coaching sessions, interviews of academic coaches, student coachees, and program administrators, and document analysis of program publications and training materials.

Data were collected while on-site at three community colleges in three different states within the United States. Each participating program operated as a unique support program with at least one program administrator. Due to the online presence of some coaching programs, some of the coaching session observations and interviews with student coachees were conducted via video conferencing software. In total, four program administrators, ten academic coaches, and fourteen student coachees participated in this study. Additionally, seven coaching sessions were observed. All three programs provided training materials for data analysis.

Individual case reports were completed and then analyzed through cross-case analysis to identify patterns across all cases. This iterative process led to a robust understanding of academic coaching at community colleges and a clear articulation of common practices, experiences, and impacts on the practice. The result of this analysis through the lens of Ives' (2008) coaching framework resulted in a new definition of academic coaching and recommendations for its practice in the community college setting.

Definition: The findings of this study support a new definition of academic coaching particular to the community college setting. Derived from the conclusions of this research, academic coaching is a purposeful, semi-structured coaching practice that employs reflective conversations, supported by a relationship, to empower student coachees to identify and address their needs and/or personal goals while providing access to academic and personal skills, institutional and college-going knowledge, and college and community-based resources. It is a non-directive, goal-focused, and therapeutic coaching practice.

The non-directive approach was conversational and similar to a semi-structured interview in which the coach and student coachee worked together to identify and address the needs and goals of the student. The conversational approach to the coaching sessions ensured the student coachee maintained responsibility and ownership of the coaching session and their personal progress. The goal-focused approach of academic coaching also reflected the emphasis on student ownership of the process and their personal progress. In short, the goal of the academic coaching programs was a goal of progress and development for the individual student, not a specific metric. This focus allowed students to grow in their abilities as students and in reaching long term change or goals.

The centrality of the relationship between academic coach and student coachee supported the autonomy of the student coachee through the coaching process. The resulting therapeutic effects of the coaching practice allowed student coachees to address their identified struggles and concerns and created a space in which the students recognized they could go to the coach “no matter what” and they would help “without judgement.” The relationship provided space to try new skills and develop social capital and college knowledge that many community college students have not yet acquired.

Training allowed for consistency of practice and institutional processes, as well as available resources for students both at the institution and within the greater community. Academic coaches had a consistent approach to students that was developed through comprehensive and ongoing training. Additionally, the purposeful approach applied to consistent data collection and analysis that informed future trainings and coaching practices and was shared with the institution at large to improve overall support of students.

Relationship to other Support Services: The lines between academic coaching, advising, and counseling can be blurred; however, the programs in this study maintained distinction from the other services. In the intersection between advising and counseling, academic coaching is a program that supports the whole student as he or she strives to meet the academic requirements of the institution. Whereas counseling's holistic focus on the student does not provide guidance on the academic and program requirements of the institution and advisement's transactional focus must be on institutional program requirements and goals, academic coaching's approach is similar to counseling as it helps students navigate institutional processes and requirements toward academic goals. Academic coaches support institutional retention and completion goals in two ways: providing supported referrals of students to needed services such as advisement and counseling, and providing data-driven feedback to the institution about the identified needs of the student. Understanding the unique role of academic coaching and its support of access to and engagement with the institution is significant as community colleges avoid duplication of services and maintain fiscal responsibility.

Implications for Practice: Findings from the study provide valuable recommendations for community colleges interested in developing an academic coaching and criteria for the evaluation of currently operating programs: 1. Academic coaching programs should clearly define their practices and procedures. 2. Ongoing and consistent training should be provided to academic coaches on coaching skills, institutional processes and procedures, academic theories of student engagement and retention. This training should not create a prescriptive approach but rather contextual knowledge. 3. Interpersonal skills of communication and authentic care should be sought and fostered in academic coaches. These skills are essential to building the required relationship between the academic coach and student coaches necessary for the coaching process. 4. Institutional support is paramount both philosophically and monetarily. Lack of support for coaching programs strongly impact their ability to support students and institutional retention and completion goals. 5. Data collection, analysis, and distribution should be an integral part of an academic coaching program so that programs can better support students within their program and affect positive change for student needs at the institution.

CONCLUSIONS

This multi-case study increased understanding of academic coaching particular to the community college context by analyzing shared practices, descriptions, and experiences of the program through the lens of Ives' (2008) coaching dichotomies. It found that academic coaching has a purposeful format that is focused on allowing students to develop their individual needs, address individual barriers, and make progress toward their individually defined goals. Academic coaching at the community college reinforces the role of community colleges to provide access and serve underprepared students through personal development in pursuit of their academic goals. This study provides a new definition and framework for the evaluation of academic coaching programs. Future research should employ this framework to establish criteria for the evaluation of academic coaching programs with special emphasis on the program's desired approach, outcomes, and effects for their coaching sessions. Along with evaluative studies of coaching programs, longitudinal and quantitative studies should be conducted to determine individual student impact and the correlation between increased retention rates and enrollment impacts. Additionally, further research should consider academic coaching's impact on college-going knowledge and social capital for student coachees.

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