



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ACADEMIC COACHING: A NEW APPROACH TO SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Academic coaching, derived from the executive model gaining popularity in business and industry, can provide community colleges a personalized and effective means of supporting the success of their most disadvantaged students. Executive coaching in the corporate world helps individuals develop, prioritize, and focus on achieving their goals; involves ongoing support, such as debriefing after difficult corporate negotiations; and helps them adjust to changes, balance work/family, or enhance their social lives.

Having dedicated “coaches” for community college students is a novel idea. The support students typically receive arrives piecemeal—doled out separately through student services departments, orientation workshops, success courses, faculty and staff advising, tutoring centers, peers, and (if the student is very fortunate) mentors. Although this support is vital to student success, often it is insufficient and packaged in ways that place some students at a further disadvantage.

Lake Tahoe Community College’s (LTCC) goal was to apply the executive coaching model to the development of consistent, holistic, and personalized support for students most in need. The Extended Opportunities Program & Services (EOP&S), a state-funded support program for disadvantaged students administered at LTCC, was the ideal place to begin the implementation of our Academic Coaching Program.

All students in the EOP&S program face multiple barriers to achieving success. In addition to their economic disadvantages, many are single parents who work full-time and are returning to school after an extended absence. They arrive academically under-prepared, uncertain about their career choices, and anxious about their ability to succeed. Though these students have access to a variety of support services, they often do not take advantage of them. Time constraints, work schedules, and childcare responsibilities prevent some from connecting with appropriate support

centers. They may be unaware of what is available and too intimidated to inquire.

Moreover, many support programs do not provide enough personalized support. Mentoring programs rarely provide adequate amounts of ongoing, consistent contact. Tutoring centers are often too impersonal and lack consistency in the quality of their services. Student support workshops and classes are offered at times which make them inaccessible.

The Academic Coaching model combines a variety of supportive services, taking the best intentions from each in creating personalized support that is accessible to the most disadvantaged students.

Getting Started

Early on, during the first term, all EOP&S students who are struggling in one or more of their courses meet with their assigned counselor and are offered the opportunity to partner with an academic coach. Interested students are matched with the most appropriate coach, based upon academic area of need, gender, age, ethnicity, and personal history.

Once an ideal coach has been identified, the student commits, through a written contract, to working with this individual for two hours per week for the remainder of the term. At this point the student signs a release of information allowing their EOP&S counselor and coach to consult. The counselor meets with the coach and highlights the academic issues and challenges for that particular student. This initial strategy session highlights any deficiencies in study, time-management, and test-taking skills, as well as any personal obstacles.

Coaching Sessions

The student and coach meet for at least two hours per week, at a convenient time and place, during the remainder of the term. Initially, they work to establish goals for their partnership and develop a structure with which they can make the best use of their time. The coach assesses the student’s academic needs, builds rapport, provides encouragement, and establishes a foundation of trust and support. The coach may contact the student’s instructor at this stage to gain further



insight into challenges the student is facing.

As the partnership develops, time is spent on current academic concerns. Working through homework problems, explaining concepts and/formulas, and reviewing completed assignments consume the bulk of each session. Through this process the coach identifies general academic skill areas that require further development. Procedures for note-taking, memorization, or reading comprehension; test-taking tips and strategies; or plans to manage time better, often will be developed if these appear to be obstacles to success.

Coaches celebrate students' incremental successes, and their objective voices challenge self-defeating behaviors and beliefs. These actions support the development of the students' self-confidence while holding them accountable for working to their potential. The coach continually checks in with students, measuring their ability to focus on school and juggle their other responsibilities.

Students' counselors and coaches confer on a weekly basis to discuss progress, motivation, issues of concern, suspected learning disabilities, etc. Any red flags or underlying personal issues are immediately communicated to the counselor, who will step in and work directly with the student. Counselors monitor student progress and offer support and guidance for the coach.

As the coaching relationship strengthens, the self-doubt and anxiety begin to subside, and students begin to listen to new voices. Students begin to feel empowered, seeing choices where previously they only expected failure. Success breeds success, and student goals and expectations rapidly expand. At this stage, coaches begin to transfer more responsibility to students, facilitating the development of their self-reliance, and empowering them to seek out support services available throughout the college.

Qualities of the Ideal Coach

Above all, academic coaches must be motivated by a desire to support the development and success of others. Ideally, they are competent in the desired academic subject area, have proven track records for working with others in a supportive environment, understand the mechanics of learning, and possess quality observation and communication skills. They understand the common barriers disadvantaged students face when returning to school and are able to provide the motivation and encouragement to develop successful behaviors. They provide appropriate, constructive feedback and hold students accountable.

Finding Coaches

Developing an adequate pool of coaches is an ongoing process. Coaches are selected based upon a number of factors and oftentimes sought only after a student has communicated a willingness to make a commitment to this process. Coaches come from in and out of the institution—e.g., part-time instructors, instructional aides, aspiring counselors, researchers, and retired business professionals.

Training Coaches

All coaches participate in regularly scheduled group training sessions. Training provides the necessary orientation to program expectations and processes. Other training topics are driven by the coaches' needs. Often, training sessions are opportunities to provide encouragement and support. Time is spent debriefing current student-coach partnerships and developing strategies for enhancing them. Training also involves instruction in a variety of areas, including effective listening and problem solving/decision making.

Outcomes

No quantitative research has been conducted to measure program effectiveness; however, it is obvious from our observations that the program is having a positive effect. The majority of students who commit to academic coaching make phenomenal strides in their academic achievements, as well as in their personal development. They are more confident in themselves, less anxious, and more willing to take ownership of their education.

One could argue that the services provided through academic coaching are simply a combination of mentoring, tutoring, advising, and orientation. However, this approach is unique in that it provides personalized service. It is the "how," not the "what," that results in the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

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